



EXTREME AUDIO FAST FACTS

WEBSITE: www.extremeaudio.org

FEATURED STORE

Extreme Audio, 7451 Sujen Ct., Mechanicsville, Va. 23111. A traditional retail store with approximately 5,400 square feet, including a 3,000-square-foot garage and 2,400 square feet of showroom, stockroom and office space. Two large doors provide access to the garage, which contains five bays with ample room for projects, boats, etc. This is the second location since it opened its doors in 1999.

EMPLOYEES

Mike Bartells, owner / manager, James Roper, sales, Brian Schurg, lead technician, Chris Carter, wiring specialist, Seth Powers, tint specialist, Rodney Hall, mobile technician

TOTAL NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 6

EXTREMELY MOTIVATED

Mike Bartells of award-winning Extreme Audio vows that his team will never stop trying to improve themselves and their business

WORDS BY MICHELLE FISHER

PICS BY EXTREME AUDIO

You might think Mike Bartells would bask in the triumphs of his shop, Extreme Audio, after winning a major industry award, completing a full garage remodel and revamping the store's website, but then you don't know Mike. He constantly points to his staff's teamwork and expertise, as well as their relationships with customers and colleagues, when discussing accolades like winning Mobile Electronics' Retailer of the Year award for 2013. He uses the pronoun "we" far more than "I." He is one humble guy.

"The Top 12 this past year was a very impressive group, and we were proud to be associated with all of them, much less end up as one of the few on top," he said.

This is not the first time Extreme Audio has ranked highly in the ME competition—it had a nominee in the Top 100 Installer category for three consecutive years (2011, 2012 and 2013) and was a 2011 Top 50 Retailer.



» Converting simplistic, everyday vehicles like this golf cart, into high-tech sound displays is part of what makes Extreme Audio stand out to its customers.

Bartells acknowledged that Extreme Audio may not have the highest profit margins, but he believes they won ME Retailer of the Year because they offer the full package as a true mobile electronics retailer.

“We don’t move millions in product each year or have the fanciest fab shop—yet—but we treat each and every client with a high level of care and respect on a daily basis. We treat everyone the way we would hope to be treated when out shopping, but rarely are,” he remarked. “We would not be the Retailer of the Year in a million years if it weren’t for events like KnowledgeFest and the networking. There is probably input in this store from 20 to 30 different people. There’s just an endless supply of knowledge between everyone combined.”

Bartells sounds like a proud father when he talks about his staff members’ knowledge and dedication. He said they have a mixture of skill sets so there is someone who specializes in each category, a “go-to person,” but each also has the wider knowledge that keeps the shop running smoothly.

“It’s definitely the best overall staff we’ve ever had—there are no bad seeds or anyone that brings people down. We all get along and everyone works together. We jump in and help each other if there is an issue with a car,” he explained. “And we definitely have the best mixture of

techs that we’ve ever had. Everyone has [his] own specialty, but also is versatile enough to cover just about anything.”

Bartells added that it is “refreshing” to see the way everyone cooperates and works well together to achieve common goals. He also couldn’t be more pleased with his sales crew, who frequently elicit compliments from customers for being helpful, friendly and well-mannered—and for going out of their way to take care of them.

“They will say to me, ‘You’ve got a good one here.’ And you know they are doing a good job because people don’t normally say stuff like that,” he continued.

As far as overall sales, Extreme Audio saw steady growth until the economy dropped in 2007 and 2008, which was a “serious road bump,” Bartells said. It wasn’t long before the numbers went back up and stabilized.

“Last year was flat overall, but the year prior to that, we had significant growth—about 20 percent or so. This year we are on track at about 10 percent up so far,” he said, adding that the harsh winter hurt business, especially when the persistent snow and icy roads shut down the whole town. “Now we’re just playing catch up to make the numbers we’ve seen in other years.”

Bartells pointed out that, despite the weather, the month of December has been a high point: In December 2013 they saw their second-highest sales figures, while the prior December was the best month they ever had.

