

# Managing the Tech Needs of the Nation's Largest Trade Show – A Behind the Scenes Look

By Hil Anderson, senior editor

Las Vegas, NV – Every year starts off with a bang for the team at Smart City Networks when the final telephone lines and Internet cables are hooked up and the *International Consumer Electronics Show (CES)* comes to life.

The bright, eye-popping displays were as dazzling as ever as an estimated 110,000 attendees and scores of journalists poured into the Las Vegas Convention Center in search of the “must-have” home runs for the 2009 holiday season.

“It’s like turning on a Christmas tree,” said Keith McNeely, Smart City’s senior director of technology services at the convention center.

The extravaganza certainly wasn’t put together overnight by Santa Claus and his elves. It took nearly 80 technicians and nearly all of December for Smart City to get the show floor wired, hooked up and tested in time for the opening of the show, which spanned 1.7 million net square feet and hosted 2,700 exhibitors. A total of 10,268 man-hours of labor were needed plus roughly another 3,000 man-hours spent on client management and customer service.

“We make sure all of our customers are up and running 24 hours before the show starts, which is hard to do when you have people coming up to the service counter at the last minute with additional requests,” McNeely told *Trade Show Executive* during an exclusive look at the technology installation for the largest trade show in the U.S.

## Plenty of Planning, But Not 100%

It comes as no surprise that *CES*, the largest show in North America and No. 1 on *TSE’s Gold 100* ranking, is a year-round project for Smart City. Management stays in regular contact with the show organizer, the Consumer Electronics Association, and begins each new show cycle with an evaluation meeting as the current show is winding down for the year. “It’s all in the preparation and



Mark Haley



Keith McNeely

planning,” said Smart City President Mark Haley.

“Every show is different and you can’t just take what you did this year and plug it into next year,” said Haley. “We have to treat it as a unique event every year.”

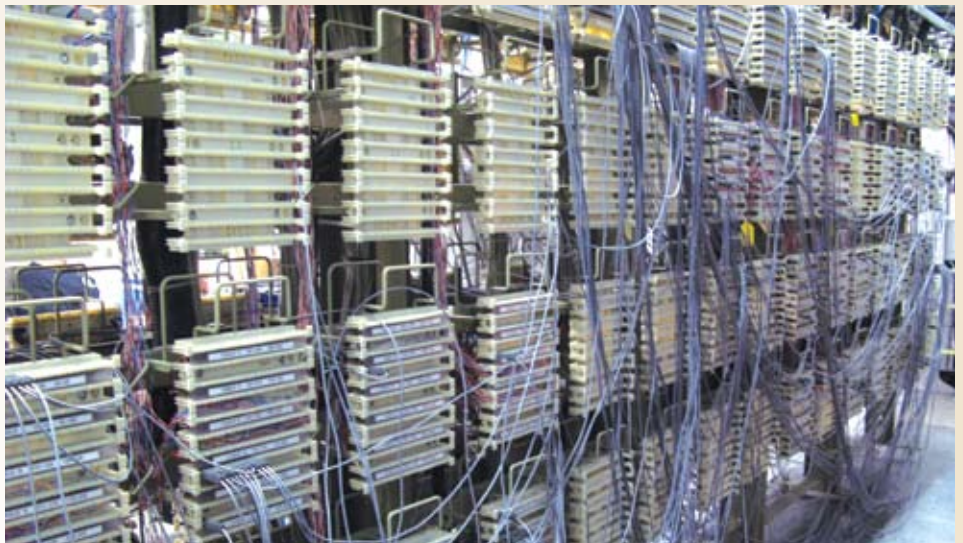
Haley said that Smart City receives a high level of input from the association on exhibitors’ needs and special requests so that he and his staff have a good idea of what needs to be done when December rolls around and the exhibit hall begins to take shape.

But 11 months of planning doesn’t cover 100% of the work that will be performed. The Smart City service desk still gets a steady flow of exhibitors who have last minute needs or new ideas. There are also a surprising number of tech companies that have not even

