



Few companies, if any, can genuinely claim to rival BARCO in terms of breadth and depth of expertise in the visual display market. Its video systems – spanning the entire range of display technologies available – are used in a diverse range of industries and mission critical applications, from movie theatres and industrial simulators to concert halls and hospitals. Following the establishment of a dedicated home theatre division in 1999, the company is now poised to unleash a new range of world-beating, high-end systems into the domestic market.

BARCO began in 1934 assembling American radios for the Belgian market: the company name is an acronym for the Belgian American Radio Company. After WWII, it expanded into TV production and, by the 1960s, had established a strong position in the CE market. It specialised in producing multi-standard sets, which further enhanced its position in Europe and the Middle East where such sets were regularly required. The company then diversified into professional electronics – first with broadcast monitors and, later, computer monitors. Being located in a region noted for its textile industry, BARCO naturally leveraged its knowledge of optics into producing automation systems for textile manufacturers. As it moved into the 1970s, BARCO had become increasingly focused on industrial work while consumer products became an increasingly smaller part of its business.

Around this time, large Japanese companies were starting to target consumers and, as BARCO had no desire to compete on pricing, the company drifted away from that market segment. It kept a hold on the high end of the consumer market, however, through its projectors, even though that was not to become a significant market until home theatre took off properly in the late 1990s. When this happened, BARCO saw it as the ideal opportunity to share the developments it had made in the professional markets with home theatre consumers and, in 1999, it established a separate home theatre division.

The first dedicated product range BARCO introduced was derived from its professional range, which was all based on CRT technology. It took some of its designs developed for control room and simulation applications and tailored them for home theatre use, which resulted in the Cine 6, 7, 8 and 9 models with prices ranging from £6000 to £30,000. At the same time it established an R&D core developing products specifically for the home theatre business, and these joined the product range in early 2002.

The home theatre R&D team, albeit a discrete entity, works closely with BARCO's other business units, some of which specialise in optics and others that specialise in video

VALUE-ADDED VISION



processing – such as the digital cinema team. So, while the home theatre team works exclusively on home theatre products, it has access to a vast range of resources from other divisions, which the company regards as vitally important when aiming to develop products that are significantly more advanced than others in the market, such as its Cine Versum range.

BARCO introduced Cine Versum in 2002 and has been developing the platform such that during 2003 it will expand the line so that for non-CRT technologies it will be able to offer a complete range of solutions from, again, £6000 to £30,000 and above.

Asked if the company was planning to venture into the entry-level market with 'affordable' mainstream projectors competing with those from the Far East, BARCO Home Theatre Division Manager, **Tom Vanthuyne** is adamant. "No. We will continue to produce dedicated, high quality products for home cinema, distributed through a dedicated channel that can handle this kind of high quality solution."

International Sales and Marketing Manager, **Wim De Vos**, expands this by stressing that: "Key to BARCO's approach is that we are making products that are suitable

for the channel that we consider to be appropriate to install high quality home theatre. Home theatre is a total package and we only deliver a part of it: our contribution has to be suitable for the specialist AV reseller and the CEDIA installer to demonstrate their ability to deliver added value. We will not produce a 'simply take it out of its box, place it on a table and it works' kind of product. In terms of performance, such a product would never be as good as we would want it to be. Furthermore, the sort of resellers we are targeting neither want nor need this kind of product."

Wim De Vos views a BARCO home cinema dealer as someone who is selling home cinema systems to affluent people and who is conscious of the 'emotional' element of the transaction: that the customer needs to feel wholly comfortable with the dealer, not least because he is trusting him to enter and work in his home. The dealer first, therefore, has to make the customer feel comfortable in his shop and be able to demonstrate his skill and proficiency. "It's important that the customer sees a BARCO retailer as a solution provider not as a box-shifter," says De Vos.

BARCO UK's Home Theatre Market Development Manager, **Mark Anderson**, currently feels that too many resellers consider home cinema to be a plasma screen and a surround sound system. Home cinema, in his company's view, is about projection and big screens, which provide a bigger, more truly cinema-like experience. He expresses a desire to see home cinema progress to that level. To do that, argues Wim De Vos, resellers need to demonstrate what is achievable: "That's a key factor in other areas such as audio and control. You can't sell a Crestron or AMX system to a consumer simply by showing him a brochure. It's all the more important with video. The customer has to experience the emotional impact of watching a favourite DVD on a big screen before he even

becomes interested in projection." The resellers BARCO is targeting are those who are well aware of this.

To demonstrate how some resellers approach home cinema, Mark Anderson relates the story of a dealer who enquired about the Cine Versum system, apparently thinking that it was a stand-alone projector that did not require the associated Cine Master controller electronics. When he winced slightly at the £15,000 price, Anderson enquired what the customer's budget was for the home theatre. The dealer replied "£70,000." Asked where the rest of the budget was being spent, he told him that it was being allocated to audio. Anderson suggested that as audio and video are two halves of the AV experience, it was hardly inappropriate to allocate £15,000 for the video part of a £70,000 system. The dealer subsequently specified the BARCO system for the installation.

Wim De Vos is also keen to see resellers promoting automation as a key part of the home theatre business, suggesting that they factor in 20 per cent for automation and peripherals such as the screen, curtains and so on. He further suggests that they shouldn't consider a Crestron or AMX controller as a product to sell but as their selling tool – their way to prove how customers can enjoy fully integrated audio, video, lighting, curtains and so on. "From my point of view, that is why it's always important to show customers a really top-notch video system: it raises their perception of what's possible and, as a result, it will often encourage them to buy a better audio system and a full automation system."

