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Table setters

High-quality, high-ticket table radios have been the sales surprise of the past few seasons, providing retailers with an easy-to-explain product — and yet another profit opportunity

BY MICAH SHEVELOFF

Several prominent consumer electronics manufacturers have breathed new life into the table radio category, providing retailers with innovative and colorful products that many customers are finding an attractive addition to their home lifestyles. Bose, Boston Acoustics, Cambridge Soundworks, Proton, Teac and Tivoli have all come to market with a unique approach to this nearly century-old house-



Cambridge Soundworks' Model 730

hold item.

Cambridge Soundworks has set for introduction sometime in the spring of 2003 the Model 730 (radio only, MSRP \$199.99) followed by the Model 740 (radio and slot-load CD player, MSRP \$349.99), although the CD version is slated for a later delivery date. "We have been selling directly to consumers since 1988, and the success we have had in the table radio category has been significant," reports spokesman Rob Mainiero. "The table radios constantly show up amongst our top-selling products because of several key factors; Consumers like the fact that our radios are easy to use, and that they fit almost anywhere within the home. Additionally, we have dedicated tremendous resources to providing exceptional sound quality from our table radios, which perform as well or better than some shelf systems on the market. Both of our new models contain a built-in powered subwoofer, and will be available in slate or ivory finishes,"

Mainiero stated. The new Cambridge Soundworks offerings will also feature dual alarm systems, RDS radio, a high-quality AM tuner section and a CD player that will display CD text and decode MP3 data. Separate bass and treble controls are also a standard feature. "Traditionally, our radios have been sold through our stores, our catalog, our Web site and through our partnership with J&R in New York. We will be actively pursuing other electronics retailers on a national level," Mainiero concluded.

A retro strategy

Teac has introduced its Classic Series, designed to look like the table radios of the 1950s. "We made a conscious decision not to be a mass-merchant vendor, and to pursue profitable, vibrant niches that have a future," explained Joe D'Angelo, Hi-Fi group manager for Teac's consumer products division. "For the 1950s radios, we began with a design image that is classic in every sense and introduced the SL-D90 (MSRP \$199). The objective was to make the sound quality a priority in a package that looks great and is easy to use," explained D'Angelo. Much of the sound quality can be attributed to a compact subwoofer built into a chamber inside the chassis of the SL-D90. There is an attenuation knob that allows the consumer to adjust the output of the woofer to his liking. Teac then directed its attention to several details that help to define the SL-D90, such as a remote control that stands up, making it easier to find at the bedside. The remote also has a snooze button on it in addition to the snooze button on the actual radio, for the ulti-

mate in convenience. There is an external antenna connection, allowing consumers to take advantage of music on cable or a roof-mount antenna if available. Both the tuning and the volume controls are good, old-fashioned knobs — digital controls, but knobs nonetheless. Finally, Teac provided an auxiliary input for users who wanted to run a video signal or any external audio source through the SL-D90. "We have had success with both very young consumers using the radio for their college dorm, all the way up to an older crowd who may be drawn to the compact size and cosmetic design," D'Angelo states. The SL-D90 is currently available in black, red, white and turquoise, with a silver version on the way designed to match the finish of kitchen appliances such as Viking and Sub Zero. "Our objective is to distribute the Classic Series through the best retailers in the U.S., and our success has been quite broad and extensive, finding a responsive audience in such stores as Neiman Marcus," added D'Angelo. "Many of the high-end audio salons are coming on board, but the power retailers remain resistant," reported D'Angelo. With stores like Restoration Hardware having tremendous success with the Classic Series, D'Angelo remains puzzled about the larger electron-



Teac's Model SL-D90 combines a retro look with a very modern remote

ics chains' reluctance. Still, he added, "many CE retailers truly appreciate the significant sales and added profits that the Classic Series brings to their business." Teac has also introduced the SL-A100 (MSRP \$149), a Classic Series table radio (no built-in subwoofer) with a turntable and an on-board phono preamp with an auxiliary output.

