

# 2015 RETAIL EXCELLENCE AWARDS



## Video and Audio Center: Southern California's Tech Teacher

By Nancy Klosek

When Joseph Akhtarzad started Video and Audio Center in Southern California in 1981 with his brother and co-owner, Mayer, the newest technology was “all to do with video games—ColecoVision, Atari,” he recalled. Akhtarzad came to CE retailing with an unusual set of credentials that likely provided him an advantage in jump-starting the business—as a Master graduate in Electrical and Electronic Engineering of England's University of Nottingham.

Fast-forward 34 years, and the parallels in expansion both for the industry and for Video and Audio Center are very apparent. The retailer, based in Santa Monica, Calif., has three prominent locations now, and has quadrupled its business over the last year. “We have the biggest market share in our area—and we are opening our technology store, which is really going to set us apart from everyone else,” he said.

The mid-September launch of the newest Video and Audio Center location in the half-billion-dollar Village at Westfield Topanga outdoor mall complex will be but the latest in a string of high points for this retailer, which has long been favored by top-tier TV suppliers as the place to make U.S. introductions of such cutting-edge technologies as OLED and Ultra HD 4K TV. What's more, this new electronics showplace will feature both traditional CE and recently added branch-out categories including wearables, but also a totally new category called CryptoElectronics, an umbrella term that applies to “verbal, digital and video” devices designed to secure privacy and protect data transmissions.

“Across the country, we're making noise,” Akhtarzad stated. “No one does what we do the way we do it. We were one of the first to bring in a 105-inch TV at over \$100,000. We were not afraid to bring it in, no matter the price. To this day, we carry a \$100,000 panoramic UHD curved TV. It's in our showroom. I don't see that anywhere else.”

Competitors? “I don't think we have any,” Akhtarzad said. “To my eyes, when I look at the competition, the majority are box-movers. Once

you shop with us, it's not about price but about the experience you get. We work very hard to be ahead of what customers are looking for because we know eventually they'll want to embrace what we bring out. We listen to customers' needs and guarantee satisfaction.” His pioneering Just One Touch custom division, founded in the early '90s, well before custom operations becoming subdivi-

tinguishes itself with community involvement. Video and Audio Center's tagline, The Talk of the Town, is apt, given its high community profile. Akhtarzad, at the times when others were laying personnel off, was hiring. The store has held job fairs, and in fact, was saluted for community service via a proclamation. He was even made Beverly Hills's Honorary Mayor for a day last year.

Akhtarzad is quick to say that the store's success is nothing less than a team effort—and that team training is a linchpin in keeping up Video and Audio Center's high standards. “On a weekly basis, we update our staff to make sure that, from the cashier to the customer service people to the project managers, everyone knows the newest technologies, so that everyone can talk about them in the same way.”

He also highly credits manufacturers for the store's success: “We have very close ties with them and cherish them very dearly. We listen to and take direction from them, and don't carry their products piecemeal. We don't cherry-pick; we carry every single model.”

Bob Hana, managing director of the buying group HTSA, where Video and Audio Center is a member, observed: “Joseph Akhtarzad and his staff of experts at the Video and Audio Center continue to redefine the experience of marketing, servicing and installing home technology solutions for their clients. With their unique ability to engage with the local community via marketing events, often including local officials

and celebrities, they present an exciting environment year-round. And when it comes to seeing the latest and greatest, major manufacturers have habitually asked Video and Audio Center to be among the first to launch new products and technologies, reinforcing that they are the ones to seek out for the best. We are pleased that they are a key member in HTSA.”

Word of mouth, trust, and consistency of story are the foundation of the Video and Audio Center story, said Akhtarzad. “And,” he added, “I have very good people around me.” ■



Joseph Akhtarzad of Video and Audio Center

sions of brick-and-mortar retailers was the norm, boasts a team “that can go into a home on the same day of a purchase and set it up. That sets us apart.”

The store also recently initiated a Platinum Concierge service, where purchases can arrive at a client's home before or at the same time the customer does. This service is being supported with the opening of a new, consolidated warehouse four times the size of its predecessor near Los Angeles International Airport.

What else differentiates the store is how it dis-