BARCO is known predominantly for its projector systems but with the introduction of the Cine Versum range, plasma has entered the mix. Tom Vanthuynne explains that BARCO now has three elements in its range of solutions – image processing, projection and direct view. Projection is still the dominant element in the offering, and is expected to remain so for a long time because, intrinsically, by using a very small device you can create a really large picture, while with direct view displays you are restricted by the screen size. BARCO would not describe its introduction of plasma as 'a test' but the company sees opportunities in direct view technologies and is developing them, "not only for home theatre but for other applications, because we see direct view as an important part of our business. There will be certainly be more direct view products coming from BARCO as we see opportunities in applications and receive feedback from our resellers about what their customers require."



Tom Vanthuynne, BARCO Home Theatre Division Manager



Wim De Vos, International Sales and Marketing Manager



Mark Anderson, Home Theatre Market Development Manager, BARCO UK



Cine Versum Master



Cine Versum 80



BARCO's main facility in Kurne, Belgium

For BARCO, it would not currently be a viable proposition to have plasma as a stand-alone home theatre product; but having it as part of a system is. It envisages people using the plasma for everyday use, watching the news and suchlike, and using the projector for home cinema purposes. Many Cine Versum buyers are people who want an optimal solution for a multi-purpose room: they use plasma for higher ambient light situations and a projector for when the room is being used as a home theatre. In most cases, though, BARCO contends that people who are spending over £50,000 on a home theatre system will use it in a room dedicated to home theatre. Many of those people purchase a Cine Versum DLP projector and image processor.

With the installation of CRT projectors, in particular, being a complex task, BARCO UK provides regular training for resellers at its Reading headquarters. It has also introduced a certification scheme which is backed up in the 'CRT For Ever' brochure. BARCO is looking to appoint twelve certified specialist dealers in the UK; as well as providing the dealer with accreditation for having undertaken all the required training, this certification also reassures the end customer that they can rely upon the person installing their projector to configure it such that it will provide the performance of which it is capable.

Mark Anderson feels that there are not, unfortunately, enough dealers in the UK who are capable of installing CRT correctly. Many have shied away and taken what's perceived as the easy option of single-lens projectors. He points out that even with BARCO DLP products, there's a degree of dealer integration required: they're not a point-and-shoot type of projector. He views that as a positive benefit for the dealer – he needs to be involved with the installation because it's not something the customer can do himself. Finding the optimum location for the projector, colour calibration, system alignment and so on are all things that need to be done by trained people, he argues, because, "Even with digital technology it's impossible to take any projector from the store, connect it, point it at a screen and achieve optimum results."

All BARCO products, says Wim De Vos, enable the reseller to add value to the sale through both set-up and integration. "As an example of the integration aspect, the Cine Versum is a two-part system – the projector itself and the Master, where the scaling and processing is done. This arrangement not only provides better picture quality but allows for a more compact projector connected by a single digital cable to a controller that can be mounted out of sight or can be positioned in the interior as a design object: both

options are a significant aspect in terms of 'Wife Acceptance Factor'. So, Cine Versum is a DLP product that allows for a lot of differentiation for the installer as well as immediately perceivable benefits for his customer."

The Cine Versum projector is designed to run for around four hours before it reaches its maximum temperature: and even then it produces less than 32dB of noise, making it one of the quietest, high performance models on the market. Its two-box design also means that analogue connections can be kept as short as possible. The Cine Versum Master can be sited close to the source components, which avoids having long analogue cables running to the projector. Signals are processed and converted to digital in the Master so there's no loss between it and the projector. This is all part of the approach that De Vos describes as 'Technology Agnostic': "We're not in the business of re-inventing the wheel: instead, we apply the technology that provides an appropriate solution for the market it is addressing."

Although many pundits aver that the CRT projector has had its day, BARCO continues to champion the technology, saying that it doesn't currently see any technology rivalling CRT from a pure performance point of view for many years to come.

Playing Devil's advocate and pointing out that BARCO's digital cinema system projects superb quality images up to 20 metres wide elicits this response from Tom Vanthuyne: "There are many other considerations with cinematic projection. For example, projecting such large images demands a huge amount of light, which a CRT can't deliver. However, CRT still delivers better black levels and greyscales than a digital cinema projector. Again it boils down to a fit between technologies and applications. For small preview cinemas and post production facilities, CRT remains the best choice." BARCO, it should be noted, is one of only three projection companies licensed by Hollywood to produce digital cinema and the only one of those active in both the professional and home cinema markets. Naturally, the advances made in developing digital cinema technology trickle-down into its domestic products. The Cine Versum Master, for example, was co-developed with the digital cinema team and uses the image processing technology employed in the professional product.

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BARCO AT CEDIA UK EXPO



BARCO will be exhibiting its range and new products, including the recently introduced £6200 (RRP), line-tripling CRT projector, the Cine 7LT, at the forthcoming CEDIA UK Expo. There will also be new additions – above and below the current price – to the Cine Versum range on display. The Cine Versum 80 now incorporates the HD2 Mustang chip, which provides increased brightness while enhancing the black level, and fine-tuned optics to extract the optimum performance from it.



Cine 7 LT / Cine 7



Cine 8



Cine 9