



TecHome Builder High-Impact Products of the Year

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Readers select the most important products of 2004, ranging from home tech to back-office software.

Builders must make hundreds of product decisions for every house they construct. It's not easy, and the process can be subject to lots of second-guessing. Builders know that one of the most trusted sources of information on product selection comes from other builders. That's where the first-ever TecHome Builder High-Impact Products of the Year awards come in. It's a selection of the most-important products of the year by the readers of TecHome Builder...your peers.

The products fall into two primary categories: • Home technology that has been sold, installed and tested in the field. • IT systems, either back-office software (accounting, CRM, scheduling, estimating, etc.) or front-end systems (Web development, online options selection, marketing systems, etc.).

Every year there are scores of new products targeted at builders. We asked TecHome Builder readers to nominate the products that made the greatest impact, either financially by saving time and money, or operationally by helping to guide the company to a new level of service. We have narrowed the field down to 29. From these, the readers have also selected an overall Highest-Impact Home Tech Product and Highest-Impact IT Product. The winner will be announced at TBX on May 20th during an awards breakfast. All builders are invited to attend. The products are nominated by the readers. Do you agree with these selections? Email jknot@ehpub.com.

Home Tech High-Impact Products of the Year

Acoustic Innovations Showcase Personal Theaters

Every builder knows that dedicated home theaters cost a bundle, right? Not necessarily. Showcase Personal Theaters costs significantly less than similarly sized theaters and can be installed quickly. Acoustic Innovations uses several patent-pending systems to simplify the production and installation, including variable height columns, a unique soffit system, modular acoustic wall panels, carpet and snap-fit column baseboards. Builders can change out column and soffit details, add sconces or recessed lighting, a front-wall speaker cabinet in painted or hardwood finishes.

"These theater packages are designed to transform a generic room into a high-end dedicated theater room in three days," says Michael Pope, president of Audio Video Interiors in Medina, Ohio. "In the past, builders have wanted to capitalize on the home theater's demand but have held off due to the high costs of installing the rooms.

Additionally, once the rooms were installed, they could not be removed, making it a risky expenditure. Showcase Personal Theaters fasten to the walls and ceilings and can easily be removed to display at the next model home. At the time of sale, clients have the option to purchase at full retail or the builder can easily remove it; they are in control.

Acoustic Innovations has even created a program where qualified builders can become agents, making up to 35 percent margin on the rooms and seating.

B&K CT600 Zone Receiver

The demand for multiroom audio and video is growing among homebuyers. To do that, you need a central receiver to

distribute the signals. The B&K CT600 has six stereo zones of audio (up to 12 mono zones of audio) and six composite video zones. It has one shared AM/FM tuner and B&K's exclusive Smart Zone system, 100 presets, and nine shared A/V source inputs.

Michael Rib of Hitech Home in Clearwater, Fla., believes the product offers "break-through pricing and infinite product flexibility for whole-house music systems."

Crestron CLX Series Lighting

Crestron's lighting control modules, switches and motor controllers are designed to control various types of light sources, motor loads and non-lighting devices. The LEDs on the side of the control modules identify whether there is voltage to the output of the modules, while the brightness of the LEDs corresponds to brightness of the lights. All of the control modules are self-healing. In the event that a module needs replacing, the setup button tells the processor to auto-install the information from the original module.

Brad Alves of Columbia Audio/Video in Highland Park, Ill., raves about the product line.

"Rarely do I see a company with as much focus as Crestron. The CLX series of lighting products definitely need to be applauded. Every time I sell a Crestron processor, the CLX series gives the client a very easy push into lighting. And as the lighting system starts to make more sense and the client has a good feel for how he wants the lighting system to facilitate his life...he may very easily jump into the D3 whole house lighting. You gotta love it"

DeCorp Flatwire

Well suited for remodels, DeCorp's patented Flat Speaker Wire Technology uses ultra-thin parallel conductors, sealed with high-performance, paintable clear film that can be run along the surface of a wall or ceiling and hidden by a thin film of plaster. This allows placement of speaker wire anywhere on the wall surface saving time, effort and money usually spent on expensive drywall/plaster/in-wall installations. FlatWire is also well suited for running wire under the rug, carpet or tile. High traffic and/or weight placed on top of the wire will not affect its performance. "I believe that Flatwire is the most significant new install-oriented product to hit the market in many years," says Ken Login of Integrity Audio Designs in Los Angeles.

