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Switching over



The new Formula One season has shaken-up the tried and tested PA People setup for the Melbourne Grand Prix. **Simon Luckhurst** takes pole position

THERE'S A FAMOUS SAYING BY Murray Walker that in Formula One 'anything can happen', but simply accepting this as fact is not a permissible mantra for event and production organisers. The 2016 Melbourne Grand Prix, while drawing a much smaller number trackside, was estimated to have been watched by somewhere between 20 and 30 million television viewers worldwide. Failure is simply not an option.

'The Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix is an event known for its glamour, excitement and passion – in both the fans and the drivers. It is also an event renowned for a high level of professionalism and superior organisation, with no detail overlooked. Part of its success comes down to the high standard of organisations forming the backbone of the event's infrastructure. With The PA People's expertise and technical ability, combined with high-quality equipment, that standard can continue,' mused Tim Jenkins, The PA People's project manager for the event.

This makes trialling a brand new A/V system a nervous time, but the switch wasn't made without good cause. The events services provider, The PA People has been responsible for the public address systems surrounding the course as well as the adjacent areas and facilities for the last six outings, but this year was also tasked with supplying the radio communications network – providing two Motorola IP Site Connect sites and more than 500 Motorola Solutions two-way radios with 12 channels. As well as the company handling radio comms, the backbone audio infrastructure was switched to Dante from CobraNet and a host of connected equipment introduced to accommodate.

As you can imagine, systems of this type aren't rolled out hours before the starting gun. In fact, planning, and indeed, execution begins long before you'd expect.

'For an event of this scale, planning begins during the pack-up of the previous year, as notes are made on lessons learnt,' explains Paul Barrett, audio project engineer. 'The project

manager starts to get busy around November to ensure all the key logistical elements are in place before the holiday period. The GP is more like a construction project than an event; schedules, permits and other paperwork must all be completed before a single person steps on-site. There's also very strict hours of work and there are often many competing priorities during the installation phase. Managing all of this is every bit as critical as a strong technical design.'

Two months prior to the race, work officially starts by erecting trackside fencing, pedestrian overpasses, grandstands and other motorsport infrastructure. All of which is then removed within six weeks of the final race. 'In the clients brief, each area, be it Track, Press Conferences or the Media Cafe is explained in detail regarding coverage of speakers, signal sources and routing, and quality of hardware. The emphasis in all areas is to deliver a world-class event, both front of house and back of house, as the world really is watching.'

Many of the systems deployed by The PA People are also not just critical from a broadcaster's perspective, but are vital to ensuring race safety, such as uninterrupted power supplies. 'Formula 1 requires that Race Control and other critical systems be able to run for two hours with a mains failure,' confirms the audio engineer. 'The PA People supplies a number of large UPS systems to facilitate this requirement that are craned into position early in the installation phase. All these systems are then remote monitored via the event network to ensure availability and rapid response to issues.'

So with a working solution already at hand, why try to fix something that isn't broken? 'Prior to Dante we were using a Peavey Media Matrix CobraNet System,' Mr Barrett adds. 'CobraNet is a good solid protocol which The PA People has extensive experience for on all scales and in critical installs. The flexible DSP of the Media Matrix was key to our delivery of the event systems and a reason we stuck with it for so long.



The Formula 1 Management Command Centre also housed The PA People's operations



The PA People director, Chris Dodds, assesses the track

'We had been looking at making the move to Dante for a couple of years for the event to take advantage of its ease of use, great sound quality and straightforward integration of many device types, but we had not found a DSP platform that fitted our needs until we trialled Yamaha's MRX7-D. By putting a CobraNet card in the MRX7-D we were able to make a staged transition to Dante. For 2016, we moved all our consoles and stage boxes to Dante and left the distribution out to the amp racks on CobraNet so we could continue to use our existing hardware in the field.



Video and audio feeds give VIPs a closer view of the action

For The PA People itself however, the big accomplishment for 2016 was successfully meeting the radio comms contract, and Craig Moca, manager, engineering, at the Formula 1 Australian Grand Prix, has high praise for the team. 'With Formula 1, there are no second chances; it has to run perfectly. The PA People knows our event and they deliver - every time. The PA People's service is excellent.'

Two-way radios provided critical communications for the duration of the event and a combination of Motorola Solutions' portable DP4600 and DP4800 series and mobile radios were deployed for engineers, race control, sector marshals,



Crowds gather in the pit lane for the podium ceremony

medical staff, recovery and rescue crews, cleaners and fire fighters. To aid with deployment, The PA People has introduced a standardised interface that connects any one of 10 headsets to the same radio, meaning

that the ideal headset can be used depending on the wearer's task, yet they are all still connected to the same radio system.

Confident in its service abilities, it's no surprise that the company's involvement in the event went off without a hitch. While making big changes to a design for a high profile event such as this might seem daunting, four decades of experience tells the team not to bite off more than it can chew. For next year though, the goal will surely be to move to a complete Dante setup.

www.motorolasolutions.com
www.papeople.com
www.yamahaproaudio.com



More than 500 Motorola two-way radios aided communications between trackside staff

We got no feedback from the client, which is great as it means the transition was seamless with these back-end changes not impacting delivery at all.

'Also having a mix of CobraNet and Ethersound made some of our routing more complex than it needed to be in a fully IP-networked setup.

Moving to Dante has allowed us full flexibility in routing, allowing signals that just need to be transported to bypass the consoles and DSP all together. Every device now has access to every source and recording and playback is as simple as plugging in a laptop. Using the GPI connections on the MRX-7D, we were able to use existing volume pots to control ceiling speaker feeds, making it a "drop-in" replacement for the Media Matrix in our application.'

User familiarity was also one of the key attributes that led to Yamaha desks being specified for the job. 'The consoles have proven very reliable over that time which is reflected in how ubiquitous they are across the industry, and also makes it very easy to find an operator who is familiar with them. This made it no problem at all to mix LS, QL and CL consoles and have the same operator jump between them. We have console files for the event that we reuse each year and Yamaha makes it easy to move those files between console types.'

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