“We are busy around the holidays. It seems to get busier and busier every year, and I really think it is the repeat business,” he said. “The larger the customer base becomes, and the more repeat business there is, the bigger the buying season.”

Concentrating on Customers

From the very start, Bartells stressed, his main focus has been helping people. When customers come to him or his staff with a problem or a specific need, they take care of it, no matter what—even if it means less money on the sale. The bigger picture is more important, he said, because word travels, ensuring an ever-expanding customer base.

“If there is ever a rare, unhappy client, we make sure steps are taken to avoid it ever happening again by improving our procedures to fix the problem. ... It probably has cost me money over the years, not being more sales-driven than we probably are, but we’re really out for the customer’s best interests,” he said. “Just because a product is the flavor of the month or we got a smokin’ good deal on it, if it’s not what that customer really needs, we’re not going to push it on them.”

AN ONLINE EDGE

Car-audio shop owner Mike Bartells said that in the past 15 years, he has tested various marketing approaches, but he has only recently unlocked the keys to success on the Internet. In February, he hired a designer to revamp Extreme Audio’s website, which may have been the best marketing decision he has ever made.

“We enlisted Mitch Schaeffer who owns 1 Sixty 8 Media. He’s done a really good job,” said Bartells. “It’s all about getting fresh articles and new information consistently online. We redid our complete look, and afterward, we had many people call in to say they really like our website, over and over.”