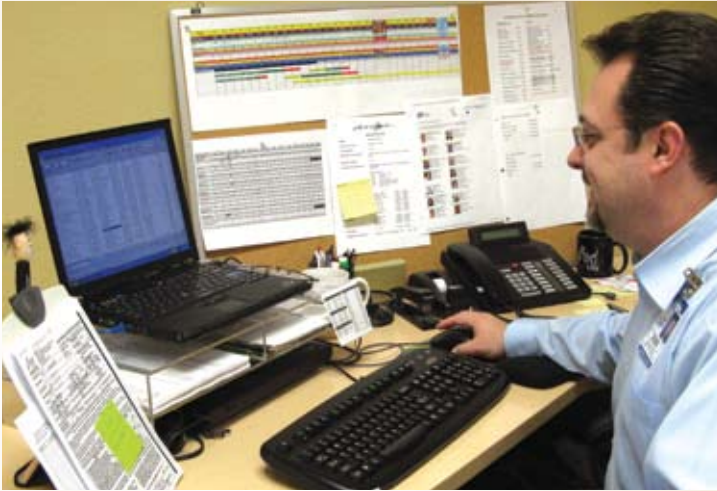
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Planning for *International CES* is a year-round process for Smart City
- Nearly a third of exhibitors don’t place their service orders until move-in
- Cables for television coverage adds to Smart City’s workload
- The Las Vegas Convention Center has nearly two gigs of Internet capacity and 600 miles of wires
- Smart City monitors the exhibit hall’s Internet system from operations center
- A crew of roughly 80 and 10,268 man hours were required to handle the tech needs of *CES*

ordered their services in advance. “Roughly 30% of the customers that come to the show don’t order until they get to the show,” McNeely said. “Many of them do a lot of planning ahead of time



**Well Wired.** A wild-looking array of wires and cables keeps the *CES* humming. Smart City spent much of December setting up the telephone and Internet service for the 2009 show.



**Traffic Cop.** Smart City monitors the Internet activity for the entire show from its operations center. Problems are usually found and fixed before exhibitors know something is wrong.



**The Big Leagues.** Pictured here are some of the 80 technicians from Smart City who wired the exhibit floor. Staff members consider it a point of professional pride to say they worked the CES.

and even come out to Las Vegas during the year to check out their floor space, but some don't order their tech services."

One of the most important bases McNeely must cover is having the right materials and enough labor on hand to satisfy late orders and great last-minute ideas exhibitors come up with to make their particular booth stand out. "Part of our credo is to anticipate our customers' needs," he said. "And the hardest part of that is anticipating what your customers' needs are going to be. It's the one thing that you don't know about that you have to plan for."

### Wired for Everything

The first customers Smart City addresses when it begins setting up for the show aren't even exhibitors. The CES receives a great deal of media coverage, including television networks that require press platforms equipped with specialty broadcast-quality cables. The 2009 show floor even had a full studio built by SONY for the taping of the game show *Jeopardy*.

"CES is different from most shows in that there is a lot of broadcasting from the show," McNeely said. "The first thing we do is run all of the broadcasting cables from the press platforms, normally during the first part of December. They are specialty cables so they bring them in and we run them. They are in place before the show even moves in. Then we start working on all of the telephone and

Internet lines."

And there are a lot of lines at the CES. Since the focus of the show is electronics, exhibitors need plenty of Internet connections to demonstrate their wares and to handle their own communications needs such as e-mail and transmitting leads back to the home office. McNeely said the convention center was up to the task with around 600 miles of cable and nearly two gigabytes of broadband capacity, which can easily handle requests from large customers that can go as high as 30 megabytes.

An average booth includes a ballpark six Internet lines and two telephone lines, which McNeely said would take his crew about an hour to connect if there were no other factors involved. Unfortunately, the process of booth construction requires Smart City to perform each installation in stages.

"Exhibitors want you to come in and do all the floor work but then you have to leave because they want to lay the carpet and build the booth on top of the carpet, so they don't want you back for two to three days," McNeely said. "This show has a long move-in so customers might not want you to go back for a week."

"It may take them a week to set up one of these booths because they are 100 by 100 feet and will have technicians in there for days," he said. "It's like a small house."

### Network Operations Center Monitors the Traffic

When the show opened for business on January 8, Smart City technicians were on hand to handle any glitches. However, the personnel who had the best view of the ebb and flow of the Internet traffic were not on the premises of the convention center but at the company's Network Operations Center (NOC) in its Las Vegas headquarters.

"They monitor the circuit usage and bandwidth usage," said Haley. "It's a big help for Keith and it certainly helps me sleep at night knowing that they are monitoring our networks across the country 24/7."

The NOC crew is supplemented by technicians from Smart City's equipment vendors and has the ability to monitor Internet traffic down to the data-packet level in order to sniff out a virus in any of the thousands of exhibitor computers running on the network. McNeely said the goal is to head off problems at the NOC level before the exhibitors are even aware there is a problem. If a visit to a booth is required, a technician will be on the scene within ten minutes.

"We make sure the network is safe, reliable and works like everyone expects it to," Haley said.

Reach Mark Haley (702) 943-6000 or mhaley@smarcity.com; Keith McNeely at (702) 943-6080 or kmcneely@smarcity.com; Karen Chupka, CEA senior vice president of events and conferences, at (703) 907-7639 or kchupka@ce.org