

Putting Music on Your Main Street

The Nuts and Bolts of Getting Started.

Many cities and small towns have thought that it would be nice to have background music on their Main Street during holiday shopping periods or for local events like festivals, farmers markets, and parades. New wireless technology¹ is now available which simplifies the process and lowers the overall cost of installing such a system. Streets and sidewalks no longer need to be excavated to run wires. In this article we'll explore the process of planning, funding, installing, operating, and enjoying Music on Your Main Street.



Should we do this?

The first question you should ask yourselves is “should we do this?” This is an excellent question and one you should spend some quality time examining. The answer is not always “yes” and there are many parties to consider when arriving at your answer. Groups such as your downtown merchants, your DDA,

¹ See Additional References at the end of this document for more information.

your tourism board, your local government officials, and your townspeople will all have “opinions”, some of which may surprise you. There will be concerns over “what kind of music will be played and who will choose it?”, as well as “will the music be too loud and will it play all night long?”, or “can we stream Pandora?”, and “can we use the system to distribute our local band’s music during a festival?” All of these questions need good answers or your plans will die early in the process. For a successful system to thrive, you must satisfy your “customers”, i.e. the listeners.



Early in the thought process you will need to decide if you’ve got the proper venue. Does your Main Street have the right “physical attributes” for a sound system? In other words, do you have a concentration of shops and businesses in a central portion of the town that can be easily covered by “background-level” audio? If your shops are spread out with large gaps or vacant lots between them, your music level may have to be turned up beyond “background level” to get good audio coverage. Your “customers” may not be happy about this and you may be asked to turn the music down.

However, if you have a classic small-town Main Street, or a classic downtown square/courthouse surrounded by a high concentration of shops, businesses, and restaurants with outdoor seating, you may have the perfect venue for the system. If you frequently have events in your downtown area, you could augment the “vibe” with background music, as well as provide announcements for weather emergencies or the proverbial “lost child”.

Planning

The first step in the planning process is to decide exactly where you want the audio coverage. This may sound simple, but in fact may be a bit more difficult due to physical limitations. The wireless audio system is designed to be mounted on existing street light poles from which it gets its AC power. Most small town city blocks are between 200' and 300' long. Street light poles are typically situated about 120' to 150' apart so that the light illumination coverage is adequate for the surroundings. This provides the perfect mounting location for the wireless speakers. A good way to begin the planning process is to walk your streets and locate which poles would be good candidates for the speakers. Some of the poles have been installed in an alternating pattern on opposite sides of the street. Good audio coverage can be achieved by placing the speakers in a zig-zag pattern on these poles.



The next planning question is “who owns the poles?” If the local municipality owns the poles the plan is simplified. If the local or state power company owns the poles, you will need “Pole Attachment Permission” similar to what is needed for holiday decorations or hanging baskets. The power company will take into account the size and weight of the speaker system as well as the power consumption.

Finally, you will need to make sure the AC power is always “ON” as opposed to power that only comes on in the evening (photo cell).

Funding

After deciding on how many speakers you need and where you want them, you will need to decide on how you want to fund the project. Many sources are available, such as local, state, and federal

government grants, local merchant associations, DDA funding, or even local residents who wish to give a gift to their town. Typical projects can range from \$5000 to \$25,000 depending upon the desired area of coverage.

Installing

Once the system has been funded installation can begin. The wireless speaker system referenced above is designed to be installed by local Public Works personnel. If the street light poles are on the order 12' tall, a unit can easily be installed in about 15 minutes by two people using two ladders. Taller poles will require a "lift".



Each system will include a single 'Master transmitter' into which the music or audio will be fed. The Master transmitter needs to be within radio range of at least one of the pole-mounted units. It can even be located in an office somewhere on Main Street. Since the pole mounted units are "repeaters" the signal is propagated from one pole to the next and can even go around corners and down side streets, so the Master transmitter does not have to cover all units directly.

Operating

Now that your system is installed and operating, you'll need to feed it...audio!

There are numerous sources of "streaming" audio. Some legal, some not so legal. Obviously staying legal is of utmost importance for a public outdoor system. Companies such as Pandora and Sirius XM offer very affordable, fully legal, licensed music of all varieties. For example, Pandora offers a business license

for unlimited play for under \$30/month. You'll be required to purchase the Pandora "player" for \$99 which will stream audio from the internet to your Master transmitter. The player can be controlled remotely and constrained to play only during selected times of days, and days of the week.

The wireless speaker system also includes the ability to remotely adjust the volume of each speaker individually. So if a certain merchant feels that the speaker outside his/her shop is too loud or too soft, it can be adjusted by the central network management system.

Enjoying

Once your outdoor audio system is installed and working you can enjoy the new "vibe" it creates along your Main Street. Holiday music is extremely popular with merchants and townspeople and has been received with rave reviews. Festivals and other Main Street events take on a new life when music is playing. Studies have shown that people actually spend more time and money when music augments the shopping experience. Plus having an emergency communications system in the downtown area will certainly make the Emergency Services folks happy.



Putting Music on Main Street may not be appropriate for every town, but with the right planning and preparation, many towns are very much enjoying the sound of Music on their Main Street.

Additional Resources

For more information on the StreetSounds® products, please visit www.streetsoundswireless.com

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