GE Security Smart Connection Center

The GE Smart ConnectionCenter from GE Security is a structured wiring and connectivity system that manages and distributes broadband, Internet, telephone, cable TV and Ethernet. In addition to the common features of a structured wiring system, the ConnectionCenter allows mounting of home security systems, gateways, audio products and home servers in one enclosure. Custom builder Wensmann Homes in the Twin Cities constructs about 475 homes per year. "We have installed GE Appliances for many years and have recently standardized on GE Security for all of our security and structured wiring needs," says David Zweber, director of sales and marketing. He calls the Smart Connection Center a "compelling differentiator."

Zweber adds that the system "enables us to have the flexibility of installing three different sized enclosures (15-, 20- and 37-inch), depending upon the size of the home and the lifestyle of the homeowner. In addition, we install GE modules in the enclosures, those modules consisting of power, telephone, video, surge protection, audio and security modules, for the most part. One of the best features of GE's enclosures is that due to the way in which the enclosures dissipate heat, the warranty is not voided by installing third party devices. Most other structured wiring solution manufacturers want to tightly control what devices and modules are mounted in their enclosure because they do not dissipate heat in the same way. In addition, GE's Smart Connection Center solution is completely scalable...we and homeowners love the fact that "you never have to throw something away" if upgrading to a larger enclosure."

GE Concord

GE Concord is a line of security control panels for residential applications. Builders can install GE's hardwired, wireless and hybrid panels in new construction or retrofit applications. The product range includes security panels, security/fire panels, fire-only panels, and life-safety systems that can provide help to individuals in emergency situations. Zweber from Wensmann Homes says the Concord security system provides "yet another reason for our homeowners to build with us vs. another builder or purchasing an existing home. GE's product is the best we have seen on the market, but it is the sales and marketing support that really caught our attention. GE has provided all of our sales agents and job supervisors with training, and it delivers that training in many different forms (self-paced CD, in classroom, and over the Internet).

We have equipped all of our model homes with literature and the merchandizing tools to easily and effectively communicate the consumer benefits of this technology."

Genelec HT205/1036A lines

Genelec's full line of speakers -- from its HT205 to its 1036A front speakers to its 1038B/4xAIW26 side and rear channel speakers -- is well suited for many types of media rooms and dedicated theaters. "Genelec offers our homebuilding clients a full product line of competitively priced mini to large monitors incorporating active technology, all with professional-grade sound and rugged post-production quality," says Paul Baumeister of Baumeister Electronic Architects in Niles, Ill. Metzner Hull Development in Chicago is among Genelec's fans for its theater and media rooms.

HAI Omni Pro II

The OmniPro II is HAI's flagship automation and security controller. It is designed for larger home and commercial installations. In addition to connections for security devices, thermostats, light switches, telephone and backup battery, the system features three built-in serial ports for connection to additional control devices. It also has an Ethernet port that allows connection to a home network. Simply put, Brian Anderson of Anderson Building Controls in Scotts Valley, Calif., says, "Price, function, reliability, service are the reasons he loves the OmniPro II.

HomeLogic OneHome

Massachusetts-based HomeLogic has launched its new OneHome line of home management and control solutions. The OneHome products are designed to add value to a home by integrating systems such as security, lighting, distributed audio and video, telephone messaging and home networking, all in one package. The system allows for users to access its features remotely by using the Internet, and the company says that its interface has been engineered to simplify its day-to-day operation.