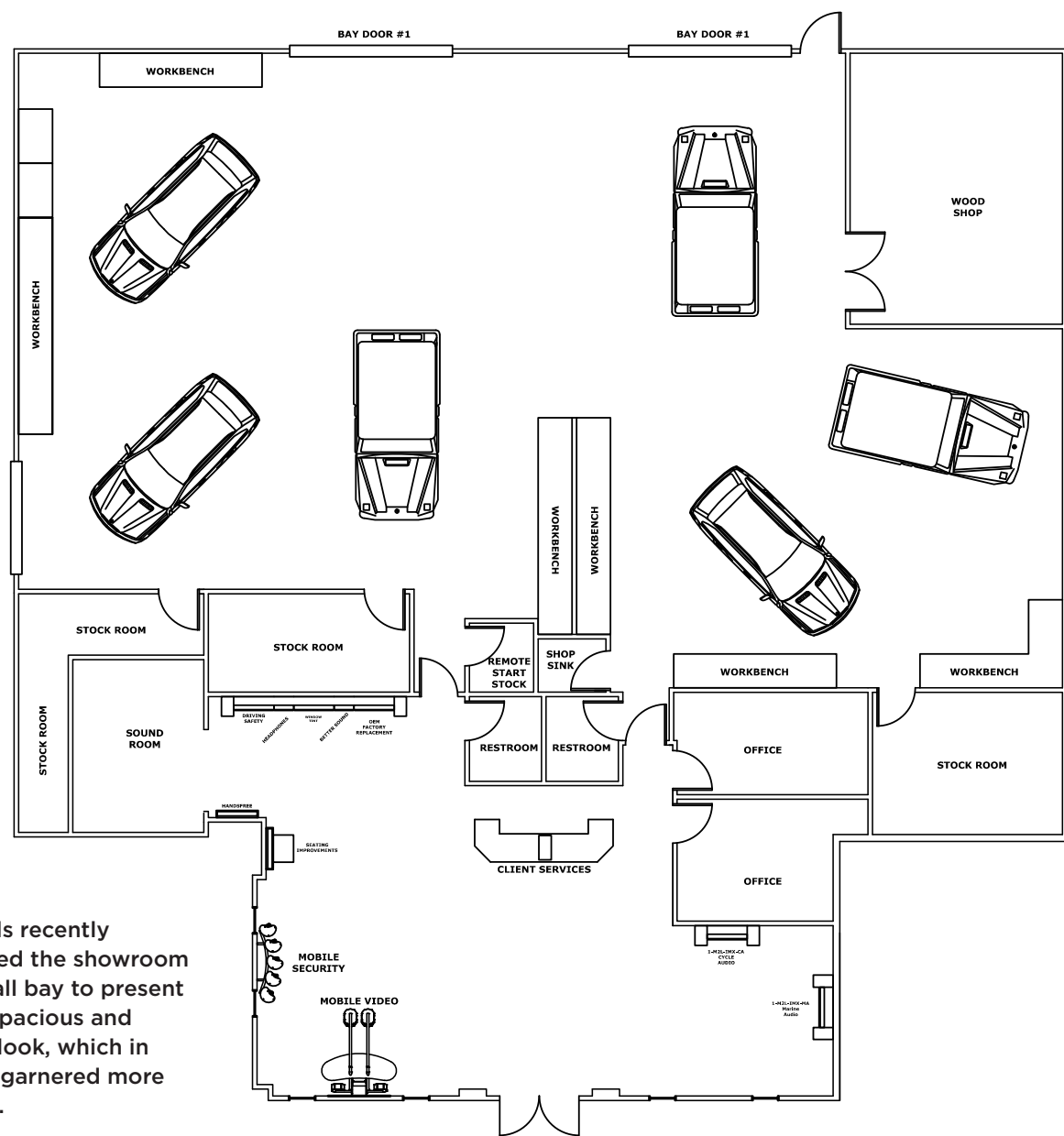
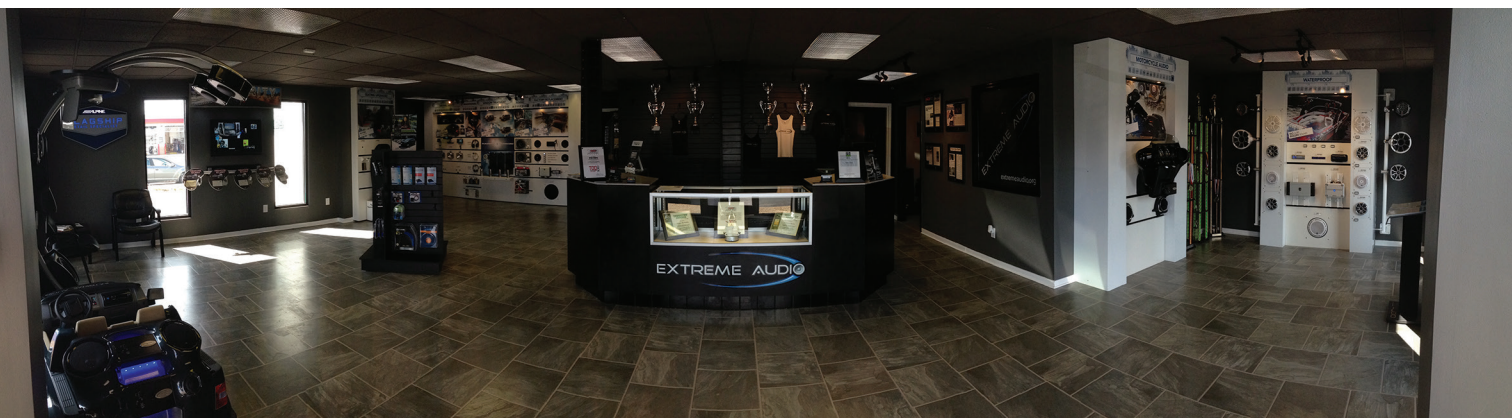
Additionally, new store customers have commented that they found Extreme Audio online and were drawn by the many positive reviews.

Bartells said he initially built and maintained the store’s website, but he later realized he needed someone with design expertise to really make it pop.

“It’s a good idea to use an expert in a field that you aren’t an expert in, so you can get fresh input,” he said. “Now we get a lot of positive feedback on our website—the fresher look and style of it. When you’re adding content to your own site, it’s kind of the gift that keeps on giving—and it’s a long-term win.”

