

# Mike Fox

## Fox Audio and Visual



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**W**hile Mike Fox was born in Peoria, he considers Springfield home. He's been in the area since kindergarten, graduated from Southeast High School and attended Lincoln Land Community College before he got his first job in 1982. "I started working my first job at MicroPOWER Computer (owned by his parents, Bob and Elsie)." It was at that job that Fox initially earned a number of certifications through technical training at specialized technical schools on hardware and operating systems. Plus, the fact that he was the boss's son, with the expectations that come from that title, gave him a good business sense, which he now realizes.

## Getting Started

"Back then, I spent a lot of time arguing with my Dad. He pushed and kicked (figuratively) to get me to do what needed to be done. He always expected more from me than from anyone else, and he expected me to work at a higher speed," Fox said. "What I didn't know then was that I would end up having a strong work ethic like my Dad. He was the biggest influence, teaching me back then the traits I would need to be successful. Sometimes, it's good to step away from a job, so that you can see clearly. I can see that now ... those important traits that at the time I didn't necessarily want to see as positive."

After 23 years working in the family business he still felt unfulfilled. "I have a very long, strong technical background." When asked what his favorite part of that business was, the answer was, "None. Honestly, I did it for 23 years and was good at it. I really knew the business inside and out, but it was just a job. I didn't get a lot of pleasure out of it, and it grew to the point that I knew more than most of the support people who I needed to call at various companies." As the years went on Fox found it more difficult to get someone on the phone who had a level of knowledge needed to get his questions answered. "It was a constant source of frustration, and about six years ago, I walked out," he said.

He didn't just walk out, though. In 2004, he started his own company, Fox Audio Visual, using the traits learned from his Dad, along with the technical knowledge base that he had gained through the years. "I'd been doing this (A-V) on the side for a number of years, and it was something I enjoyed, and it looked like it was going to be up and coming in business. So I never turned back. It's the best decision I ever made. I really enjoy doing this, it doesn't feel like a job."

Part of the reason he is able to handle the multi-faceted needs of his business and the jobs he does now, from start to finish for a client, is because his Dad always sent him on calls believing and telling him he could do the whole job, while similar jobs would have more than one person working them. "At the time, I was always mad about that. Now I realize that Dad was helping me learn to be more than an employee, and I am thankful."

Fox knows firsthand that on-the-job training is paramount in his profession, as is ensuring appropriate certification for the various aspects of business with which he deals. He continues to be certified in industry-standard areas, and the list is extensive. He jokes saying, "I have more acronyms that can go behind my name than will fit on a business card." A number of the certifications he has earned include: Certified Network Engineer, ASE, Master ACE, RHCE, MSE, Linux/Unix Specialist. Those acronyms show the dedication he has to learning and staying on top of the most current technological trends needed to provide his customers the best service and choices.

## Evolving Technology, Trends

As we all know, the world of technology is always evolving, and it is imperative to have someone with a keen understanding of how it all works, and more importantly how it can all work together when planning your space. There are terms that to the everyday person, don't even come into play as we discuss home theaters, surround sound or full-house

automation. Terms such as absorption, baffle, diffuser, white noise and digital micro mirror device are among the hot topics, and the list continues. But understanding these terms and how the set-up of each component functions, separately or with others, is key to getting a system custom designed. "It's important to know what the client needs and what the client wants," said Fox.

Fox has indirectly, always been helping "customers." Now 45, Fox said he was the kid who was always installing the other kids' car stereo systems. And he dabbled in home theater. When he launched Fox Audio Video, he knew that he wanted to do more with home theaters. From his time at MicroPOWER, he also had a working knowledge of providing sales and service. While he has the skill, ability and desire to do it all, sometimes, he says there just aren't enough hours in the day. "I feel fortunate that I have two to three contract employees that I can call at any time if I need help with a job. I do everything from the advertising to handling inventory to doing the books, and actually getting out there and doing the work. It never seems like there are enough hours," he said. Much of the time he uses is doing what he likes doing best ... designing the space for a client and then putting it all together for them.

He can integrate multiple technologies and products together. He demonstrated this during our visit. He was able to use one remote controller to dim the lights, turn on the fireplace, play the stereo, and not just in the living room, but in different areas of the house, having everything pre-programmed. Quite impressive. And he had it set to be controlled through the ever-popular iPhone, too.

He has built several homes, including performing all labor involved with plumbing, electrical wiring, heating and air, and other projects as they are related to new home construction. The new construction business is down according to Fox, but he still does one or two designs and/or installs a month. Two of his commercial clients include

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the Chatham Library and Benedictine University.

"One of the advantages of being a custom installer is that we are not married to any particular manufacturer and instead offer thousands of alternatives and better quality products than you can find locally in a 'Big Box' store," he said. "Quite a few people are under the false pretense that what they see in these stores is all that is available. Having relationships with a number of companies allows us to offer the right product for our clients to meet their needs at a more than competitive price."

Fox designs, fabricates and installs true custom theaters. He says these theaters go well beyond the basic burlap lined acoustic walls and offer true custom hardwoods, imported fabrics and authentic theater seating. "We typically do several of these a year and I enjoy the challenge of each one. We work with some of the best custom woodworkers in central Illinois and have even worked with local designers as needed," he said. The typical range of these theaters can start as low as \$30,000-\$60,000 and can go well beyond based on equipment, decor and even seating.

One of the things Fox said, is that he is frugal with his money and even more so with his customers' money. "I'll price shop to make sure I am providing the best deal. It takes time in the bidding process, but customers deserve to know the scope of what is available to them." And once someone becomes a customer, they have lifetime access to Fox. "It's accountability. And I think impression is important, too. That's why I do the little things even, like take my shoes off when I go into a customer's home." Fox believes in treating the customer right from start to finish. He says taking his shoes off, which he expects his employees to do, is a matter of respect to the homeowner. You don't track through the house. And Fox and his crew don't park in their customers' driveways. They use the street, so as not to inconvenience their (the customer's) normal routines. "We want referral business," Fox said. "And showing

respect to a customer is a large part of that equation."

## Industry Recognition

Fox Audio Visual is a name that is associated with winning projects in the industry, especially in home theater design. The business was featured in Electronic House magazine's Cool Theaters June/July 2009 issue, won the Electronic House magazine Home of the Year Contest in 2008, and was voted St. Louis Home of the Year 2005 by St. Louis Magazine. To see these featured spaces, visit [www.foxav.net/html/body\\_theaters](http://www.foxav.net/html/body_theaters).

## Life Outside of Fox AV

In addition to his business, Fox has two children, Aidan, 16 and Trevor, 12, who he likes to spend time with. He is an avid boater, especially enjoying the Ozarks and Lake Springfield on his 28' Regal. "I love being on the water." He also has an eclectic taste in music, from jazz to alternative, as well as different music styles in between. He not only enjoys listening, but also plays keyboard and guitar. "It's another passion. I like anything musical," he said. He travels and spends time with girlfriend, Amy. He is a busy man with an eye on the future and what it might hold in store, for Mike Fox and Fox AV.

## Future plans for Fox AV

He said he plans to continue growing his business and that perhaps one day he'll have a store front. This business is all about the senses ... what people get shows their lifestyle. "People want to see what they are considering. They want to touch it, feel it. They want to make sure it fits their lifestyle. Right now Fox is pleased with how his business is doing. "I want to be able to offer my customers good, dependable equipment at a fair price. I may bring on another part-time sales person, at some point." For now, he is taking it day to day, project by project, creating spaces that earn him recognition and most importantly, creating spaces that keep his customers coming back!