Mark Komanecky, president of simpleHome LLC in Westborough, Mass., says, "In addition to providing typical home automation functionality (climate control, lighting, irrigation, video, security, etc.), the OneHome provides homeowners with an innovative voice mail/messaging solution, including remote telephone control, a superior Internet-based remote control solution, and finally a terrific whole-house audio and digital media server solution." He says the ease of programming is another big plus.

iCEBOX Flip-down LCD TV

Technology has definitely invaded the kitchen. The iCEBOX 12-inch LCD monitor flips up and out of the way under the kitchen cabinets when not in use, sliding into a sturdy mounting bracket. The unit comes in black or slate finish. It's not just a TV, but builders can use it to accommodate television, Internet, DVD/CD, FM radio, home video monitoring, touchscreen, remote control and a keyboard.

"I believe the greatest impact was when Icebox dropped their pricing and improved the product. Now we sell more than ever before. Very cool" says Ken Pinto, area vice president of purchasing for Pulte in Southern California.

Logitech Harmony Remote 880

The Harmony 880 Advanced Universal Remote puts the homeowner in control of the A/V system with just one button.

Optimized for complicated HDTV and PVR systems, the Harmony 880, which has an interactive color display, helps tame tough configurations like switching the television between video aspect ratios depending on the program source. Even better, its MSRP is only \$249.95.

"This remote has changed my business," says Michael Murdock of Enhanced Living in Aurora, Colo. "I am now installing systems that I didn't want to deal with in the past because control is so much easier for the end user. There is nothing out there for the price (at any price) that can compare to the ease of programming or the level of customer support provided by Harmony. Repeat calls for programming changes, operational training and product service calls have decreased by 78 percent."

Omnimount U3T TV Mount

No doubt about it...flat-panel televisions are revolutionizing room design and architecture. Builders are now able to create smaller rooms with angled wall spaces to accommodate a wall-mounted plasma or LCD. But those TVs don't float on the wall magically, they need mounts. With the ability to mount 37-inch to 63-inch displays, the Omnimount U3 has a

load capacity up to 200 pounds while keeping the unit less than 2 inches in depth from the wall. It also tilts and locks, with the Lift n' Lock Installation feature.

John Sheiry of Home Technology Source in Alexandria, Va., says the U3T "nearly fits everything from 42 inches to 61 inches with enough spare bolts and parts to sink a battleship. It can hit studs at various intervals and does NOT need to be exactly 16 on center. This thing is the Swiss Army Knife of plasma tilt brackets."

On-Q Wireless Access Point

Every builders at one time or another has muttered under his breath that he can't wait until everything is wireless. With claims as the first wireless access point specifically designed for residential use, the On-Q Home Wireless Access Point offers easy installation, an unobtrusive paintable design, tetherless roaming and user-friendly operation. Its Power over Ethernet design requires only a single Cat 5E cable for both power and data, making installation simple. Moreover, the unit is almost invisible, mounting flush into the ceiling.

As technology sales for Newmark Homes in Austin, Jim Bonner is a fan of OnQ's Wireless access point, or "the one that looks like a smoke detector," as he says. Newmark is a division of Technical Olympic, which builds homes in Florida, Texas, Northern Virginia, Phoenix, Colorado, Nashville, Baltimore and Las Vegas.

Bonner says it has been "a great success for Newmark Homes to its higher-end home buyers. The fact that the W.A.P. can be located high and in a central location allows for better coverage in a home and is not an unsightly machine sitting on or close to a desk. I have to say that all of OnQ's products and its modular approach have made my job of designing /selling structured wiring systems easy. Cost has also played a large role in Technical Olympic's decision to use OnQ's products for the majority of its builders across the USA."

Russound SP-H6TT In-Ceiling Speakers

Known for its multiroom audio systems, Russound dove into the speaker market a few years ago. Its SP-H6TT is an audiophile-grade 6.5-inch ceiling speaker specifically designed to offer quality sound. It delivers clarity and natural reproduction from any source. The speaker can be angled to focus its output at the prime listening area. It comes with the company's Twist & Tilt bayonet mounting for easy installation. Other features include an aluminum grille and moisture-resistant materials.

