The Unmanned Revolution

VISUAL CONTENT LINKS DRONES TO THE AV MARKET

Drones may be a divisive topic, but one fact about them is inescapable—unmanned aerial vehicles present a real growth opportunity for AV integrators.

Much of the talk about drones in mainstream circles centers on military and police applications, or privacy concerns. But consumers are adopting them for a variety of applications, and there is a firm link to the AV market that makes integrators the perfect source. That link, of course, is visual content.

“Drones are in active use in a number of markets, including aerial shooting for film and television, inspection for towers, wind turbines and other utilities, assistance with search-and-rescue missions, and law enforcement,” said Uri Kanonich, vice president of marketing at Amimon.

The benefits of using drones are clear—they cost only a fraction of what film and TV crews pay for helicopter rentals, and they can deliver tight shots from places where humans can’t go or in places where it’s unsafe for them to venture.

Some AV integrators and technology or service providers are seeing an increase in drone use in these applications that are typically hazardous for humans to undertake, such as underground mining or oil and gas inspections. Techniques such as swarming, or flying multiple drones in the same area, can be especially helpful for first-responder calls like wildfires.

“Often it’s too dangerous to fly a plane over a fire, but if you fly a drone over that area with an infrared camera that can see through fire and smoke, firefighters could see where the fires are moving,” said John Minor, provost of the Unmanned Vehicle University.

“If firefighters jump into an area and the winds change, for example, they could be left with no way to get out because they didn’t have good situational awareness of what the fires were doing. Drones can provide that...
information, and the higher the resolution the better."

Precision agriculture is a growing industry as pressure on land and the need for efficiency in food production increases. Countries like Japan that have little area suitable for farming, Minor said, have used drones in precision agriculture for years.

"In the past, these big farmers have used satellite images to determine which plants are stressed, where they need to water, and where insects are damaging crops," Minor said. "Drones can get very close to the plants and deliver higher resolution imagery, so farmers can get much better info than they could from a satellite or a manned aircraft."

Core AV consumers, such as higher education and even churches, are also adopting drones, said Kevin Kelly, president and COO at Stampede, placing drone demand squarely in AV integrators’ wheelhouse.

Integrators shouldn’t underestimate early technology adoption in these core markets— one house of worship in particular, Kelly said, recently spoke with him about trading up for a more costly drone that could assist with its annual events that draw upwards of 70,000 attendees.

"This church was looking to upgrade to a bigger unit that can fly longer and in high winds," Kelly said. "They weren’t happy with the performance and needed something [more robust]."

The video side of the AV equation is what draws consumers of drone technology to seek experts in the field. The convergence of AV with IT in some sectors gives integrators another reason to serve this user base—the networking and storage needs of super-high resolution technology.
devices are high.

“...I believe that drone technology offers an unprecedented opportunity for the AV industry to shepherd a new technology and sell something that wasn’t there before,” said Kelly.

“We’re on the front side of a very large innovation curve that we haven’t seen in our industry in ages. The pro AV arena has already served those end users, and integrators can now take these solutions to customers they have served for years, and that can reinvigorate their customer relationships by introducing new, exciting technology.”

Kanonich concurred, and noted that consumers of drone technology are especially concerned with having adequate means to use and transfer content, a trail that leads directly to AV integrators.

“Integrators will quickly find that users want the best possible connectivity for their drones, and this can be a highly profitable business builder.”

AV integrators can start addressing the market by educating its staff on the types of technologies available, and by approaching the market opportunities with open eyes. Formal training exists today through organizations like Unmanned Vehicle University.

“Proper education and training on how to use drones properly and effectively, and how to understand the laws and avoid morality issues, I think is the key,” Minor said.

While sentiment within the AV industry appears bullish on growth in demand for unmanned vehicles, the size of that demand remains a question mark.

“There have been several studies done,” Minor noted. “One said 75,000 jobs will be created, making a billion-dollar impact. By 2025, the economic impact could be $82 billion. It’s going to have a huge economic impact that will create jobs, stimulate the economy and do things better, faster, and cheaper.”

Jim Beaugez, APR, is a freelance writer and accredited communications professional with a decade of experience in the MI and pro audio industries. You can reach him at jimbeaugez@gmail.com and follow @JimBeaugez on Twitter.

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See drones in action in a video by the Unmanned Vehicle University at avnetwork.com/scn0615.