



The company has branched out and is now building its own smart properties from the ground up

## Acton Man

*EI* spent the day with Ashwin Shah, chairman and founder of **Visual Systems Sales** (part of the Myriad Group), at the company's specially converted HQ in the up and coming area of Acton Town, West London. This dynamic company leader, with well over 40 years in the industry, shows no sign of slowing down as his company continues to innovate and develop.

**Visual Systems Sales** has been established for 27 years at its home of Acton, which is undergoing a major regeneration programme. The Myriad Group, of which the company is part, has a history stretching back over 45 years to the earliest stirrings of the AV industry.

Ashwin explains to *EI* that his entry into the sector was a complete accident. "I was training to be an accountant and I got to know a guy in my building who worked for a company called Myriad Production Associates. He worked 12 hours a day, six days a week, and he could not work out why he was not making any money. He asked me to take a look at the books and I made some adjustments to make the company more efficient.

"I was asked to join with a small share-holding - and some three years later - I was in a position to buy the company out. The company operated mainly in the AV production side of things; servicing events, shows, and some fixed installation work. We had some serious clients in areas such as the financial sector and were working with

very early equipment, it was so long ago we operated with slide projectors like the Kodak SAV 2020's before video projectors were even developed."

Now known collectively as the Myriad Audio Visual Group, right from the off Ashwin could see the potential in all the different areas an AV specialist could work in; so set about purchasing specialist companies and recruiting the best people to expand the company's interests. Gradually different arms were added to create the different divisions that exist today which include Visual Systems Sales (professional AV commercial and residential integrator), SiteCall (service and maintenance division) and Creative Staging Ltd (Dry Hire, production, set building and events) including Mediatech Hire & Events business - which was purchased a few years back and merged fully into Creative Staging. The group also contains Myriad Networks (IT & telephone networks), Myriad Audio Visual (sales and group management) and Map Multimedia (broadcast software).

The hospitality sector is just one of the areas the company operates in



Most innovative of all is the company's Design and Build division, which was created to build smart homes. The company not only provides all the technology but builds the homes as well.

Ashwin enthuses, "Throughout the history of the company, we have been able to deliver this growth because we put the staff right at the centre of everything we do, we give them the power to innovate, take responsibility and drive the company forward."

"I am particularly proud of this aspect, we have staff that have been with us since they left school and are now in their fifties; we currently have seven people retired from the business having spent many years with us, and every year we bring in three new people to continue our journey."

"We are all colleagues together, what hurts you, hurts me, we don't have any 'no go' areas in terms of ideas, we listen and make decisions fast if we think it's a good idea."

Just one recent example here was a suggestion that the company was not fully servicing the needs for video walls; now the company is fully active in that area providing solutions for, amongst others, a top London hotel and an international IT company in Canary Wharf.

Ashwin explains, "We've already had video wall's in our rental fleet so we understood the technology well, we knew we could offer something of value to the fixed the installation market, so we did, simple."

"The rental side of the business is a great proving ground for technologies and products, you often learn the most about them in those environments; products often begin in this sector of our company and make the transition across to the fixed market."

Ashwin is not just proud of the company's ability to recruit, train and retain the best staff, but also its ability to build client relationships. Just over 27 years ago the company won a contract for the fixed installation needs of the Post Office, it still has that contract today and in 2015 completed a £1m project fully updating all the AV at the Post Office's HQ, winning the first of its hatrnick of Smart Building Awards in the process.

As far as the domestic sector goes, the company's journey into this sector was down a recognised route.

Ashwin explains, "We were working for lots of top companies in London, so senior staff started to ask what we could do for their homes as well. We started to become active in the market and took on some really nice projects including one for the finance director of a major bank."

"Right from the off we were working on large scale projects as we had the experience from the commercial sector to cope. Another of the early projects was a £0.5m project for a company chairman; complete home automation, music everywhere including the gardens and grounds, AV distribution too - a really cool project."

At this point Ashwin is at pains to point out just how brand neutral the company is. "We never make any decisions based on brand. We assess every-single project on its own merits and specify exactly what suits the client best. Way too many technicians spec the system they would have and don't listen well enough to the client. Don't go on an ego trip, go on a client trip."

"We are totally client centric, often we don't spec exactly what is going into the system until quite late in the project. Take projectors for example, it's a really fluid market, at one point in the year, one maker has the best solution for a project, a few months later, it could, and probably will be, someone else; so we give ourselves the freedom to stay fluid and pick the right equipment."

Ashwin is proud of his company's record in recruiting and retaining talented staff



## A developing market

Ashwin is rightly proud of one of the company's most recent innovations, the creation of its own developer arm. The first project the company got involved with was a three dwelling development, not far from company HQ in Pinner.

"I have a passion for creating smart homes, so we thought why not create our own client base and build the homes as well!" enthuses Ashwin, "We are also in the latter stages of a project that is literally around the corner from here developing a warehouse into 11 loft apartments. Clients will get control of all their utilities over a Wi-Fi system which will use iPads and Alexa as the



High quality cinema is definitely part of the company's road map

control interface. As the homes are purchased, the owners get a brochure laying out exactly what their new home can do, but also offers them upgrade paths to enhance with higher levels of control or the addition of AV."

True to his word, the apartments are literally a stone's throw from the office and a quick tour confirms the near completion of this innovative and exciting way to create smart homes. Really cool looking loft apartments with mezzanine floors which are just crying out for the most modern of tech too, thanks to Ashwin and his team, they will get just that. Completion is scheduled for three weeks and the company already has another development in the planning stage, also in Acton, which literally got planning approval the day of *EI's* visit.

However, Ashwin is not a fan of all types of new build projects. "We are often asked by developers to get involved in really large-scale stuff. But we are cautious, some of the terms offered are frankly crazy and we often say no. We said no to a 300-apartment project in London, I knew the financial arrangements were way too risky, the company that did take the project on went under."



## Bringing it all back home

Home cinema is another area Ashwin is excited about. The company has been involved for a long while acting as the installation partner to another firm, which was selling home cinemas and then bringing Visual Systems Sales in as the installation partner for projects that included work in One Hyde Park. However, staying true to its tried and tested method, the company recruited a sales person with a history in residential AV and home cinema, and is now embarking on projects of its own, quoting on high end London market and MDU's. A nice sounding large basement cinema is just waiting for its planning permission to come through for the team to get started.

As far as the future is concerned, Ashwin is very positive. "Amazon, Google and Sonos have done us a huge favour in raising the awareness of the concept of smart homes. On their own none of the products released by these giants really amounts to much, to make a truly smart home, end users need the industry to integrate the experiences into a whole and they need experts to not just fit them but define the clients needs in the first place. I was at an event recently with one of our suppliers and one of the bosses was saying how he had purchased an Amazon Echo and fitted it himself. Then he said, 'But I can't get it to work properly, can you help me?'"

Ashwin's enthusiasm for the sector is clear, "At the end of the day I am an entrepreneur, I get excited about many different areas we can get involved in. But my first love is the AV. I eat, sleep and even dream it. There are loads of innovations coming that we will be able to exploit, in many ways this industry is just getting started and I can't wait to see what we can offer clients next."

*EI* has to say it was a real pleasure to spend the day with one of the industry's true pioneers and characters, Ashwin's fervour for the sector and belief in his staff is truly infectious, and long may it continue.