"These Russound speakers can be aimed straight down or at a 15-degree angle. This has allowed us to set up home theaters in family/great room locations where we had not been able to do anything in the past because of room layout," says Franco Fedrizzi of Automated Lifestyles in Bettendorf, Iowa.

Solus DR-IR8 in-wall speaker

When offering both multiroom audio and home entertainment, you need speakers...obviously. The Solus DR-IR8 is a two-way high-performance loudspeaker system made for custom in-wall installation where external or freestanding speakers are prohibited by space limitations, or architectural considerations are primary. It is intended for use as a high-quality home theater surround-sound distribution loudspeaker as well as a high-end audio loudspeaker for in-wall placement.

Physical components include a molded $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch lip-edged frame with four plastic screw-held clamping feet for securing the frame to the wall. A fitted metal grille covers the system with final finish out flush with the wall. Both the frame and grille come standard in decorator white and are paintable and cloth coverable. The grille is also primer treated for use in high-moisture areas such as bathrooms.

"It is an in-wall speaker utilizing a ribbon tweeter, selling for \$1,599 per pair. I have used these routinely when the only alternative to tight spacing requires the employ of in-walls and a perforated screen allows a front projection system to fit in an area that otherwise would not be possible," says Michael Hamilton of Perfect Pitch and Pixel (a division of The Real Picture) in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Sonance | DAB1

The Sonance DAB1 is a four-source to six-zone distributed audio system that provides audio to six locations via a combination of Cat 5 wire for keypad control and speaker wire for audio. The unit can be a simple background music system or it can be integrated as a subsystem in a complex whole-house automation and control package.

"This product has proved to be reliable, easy to program and an excellent value. The system design is very straight ahead. It fits in a standard double gang box. Each zone can be customized for sound with bass and treble control. Sonance has added iPort to the mix which provides a place for your iPod to rest when you get home. The DAB1 has been a solid performer. It is very intuitive to program and has solid features and is reliable. I recommend it highly," says Bob Dettloff of Audio Video Planners in Oakdale, Minn.

Universal Remote Controls MX-850 and MX-250

It doesn't help to have cool electronics in the homes you build if the homeowners don't know how to operate the A/V equipment. That's where the MX 850 remote control comes in. It combines both infrared (IR) and radio frequency (RF) operation to provide up to a 100-foot range through walls, floors and doors, indoors or outdoors. Programming up to 20 components is a snap using the Editor software, which offers a Programming Wizard for first-timers. When you select a device located in the home theater, the MX-850 talks to the RF base station MRF-250 in the home theater using RF.

"It has saved us probably hundreds of hours over the last year compared to programming touchscreen remotes," says Franco Fedrizzi of Automated Lifestyles in Bettendorf, Iowa. "The most important part is it has a logical, easy-to-use layout. We have customers that pick up the remote with zero training and can operate fairly sophisticated systems."

John Sheiry of Home Technology Source in Alexandria, Va. agrees, saying, "If I never program another Philips Pronto-like touchscreen I could die a happy man." He prefers non-touchscreen remotes, like the MX-850. "This thing is IR and has optional RF capability. If Universal could get the RF to be bulletproof around a rack of gear, I would personally go hug the whole bunch of them."

IT High-Impact Products of the Year

Autodesk Buzzsaw/DWF Composer

"Autodesk's collaboration solutions, designed specifically for homebuilders like us, make it possible to build homes better, faster and cheaper," says W. Mike Harkins, national director of architectural technologies for Pulte Homes in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

Buzzsaw is a Web-based collaboration solution that allows us to keep track of the multitude of design and other document versions out there for our bidding and construction project management, so we can access them anytime, anywhere, making geographically distributed teamwork a breeze. Instead of printing reams of paper designs for construction project management, we can refer to digital plans, complete changes, make approvals and share status online."

