

Murphy's Theorem Applied to P.A. Work

A neurotic sound fantasy/experience.

EARLIER, you were very secure. Naturally—you had a nice safe job as a bench technician. But now, you are a P.A. sound man for the first time. Why? Simple; there weren't enough field service people in your company to handle the entire National Convention being held in a Tijuana border town. So here you are, poised at the controls, awaiting the first words of the first speaker, reflecting upon the circumstances and nightmares which brought you to this half-way mark. Somehow, you've managed to get all the equipment set up, and now, for the production part—the actual event. As you reflect upon what it took to get you this far, the bad memories come back to you again—how you quoted “An extension cord! An extension cord! My Kingdom for an extension cord!” when you found that your power line was only four feet away from the outlet before you ran out of the means to reach it. And when someone did contrive an extension cord for you, it was the three prong variety. You didn't have a three prong adaptor. And then, being that it was in a border town, you didn't have a step-down transformer for the P.A. equipment you brought. Of course that was minor. The troubles really began when the people running the conference told you where they wanted you to put your equipment. Then, the hotel's “sound man” (he has a degree in food management) insisted that the podium must be immediately under the ceiling speakers because “it looks nice.”

Fortunately, you brought your own equipment with you, including power amps and speakers. You did so because your boss insisted it wasn't necessary, since there was an in-house sound system. [You had already memorized Murphy's Laws on In-House Sound Systems.] What nobody noticed was that the local help utilized the ceiling speakers for a rock concert during off-hours and pieces of cardboard fall through the grillwork whenever the system is in operation.

Of course, you made sure to set up two hours before the program. Of course, the program director arrived ten minutes before the program, to let you know that you were going to have to record it. He brought along a tape recorder, but no cables or mikes, and you have to wire into the chassis of the machine (manufactured in Albania) because the input jacks are a rejected version of a serbo-Croatian standard d.c. power plug.

There was no dress rehearsal for this program. All you can decipher from the program sheet, is that the topic is Yoga, and there are four speakers. You assume that each speaker will need a lavalier mike, because of apparent mobility. Naturally, you are right. Naturally, each speaker leaves his lav. mike on the podium, and then moves back three feet, to speak in a spiritual-sounding manner that can best be described as Inverse Fletcher-Munson, divided by the negative square root of infinite articulation loss. People place their ears against the wall, in search of a better sound medium, while gazing at dummy you. And since they said the sound man must not be too obvious, you cannot even see the speaker, to make use of your newly found lip-reading skills.

The next man to speak stands at the podium, picks up the only condenser lav. mic. bangs a nubby forefinger on the diaphragm to confirm that it is working, and then wonders why his voice sounds fuzzy. His speaking is punctuated in all the proper places by microphone failure.

Dust, and more falling cardboard, concludes his speech as the resident dishwasher turns on the A.M. rock he favors, and generously distributes it to all of the rooms in the meeting hall as well as to the speaker over his dishwashing machine. Just as you reach the cleverly concealed house P.A. system closet and turn off the power to the whole system, a blaaaah sound emanates through the meeting room. When you recover, you realize it is a klaxon horn for shift change, and not the dying embers of your power amps. You are of course, unshaken, for this is typical of what can go on at such affairs. The minister gives the invocation for the dinner banquet, beating everyone else to the meal by prematurely devouring the microphone and spitting it out on alternate syllables. Your job is done. And if you've done it well, no one will never know you were there. Except you, your psychiatrist, and three gastro-intestinal specialists. ■

Michael P. Rogalski is audio engineer for Philadelphia Community College and does free-lance design.