Sound construction

Mark Stein is an audio buyer at J&R Music World in New York, and he expects to do quite well with both the Cambridge Soundworks units and the Teac radios. "Cambridge brought in a demo unit for us to hear, and it sounded wonderful and had a sleek, contemporary design," Stein reported. J&R does well with the table radio category through its catalog and Web site sales, and Stein points out that they are small and easy to ship. "It is a very decent business, and we had a strong Christmas season this past year with table radios," added Stein. J&R has each model plugged in and ready to demonstrate behind the counter, and the retailer recently mounted a Teac window display with the Classic Series that drew a lot of attention from passers-by at the operation's Lower Manhattan location.

An easy impulse buy

Franklin Karp, president of New York City-area specialty retailer Harvey Electronics, reported, "We are heavily entrenched in the table-radio category; between Tivoli, Boston Acoustics, Teac and Proton, we sell big quantities. We merchandise them in high-visibility, high-traffic locations, and there are millions of people looking for high-quality sound combined with simplicity. The category is a wonderful opportunity for additional high-margin business, and the price-points are low enough to qualify the products as impulse-buy items."

Even venerable speaker maker Boston Acoustics has entered the table-radio arena with the introduction of the Receptor (MSRP \$159), the first radio manufactured by the company in its 24-year history. With high fidelity the primary objective, Boston Acoustics developed patent-pending circuitry called BassTrac, enabling the Receptor to deliver bass response out of proportion with its compact size through a purpose-built driver in a tuned-ported enclosure. The Receptor project has been a personal passion of company founder Andy Kotsatos, who saw that an opportunity existed in the



Boston Acoustics' inaugural table radio offering: The Receptor

category. "It was very important to Andy that the product be exceptional," reported Jeffrey Cowan, director of integrated audio systems at Boston Acoustics. Cowan added that the company was keenly aware that Receptor was the first totally self-contained solution put to market by the company with a potential to reach a very large audience. "We want people to know that virtually everywhere in the home that you want great sound, Boston can provide that solution," said Cowan, who is also aware that this \$159 radio could be the first Boston component consumers are exposed to. "We'd better not disappoint them in any regard," Cowan stated. Boston Acoustics employed the finest digital tuner it could lay its hands on for the Receptor project, and Cowan indicated that the extensive research has been well worth the effort. "People have forgotten how good a tuner can sound, the number of stations and the diversity of programming available in many areas," he remarked. Another area of focus in the design process was human interface, and consumer feedback has indicated that the Receptor is so easy to operate that people rarely need to refer to the owner's manual. Although the emphasis is on sound quality with this product, Cowan indicated that "it made sense to give the Receptor clock and alarm functions." Receptor features two independent clock alarms, 20 presets of AM and FM stations available in any order desired and a battery backup that retains presets and time settings during a power outage. The unit is available in polar white, charcoal and platinum.

Kevin Penneau is a buyer at Flanners, an electronics retailer located in the Greater Milwaukee area. "The table radio category has always been strong, and the Receptor sounds great and is easy to use. Boston Acoustics is a good brand name, as well," said Penneau. "We show the Receptor in the same area of the store as the executive systems, and we have had success displaying all three colors. We have only had the product a short time, but there is a steady stream of consumers buying this category, and they make great holiday gifts," Penneau added. Dan Kline, buyer for portable audio, accessories and wireless for the Tweeter Home Entertainment Group, has also seen a positive consumer response to the Boston radio; "We're very happy with the initial success of the Receptor. We've always felt that there was an untapped market for higher-end clock radios and it's great to see that Boston Acoustics has come to the table with a good-sounding, high-quality product," said Kline.

Bose's unique approach

Bose uses a unique approach with its Wave Radio (MSRP \$349) and Wave Radio CD (MSRP \$499) products, making



This Bose Wave Radio includes a CD player

them available to consumers solely through direct channels such as the Bose Web site, a toll-free number, and its factory stores located across the U.S. "The combination of providing quality audio in a small, elegant and easy-to-operate system seems to resonate with consumers," explained Rob Brown, category business manager of Wave products for Bose. "It's the idea that music, not equipment, is the ultimate benefit," added Brown. "Through our Bose WaveGuide technology, both the Wave Radio and the Wave Radio CD provide superb audio reproduction in a compact, elegant design that is easy to operate," concluded Brown.