Meanwhile, Harkins says DWF Composer software is an affordable way for Pulte to review, mark up, and revise home designs through email and through Buzzsaw with lightweight files that preserve the integrity of plans. "Using DWF Viewer, our teams can view and review design files without needing a copy of the CAD software on their computer. Gone are the days of poring over and merging multiple redlined drafts.

"This year, Autodesk Buzzsaw and DWF Composer have helped us to achieve greater efficiency, and those savings can be passed along to home buyers and shareholders. Not to mention they make our lives easier," adds Harkins. **BeHome Wise B-Wise Enterprise Edition**

Jeff Young, COO of Losani Homes in ??? calls the system "invaluable for us to be able to effectively market to our lead database, and actually increase the traffic to a grand opening. Plus, we no longer have to deal with the time-consuming task of faxing and compiling information from a variety of sources. The system has saved us valuable time and money"

BeHomeWise offers Web-deployed prospect management solutions for converting prospective new homebuyers into sales. The BeHomeWise software system, B-Wise, integrates leads from all of a builder's various marketing channels (including walk-ins, search engines, portals, Web traffic and Realtor referrals) and automatically prioritizes these based on who is most likely to buy.

The B-Wise Enterprise Edition is especially designed for medium-sized and large builders that want to use the power of the Internet to manage all aspects of the sales and marketing function.

"The BeHomeWise tools allow us a much more organized way of maintaining contact and being responsive to our prospects," says Frank Lackman, vice president of operations for DR Horton in Virginia. "It makes it easy for us to respond before they lose interest or find something else, and the technology has become an integral part of our sales system."

BuilderMT Workflow Management Suite V4.0

BuilderMT Workflow Management Suite V4.0 offers wireless scheduling and project management" for Timberline Office users. Using tablet PCs, smart phones, Palm OS PDAs, or Nextel Blackberry devices, BuilderMT users can interact with their back-office software from the field. The unit is not reliant on a "hot sync" or "cradle sync" to coordinate data between field- and office-based software systems. Builders just need to use a common wireless device to update any of a long list of field activities and access crucial back-office work-flow documents.

Builders can use the system to schedule specific activities from the field, log in completion of individual activities from the field, trigger payment approval to accounting for pay points and more.

Cadsoft Envisioneer 2.0

Envisioneer caters specifically to the detailed needs of the professional architect, design/builder, interior designer and landscape architect. This software, through its integration with other key software applications, ties the entire building process together. It allows the user to quickly convey the building exterior, interior and landscape design ideas in fully animated 3D. The goal behind Envisioneer is to simplify this process by allowing builders to use the same information from start to finish. Envisioneer features intelligent drawing objects that behave according to their surroundings. This unique interactivity reduces error in design. The product, which has an MSRP of \$595, is designed to recognize that home building is a multi-stage process that varies from builder to builder.

Construction Management Software (CMS) ProEst Estimating

In the construction market, the success of a company often depends on the ability to generate quick, accurate estimate information. The ProEst Estimating software by CMS tries to offer a new standard of integration, speed and efficiency to construction estimating with ease-of-use. CMS says its estimating solution increases both productivity and accuracy. The logical layout of ProEst make it easy to learn and use without sacrificing the power and reliability needed to quickly turn raw data into accurate, competitive bids. Through its user-definable centralized database, estimators can share vital information for preparing estimates. The database contains material, labor, equipment, subcontractor and associated costs and the contractor has 100-percent control over the database structure and all of the information it contains. This allows the database to be edited or modified to suite any type of construction.

Evoco Professional

A fully Web-based application, Evoco Professional is available to anyone with an Internet connection and a Web browser. This means no investment is needed for trades and suppliers to access the application. The intuitive design ensures that users see only what they need to see and require virtually no training to get up and running. Evoco lets customers view very large files, including CAD drawings without needing to install the software, making it simple to share and manage project documents from virtually any computer. Evoco lets customers: 1.) Create an online work center where drawings and plans are accessible from anywhere 2.) Mark-up and share revisions between their build team 3.) Control version histories and record who did what and when 4.) Connect all suppliers, trades and contractors to up-to-date information 5.) Email change notifications 6.) Personalize the work center to reflect their company's business processes and corporate image.

