

# CERTIFIED FOR SUCCESS

The Home Technology Association is on a mission to improve integrators' reputation with architects, designers, and builders

By Rob Stott

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Photography by: Matthew Emmi, OneButton

When we launched *Connected Design* almost two years ago, we did so with the stated mission of creating bridges and building connections between the technology integrator community and architects, designers, and builders. In covering the space and speaking with all parties involved, we understand the need for integrators to get involved in the building and design process at the earliest stages possible. Technology, as it becomes more deeply integrated with the home, needs to be at the forefront of any project, whether it's a new home build or a retrofit.

We've beat that drum to the point where it's starting to sound rather cliché, but until architects, designers, and builders recognize the importance of integrators—and actively engage this industry from Day One—we'll continue to do so, and we hope that others will as well.

The more voices that shout this message from the integration industry the better, and there may be no other organization doing a more impactful job of this than the Home Technology Association. Launched in 2017, HTA is first and foremost a certification body for integrators. The association's rigorous certification process can take weeks at a time and scores integration companies on a number of different criteria, including their technological abilities, attention to customer care, and

their overall reputation within the industry.

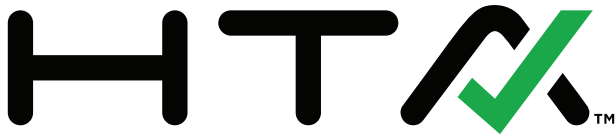
"This is a very low-barrier-to-entry industry, and as such there are so many installers out there that don't do a good job," Josh Christian, HTA's director of certification, said in an interview with *Connected Design*. "Most companies out there are kind of run by hobbyists that love the technology but really don't do a great job of implementing the technology in a way that consumers can operate. But more importantly it's things like service issues, too. When things go wrong—because they always do, things have to be rebooted or reset or need maintenance—that's where a big failure point in a lot of this industry is, is getting good customer service."

It goes without saying, but bad customer service can harm an integrator's reputation with clients. If a client has a bad experience with a local integrator, they will likely talk to people they know who will then talk to people they know, and so on, leaving the integrator in a pretty tough spot in their local community.

But bad customer service, as HTA's Christian learned, has also set this industry back light years with architects, builders, and designers.

"The reason why is because there are so many flakes out there that





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oversell their capabilities and don't take care of the client, and then that comes back and bites the architect, or the builder, or the designer, at the end of the project when the client was told it's going to be simple to use and do all of these magical and great things, and then it doesn't," he said.

Christian actually found himself speaking with some of the top architect and design firms in the country at various industry conferences and they'd admit as much right to his face.

"They'd tell me, 'Yeah, we understand the need to have a low-voltage person on our design team—we get it. But we stopped doing it because it bit us in the butt and it hurt our reputation when, at the end of the project, the client was so frustrated they're calling us to get to the integrator because the integrator stopped returning phone calls,'" he explained. "They get it; they understand the need. ... You have all of these architects, designers, and builders out there that have a low opinion of this industry and have been burned by it too many times because there are too many companies out there that just aren't professional enough."

And that's exactly what led to the creation of HTA and the group's certification process. Christian and others who helped form this year-old upstart organization recognized a serious need to help weed out the reputable, respectable integrators from the rest—and to give architects, builders, and designers a fighting chance when it comes to hiring a trustworthy integrator.

### A Conversation-Starter

HTA is doing much more than slapping seals of approval on integration companies, though. The association also recently launched a budget calculator tool that is proving itself much more valuable than anyone at the organization ever thought possible.

The idea behind the tool was pretty simple: HTA wanted to give integrators a way to advance past the awkward conversations around money and budgets.

"One of the biggest challenges that integrators have when they meet a client is finding out the client's budget, because clients are really confused and clueless about this industry," Christian said. "They know that they want technology in their home, they see all of the neat things—TVs and sound throughout the house and lighting controls and motorized shades and smart home—but they really have no clue what this stuff costs."

More often than not, a client will be unlikely to share their budget

with an integrator because they either don't want to aim too high and risk being upsold, or too low and end up experiencing sticker shock.

The HTA budget tool simplifies that process by running the potential client through a series of 20 questions that cover everything from the home's total square footage, to the types of technology they're looking to install, to how much of their home they want to deck out. It's a very high-level kind of tool that doesn't push specific brands or anything like that and really just focuses on specific features.

HTA developed the tool after receiving tons of industry input, and the feedback has been incredibly positive, Christian said. And, to HTA's surprise, the tool has been a huge in for integrators with architects, builders, and designers. The association and its certified integrators have been on a grassroots-level campaign to get the tool in front of that community and shake the perception that this industry is a bunch of general technology contractors—and it's starting to pay off.

For starters, they're noticing that architects, builders, and designers are actually using the tool themselves to gauge their clients' technology budgets.

"By getting this budget calculator as a tool out there where they don't have to hire a contractor early on to come in and share numbers, now they can expose what the technology is going to cost," Christian said. "It's a vehicle to bring in the conversation early to the architect so they can think about this trade earlier."

Additionally, the budget tool has exposed architects and builders to the advanced skill-sets of today's technology integrator. While a media or entertainment room might be the main reason for bringing in an integrator, the tool opens up the possibility for a wider range of work that could include the kitchen, lighting throughout the home, motorized shades, and perhaps even full-blown home automation systems. Simply put, the HTA budget tool has been great for awareness around just how much an integrator can provide from a design and implementation side of things—beyond just a home theater room.

"This tool is giving the integrator larger wallet share on projects because it's opening up those doors to other services that architects and builders might not have looked to them for in the past," Christian said. "At the end of the day, we're giving architects, builders, and designers peace of mind by saying in so many words, 'We get it. We get that you've been burned before. But it's in your best interest to involve an HTA-certified integrator early on in your project. You don't have to gamble anymore.'" ☺



Josh Christian