'Warm & fuzzy' experience

"There is something warm and fuzzy about listening to one of the classic Henry Kloss radio designs, such as the Advent Model 400, the KLH Model 8, or the KLH Model 21," mused Tom DeVesto, president of Tivoli Audio. "The more complicated the world gets, the more people appreciate a radio that turns on with one button," added DeVesto. The design of the current crop of Tivoli products feature an award-winning tuner that has been compared favorably with tuners from very expensive home receivers. "Our tuner gets more stations than just about anything," said DeVesto, getting right to the heart of the matter. Tivoli offers the Model One (MSRP \$99.99), available in four color schemes, and the Model Two (MSRP \$159.99), a stereo version of the Model One that comes in a cherry wood/taupe finish. As optional add-ons for the Model Two, Tivoli has designed a companion CD player called the Model CD (MSRP \$199.99) and a match-



Tivoli's Model One evokes Henry Kloss's KLH designs

ing subwoofer called the Model Subwoofer (MSRP \$79.99). As a package, Tivoli offers the Model Two with the CD and subwoofer all together called the Radio Combo (MSRP \$439.97). "People like the colors and the warmth of real wood that the Model One and Model Two bring to their home décor," DeVesto added.

Tivoli has added a battery-powered portable radio to its lineup called PAL (MSRP \$129.99), which DeVesto is quick

to point out creates an entirely separate product category altogether. PAL incorporates rubberized components with stainless steel hardware for increased durability and weather resistance, when being used at the pool or on the patio. PAL has an auxiliary input and a headphone output for maximized flexibility, and the analog tuner will work anywhere in the world. The Nickel Metal Hydride (NiMH) battery pack is mercury-free — good for the environment. An A/C adapter is included with PAL, which is available in eight colors.

An early entry

Proton entered the table radio arena in the early 1980s with the Model P-300, still considered one of the finest-sounding table radios ever made. The P-300 has earned Proton a loyal following of customers who like the sleek industrial design philosophy employed by the company. "There is a diehard Proton table-radio

customer — they buy whatever we make," explained Shaun Backus, national sales manager for Proton. The latest version is called the R5A (MSRP \$150) and uses a pre-tuned internal radio receiver that responds to a special time-setting signal generated by the U.S. Atomic Clock, operated by the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology. Audio fidelity



Proton, one of the industry pioneers in high-quality table-radio sound, now offers the R5A

was also a primary focus, as Proton incorporated a five-watt amplifier and a high-quality full-range 5" speaker. Separate bass and treble controls allow consumers to further tailor the sound to their liking. To assure a gentle waking, the volume of the radio or alarm rises gradually to its preset level over a one-minute period. The R5A has a battery-backup system, protecting time and alarm settings until A/C power is restored.

"Proton does indeed have a very loyal following," reported Doug Gillis, president of Wild West Electronics, located in a suburb of Phoenix, AZ. "We literally can't keep the R5A in stock. People seem to like the Atomic Clock, the gradual-wake feature and the quality of sound all together in one package," he added. "The service and support from Proton is excellent," noted Gillis, who operates a showroom he founded in 1999, but who does almost 100% of his Proton table-radio business from his Web site.

Table radios are available to consumers in every imaginable format; however, it is clear that the category is popular — and one that can add valuable profit dollars to the bottom line sales of any CE retailer. It has been pointed out that most of these items are easily packaged and shipped, making them attractive to Internet shoppers. There are countless colors and styles within this category, making the products easy to merchandise and an eye-catching addition to any holiday display.

Bottom line: These products are well engineered and likely to bring hours of enjoyment and music to millions of consumers.

Are table radios on display in your store?