Conversely, Bartells can recall spending a tremendous amount of money with a search engine optimization (SEO) company that also handled their pay-per-click campaign with Google. Even though it was a well-known firm, he didn’t get the results he wanted.

“We spent a lot on results for ‘car stereo’ and ‘car audio’ but not for the smaller, more diverse things we do. We really saw no results whatsoever,” he noted. “We learned the bulk of people searching for car audio online tend to be younger and more interested in buying online ... and are not as into our services. We already had that customer but weren’t picking up additional customers on top of that.”



» Bartells recently remodeled the showroom and install bay to present a more spacious and modern look, which in turn has garnered more business.

Bartells takes this approach because he wants to establish long-term relationships and build on his already solid reputation. In 1999, he opened Extreme Audio—a name he often regrets choosing because it doesn't represent the bulk of his business—in the bustling city of Richmond, but he moved to suburban Mechanicsville after two years. In Richmond, the store was located on the main drag, he recalled, but there were several similar stores on the same three-mile stretch.

For the past 13 years, Bartells has enjoyed the hometown feel of the middle- to upper-middle-class area where he now lives with his family of four. With far less competition around them, the shop has become more of a destination.

"We're in this for the long haul. It's something I want to do for the rest of my life, not just get the money and run. We need customers to have faith in us to set them up with what they need so they want to come back to us over and over for the next 20 or 30 years. We don't want it to be a transaction—we want it to be a relationship," he said.

Extreme Audio may not be the cheapest place in town when it comes to car audio and video, Bartells admits, but they make up for it in service. He believes customers keep coming back because of the shop's high level of expertise and workmanship.

"We offer a better overall experience, more knowledge, and we certainly treat the customers and their car a lot better," he added. "It's really nice when you have people driving in from an hour or two hours away—driving past 15 other places—to get to you."

He emphasized that his sales staff are a crucial component in building customers' trust. When it comes to style, Bartells said, there are two types of salesperson: the uber-confident, fast-talking type, and those who simply rely on their knowledge.

"We have the technical knowledge where customers can trust anything we say they need to do. It is going to come across with confidence based on the knowledge that we are pointing them in the right direction," he continued.

Every vehicle that is pulled into their garage undergoes a very detailed check-in and check-out procedure. The vehicle is hooked to a battery maintainer for the entire time it is being worked on, seat covers are used, and work areas are taped off.

"Everything we do while the client's vehicle is in our hands is done to ensure a quality result, without simple things like dead batteries, scratches, etc., derailing what would have been an excellent experience with us," he said.

Since completing last year's renovation, Bartells said, they all have more confidence when giving a tour of their showroom and garage. Before, some customers were a bit wary about the cleanliness of the install bays when getting their cars tinted, for instance. Now, as they head back to the garage, customers are immediately at ease when they see the shiny new bays.

"We painted the garage, epoxied all the floors and replaced all the work areas and toolboxes. When a client walks into our garage, it's obvious to them the commitment we have to this business and taking care of their vehicle while it's in our hands,"

SIX BRANDS

Alpine, ARC Audio, CompuStar, German Maestro, JL Audio, Wet Sounds

Extreme Audio owner Mike Bartells is proud of the long-term relationships he has developed with his key vendors in the past decade and a half. The business is an Alpine Flagship retailer that has supported the full line for eight years. It has sold Wet Sounds for six years and JL Audio for four, and last year it brought in ARC Audio and German Maestro due to their distribution policies and product quality. In addition, CompuStar has been Extreme Audio's main remote start line for the past four years.

"I feel we have a great group of reps," said Bartells. "The vast majority of the vendors we deal with show up in force to events like KnowledgeFest. They are all there, willing and wanting to hear the good, the bad and the ugly. They are just as interested in what they can do better as we are."

He added that all of the shop's vendors are very accessible, and they are on a first-name basis with him and his staff, so it usually takes just one call or e-mail to get things done.