HomeSphere AllTrack

HomeSphere's AllTrack rebate management system is a comprehensive software application that gives builders complete control over their rebate management efforts. HomeSphere says its AllTrack allows builders to easily maximize rebate payments and to identify opportunities for increases in their current rebate programs. In addition, AllTrack uses builder account codes to correlate rebates with the house cost permitting builders to monitor rebates in affiliated operating entities and to identify new rebate opportunities. Acting as an independent contractor, HomeSphere facilitates a win-win situation between homebuilder and manufacturer via an ASP (account service provider) based portal that provides each party with the various tools needed to benefit from the rebate relationship.

Options Online Online Design Studio

Online Design Studio begins with Community Options Catalogs, which consist of every option offered to the homebuyer

by the builder or design center. The catalog is home-site, floorplan and cut-off-date specific. It is also interactive and dynamic, as it communicates by email with the homebuyer regarding his upcoming cut-off dates and drops the selections from the catalog at the cut-off date. This allows the homebuyer to view and select from his available options, online, anytime, anywhere he has Internet access. The buyer views a picture, enhanced descriptions, community room scene pictures from his community's model homes and educational information. The Community Catalog is created as the design tool to enhance the experience and help deliver a finish home that meets the homebuyer's expectations.

Options Online Online Back Office

Online Back Office streamlines the processes of selecting the home and generating contracts. Add-on options can then be added to the contract as addendums. This allows everyone working with the homebuyer to be in the same database with user role capabilities for their functions. The homebuyer, salespeople, designers, construction personnel, vendors, lender and escrow, accounting and management all have access to the selections and information regarding the home anywhere they have Internet access. Online Back Office also emails all those involved in the process when information is available that affects their part of the process.

PeopleSoft EnterpriseOne Homebuilder Management

PeopleSoft says its EnterpriseOne Homebuilder Management application was developed with influence by PeopleSoft homebuilder customers, who played an active role in shaping and validating the product strategy. The result is a tool that promises to help builders better manage critical business processes for sales, purchasing, construction and community setup. This functionality is delivered through a combination of homebuilder-specific applications and PeopleSoft EnterpriseOne products for project costing, procurement and customer relationship management (CRM). PeopleSoft EnterpriseOne Homebuilder Management covers four major business areas. The Foundation provides a repository to establish and maintain communities, lots, plans and options. Its scalability enables builders to run on a single database whether they start 100 or 30,000 homes per year. Extensive copy functions and import-export capabilities eliminate redundant data entry as new communities are established. Sales management functionality helps manage buyer relationships from contract to closing.

Pivotal Homebuilder Front Office

Pivotal Homebuilder Front Office provides lead management, sales automation and customer care features based on the requirements of homebuilders. The company says it is built on a flexible, enterprise-level CRM technology platform that enables a fit for any business. Homebuilders need a solution to handle their disparate divisional processes across sales, marketing and service using adaptable software that provides key industry functionality, with flexibility to accommodate changing business requirements. To answer this need, Pivotal HomeBuilder Front Office was developed to extend customer relationship management capabilities to Homebuilder organizations via the Web, mobile systems and wireless devices.

SiteStream Software

Built around a single SQL server database that allows true single data entry and instant reporting throughout the four fully integrated modules, SiteStream is builder software that provides the user with a fully configurable back and front-office environment that's rich in functionality. This is supported by both Visual Basic and Web browser interfaces providing tools to manage the key home office, divisional- or development-based functions required by homebuilders. Using a three-tier design principle utilizing the COM+ object-oriented architecture, data integrity and performance are kept to a maximum. The software provides the user with unrestricted access to the Microsoft platform of choice. This means that the SiteStream can be freely distributed throughout the organization, allowing anything from complete central standardization of the business process in all divisions to complete regional autonomy.

