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Education a key focus at InfoComm '06

Companies display new AV products for schools and colleges

By Dennis Pierce, Managing Editor, eSchool News

Education was a key focus at InfoComm 2006, the audio-visual (AV) industry's largest annual trade show. Conference organizers attribute growing interest in AV technologies among schools as one reason this year's event was the most successful in the show's history. From digital projectors and interactive whiteboards, to video recording and streaming systems and June 19, 2006—Thousands of buyers and sellers of audiovisual (AV) technologies convened in Orlando earlier this month for the annual InfoComm trade show--and many of the new products they discussed were aimed at schools.

InfoComm organizers say this year's show was the largest ever, with a record 770 exhibitors participating. Reflecting strong demand for AV technologies in education and other markets, attendance at the end of the first day of the conference topped 25,000, show organizers said. (Final attendance figures were not available at press time.)

One of the topics causing quite a buzz at the show was the "going green" of new AV technologies. New environmental regulations, called the "RoHS" directives (for "Restrictions of Hazardous Substances"), go into effect July 1 for all new electronics products sold in Europe-- and Jan. 1, 2007, for those sold in California. As a result, many vendors were promoting the fact that their latest products are RoHS-compliant at InfoComm.

For instance, GTCO CalComp (<http://www.gtcocalcomp.com>) announced that its InterWrite PRS RF product is now 100-percent compliant with RoHS directives. The system enables students to answer questions and interact in the classroom with wireless, radio-frequency "clickers." A two-line Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) screen enables educators to ask advanced numeric questions that include positive and negative numbers, decimal points, and fractions, in addition to multiple choice or even short-answer questions. Teachers can receive instant student feedback, stir classroom discussion, quickly and easily grade tests and quizzes, generate student assessment reports, and even take attendance using the system, the company says.

Also, ELMO USA (<http://www.elmousa.com>) announced that its new TT-02 Teacher's Tool document camera is RoHS compliant. The device's camera automatically adjusts to changing levels of room brightness, ensuring easy-to-view presentations, even in darkened rooms, ELMO says. A "microscope viewing" mode lets users display microscopic materials in science classes, and a removable stage makes it easy to annotate materials being presented.

In addition, Samsung Electronics has launched a new online service to help its customers demonstrate RoHS compliance. The service, available at <http://www.samsung.com/rohs>,

provides easy access to the documentation necessary for showing RoHS compliance, as well as a search index for environment-friendly products. Other companies that have added a section to their web sites with information about their RoHS-compliant products include Panduit Corp. (<http://www.panduit.com/resources/102212.asp>), a maker of AV accessories, and Toshiba America (<http://www.toshiba.com/taec/adinfol/leadfree2>).

other devices, vendors unveiled a host of new products aimed at schools.

Audio systems

If you're looking to enhance the sound of your whiteboard-based lessons, Califone International (<http://www.califone.com>) has a solution. At InfoComm, Califone announced a new 30-watt UHF wireless whiteboard speaker system designed to work with any type of board. A typical system consists of a transmitter that plugs into an interactive whiteboard, and two speakers--one for the front of the classroom and one for the rear.

Califone also announced a new infrared classroom amplification system, as well as a 90-watt portable sound system that reportedly is the first on the market with an SD memory card slot for playing saved audio recordings; it also contains a USB port for connecting and playing music from an iPod or other portable sound device.

The classroom amplification system includes two sensors that are installed in the ceiling, instead of the typical single sensor, and a belt-pack transmitter that sends signals to the sensors. It uses the same "array technology" that underlies Califone's wireless whiteboard speakers, according to Tim Ridgway, vice president of marketing. This technology projects a more focused, high-quality sound, Ridgway said, instead of emitting a random, non-directional sound.

A brand-new company, Revolabs Inc. (<http://www.revolabs.com>) of Maynard, Mass., introduced two new sound systems of its own at InfoComm: the Solo Executive and Solo Desktop wireless microphone systems.

The Executive system consists of a charger, a receiver, and eight wireless microphones, each about the size of a lipstick case--and each with its own secure communications channel. Revolabs says the solution would be ideal for school board meetings or other conferences with multiple speakers. The Desktop system, which would be more appropriate for classrooms, consists of a single wireless microphone and a base that connects to speakers. The Executive solution costs \$8,000, and the Desktop solution sells for \$500.