Bartells pinpointed a couple of new products he and his guys consider hot. "Alpine's new 9-inch in-dash navigation is definitely something we're looking forward to," he said. "ARC Audio's new line of XDi amplifiers is starting to trickle in, and looks very promising."

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—Mike Bartells, owner of Extreme Audio



» Openly displaying local and national press that the store has been featured in draws the attention of its customers, which helps boost sales.

he said. "It was a complete transformation ... something much more up to the dealership level cosmetically. We're downright proud to walk someone back to the garage ... and we've had quite the reaction from customers."

The remodel took nearly two months because they did it themselves—it was mainly Bartells and his teenage son. Bartells recalled it was "extremely busy" for weeks because the technicians had to keep working on cars while the two of them were sanding floors, doing prep work and moving everything around.

"It was quite the stressful time because it was also the exact same time we had to turn in Retailer of the Year stuff. I was desperately trying to get the garage done so I could show what it was going to look like instead of having to describe what it was going to look like," he said.

Continuous Improvement Bares Steady Rewards

Despite the ME award and rave reviews on his remodel, Bartells emphasized Extreme Audio will never be perfect, so they will never stop trying to improve themselves and their business. From the newly remade showroom to the install bays, he said, they are proud of how they represent themselves and their partner manufacturers. They also have a good-sized wood shop and fabrication area with ventilation to the outside of the building as well as a vacuum system.

"With the showroom and garage having been overhauled recently, the fab room is a likely next step," he said. "We've always had the mentality of wanting to be better in one way, shape or form."



He remembers starting down this path around 2005, when he spoke extensively with Marcel Newell at Avidworx before KnowledgeFest. Their conversations proved to be "eye-opening," he said, as he drank in advice about modernizing his showroom.

"We ended up redoing our entire showroom and have redone it again since then. It really took us from being the traditional car stereo retailer that has stacks of product all over the floor—kind of what we used for our displays—to a much more clean, organized and higher-end look with more focused displays," he continued.

When they overhauled the showroom a second time in 2012, Bartells once again saw definite results in both customer feedback and a measurable increase in sales.

"After we did the initial revamp, we had a spike in our sales numbers. Nothing else had changed, only the overall look of the store. In this last round, we changed the paint and lighting and got a new slew of displays to create a higher-end look," he said. "I learned I'm not an expert at lighting and showrooms so I have to turn to others. ... This realization pointed us in a new direction, between that and KnowledgeFest."

Bartells is a proud member of MERA and enjoys attending KnowledgeFest each year because of the exchange of ideas and camaraderie among industry insiders. The positive energy and sharing that takes place only motivates him to try harder.

"Everybody's got something that makes you go, 'Oh, I like that. I want to do that.' When you associate with people like this, it brings out the best in you because we're all a little competitive. So someone like John Schwartz, for instance, is knocking

it out of the park doing this or that, then I want to do the same thing—and even go a step farther," he said.

Bartells clarified that the mobile electronics retailers share a friendly competitiveness. The best part is they don't hold anything back from each other when talking shop, whether it's at the show or in an online forum afterward. The retailers aren't competing with each other, he explained, because one may be in Alaska, one in Virginia, and another in New York. So, sharing what works and what doesn't helps them individually as well as collectively.

"If we can better everyone in the industry, then the entire industry is going to be healthier and be seen in a better light," Bartells added. "If people assume we're a bunch of kids running around with our pants sagging down and wifebeater T-shirts on and things like that, then we've got a problem. Sadly, that is the image that's been put out there in a lot of places for many years, and in some places, it still is."

Fortunately, that's not the image of Extreme Audio. Bartells said they don't need to run a lot of promotions because they are so well established, but they do one promotion that's a hit every year. It brings in new customers while also showing a commitment to their local community.

"We do a promotion for Coats for Kids, where you can get credit off a remote car starter if you bring in a coat to donate. So that usually does help on the remote starter end of things. Or if people are calling around and comparing prices, we let them know they can get a discount added to it. Of course, something like that hopefully adds goodwill," he remarked. ☺