



Musical fountain at Miracle Mile Shops in Las Vegas. All fountains shown in this feature were choreographed and programmed by Scott Palamar, H2Oarts.

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Bellagio In The Backyard

IT IS NO GREAT STRETCH to suggest that automation is transforming society. However, it is somewhat riskier to assert that it's revolutionizing the pool and water feature biz.

Why? Because our industry is a bit averse to deviation from the tried and true, and also due to the absence of off-the-shelf, shrink-wrapped products labeled "Automated Water Feature Kit!"

It's common knowledge that you can spend 25 bucks for an astronomical timer to activate your lighting at sunset year-round, but did you know your clients can use free mobile apps to change lighting schemes and function modes? Or that you can completely automate a fountain with live music? How about this one: For a few hundred bucks you can score a little box that sends you text/email when it detects wet where it should be dry. Pretty handy, right?

There are good reasons to consider offering

a greater range of capability and user-control. One is that the barrier to entry keeps falling as the technology keeps getting more friendly and affordable. And two, because you can increase your profits by selling up!

And three, you will stay ahead of your competition. Oh, and four, it can be fun.

So where to start?

Fortunately your savvier clients are probably already addicted to thumb-worthy smartphone apps for logging onto home thermostats, checking security cams, dog food bowls, etc., so it's unlikely to take a lot of educating on your part to show them they can also remotely change the color on their pool lights or crank their backyard waterfall from mellow to Niagara — from wherever.

Of course, that assumes you know how to do these things! If you don't, then you might consider joining the 21st century (or by teaming up with someone who's already a member).

BY SCOTT PALAMAR

Automation



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109 jets make up this interactive musical fountain at the Lorenzo, an amazingly upscale USC student apartment complex in Los Angeles.

Take some baby steps by poking around on the Internet; try Googling “water feature automation.”

People learn best by example, so without getting too deep into technical details and specific products, let's create a hypothetical situation to explore.

You have a client who loves the latest and greatest of everything, and wants a major home water world upgrade with pool, spa, pond, waterfall, fountain — an entire backyard

Bellagio! What's currently installed does what you'd expect. It has automatic circulation, heating, sanitation, white lights on a timer and basic manual override functions.

Here are some enhancement ideas:

As a foundation, see to it that there is an Internet connection in the yard where the equipment is located. This is easily accomplished with wi-fi repeaters, etc. You don't have to do this yourself, just tell your client it's a must-have for remote control and monitoring of the new toys.

A core capability, which may already be in place, is remote control of on/off devices. In that case you might merely be looking at simple extensions of what's currently installed. Insteon, Z-Wave, ZigBee, WeMo, and UPB are a few of the Internet of Things revolution technologies that are in common use. Just browse the website smarthome.com and prepare to be amazed at the range of available products and systems.

A primary “toy” to consider adding is color-controllable LED lighting, both in and out of water. There is great variance in terms of price, complexity and performance in these systems. For example, lighting giant Philips offers both a “Hue Connected Bulb” residential system and pro Color Kinetics line of products. Controls here range from wireless remote to mobile OS app to dedicated computer. The results are just as wide ranging, from simple color presets to animated musical response. For starters, check out the friendly wi-fi enabled screw-in multicolor LED bulbs by LIFX.

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Next up on the wow list is water control. Again there are many ways and degrees of sophistication possible, so it does come down to the application and the budget. It's relatively straightforward to turn pumps on and off and select discrete speeds by remote control via switches and relays, but the additional effort for continuously variable speed is the ticket when smooth jet and stream animation is desired.

For both lights and water, the ultimate control likely involves a computer using a dedicated peripheral or two and the serial protocol known as DMX. Google "DMX controls" to explore this technology. If your client really does want a backyard Bellagio with animated jets and lights, a DMX-based show control system is de rigueur. And since this protocol has been the professional lighting control standard for decades, there are many products and systems in circulation (and specialists who know how to use them on water features).

If this exercise has you intrigued — but a bit anxious — not to worry. Start small and work your way up. Experiment with your own home water feature. And if you land a juicy but scary project in the meantime, why not get some help from those in the know?



The Delta Fountain at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

One key point for your marketing plan is to pitch simple and manageable options, but be prepared when the client asks, "But can it do this?" Systems can get really complicated, but that's no reason not to specify one that's sophisticated and expandable, since future upgrades can be profitable and you will be pleased to say, "Sure, I can do that."

Lastly, it's worth pointing out that Internet-enabled water feature technology is not just a benefit to your client. The value for end-user control is clear, but perhaps as important is your ability to monitor and support your installations without having to get in the truck and drive on out to site. Mobile connectivity allows you to keep your costs down and sell ongoing remote customer support and upgrade subscriptions.

So jack in, log on, and touch the future . . .

Comments or thoughts on this article?

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Scott Palamar of H2Oarts, Los Angeles, has been developing water feature content and show control technology for over 15 years. To see some cool water feature projects, go to www.H2Oarts.com.

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