

# Attention Kmart Shoppers!



The Blue-Light Special redesign is far more sophisticated than the original light-bulb-and-plywood model. The kiosks display information, broadcast announcements and tie into the online adjunct, BlueLight.com.

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# Attention Kmart Shoppers

## The Blue-Light Special Returns with a New Image and Sound

By Alex Artaud



■ IN 1965, AN ENTERPRISING KMART ASSISTANT MANAGER named Earl Bartell devised a novel way to attract customers to special deals in the store. Propping up a 2x4 plywood board with a blue light fixture on the end wherever he wanted people to flock, Bartell found a simple solution that would take hold and evolve into the well-known Blue-Light Special. Little did anyone know that the accompanying announcement, “Attention Kmart Shoppers,” would enter into the popular lexicon. Or that “blue-light special” would become a retail catch phrase for any bargain or special deal.

But after 25 years, corporate headquarters felt that the special had lost its luster and discarded it. Ten years later, CEO Chuck Conaway was looking for ways to spark interest in the chain. He felt the retail icon should adopt a new marketing strategy to go head-to-head with the other giants, Wal-Mart and Target. The image needed updating, though, and the familiar traveling cart with the flashing blue light would have to go. Instead, the company’s retail design firm, FRCH, developed the concept of a Blue-Light-Special zone that would be in a central location within each of Kmart’s 2167 stores. Now the question was how to capture, once again, the attention of shoppers.

### THE NEW BLUE-LIGHTERS

To design the prototype and deliver the final product, Kmart turned to Visual Productions Inc. of Troy, Michigan, and Blue Water Technologies of Southfield, Michigan, sister companies co-owned by Tom Schoenberger and Skip Speerschneider. Blue



**THE MEN BEHIND THE BLUE LIGHT:** Above, Earl Burtwell, who pioneered the Blue-Light Special in 1965, back when five-cent cigars cost only five cents. Left, Kmart CEO Chuck Conaway, who re-invented it, 35 years later. Above left, architect’s preliminary rendering of the kiosk design.

Water Technologies is an 18-year-old company specializing in custom audio-visual engineering and consultation, equipment integration and custom systems design. Launched in 1991, VPI complements Blue Water’s services with an emphasis on product-focused marketing approaches for retail design, event marketing, merchandising and interactive kiosks. Over the past year, both VPI and Blue Water worked on jobs for Kmart, and the synergistic relationship of the two companies impressed Kmart’s top brass.

Having two companies dedicated to this endeavor may seem like overkill unless you know their time constraints. Once Kmart completed the design in January of this year, it needed all refinements done by the beginning of March. That left only a month for the manufacture and delivery of over 2000 units in time for the April 2 unveiling ceremony in New York City—obviously there was no extra time for any errors or redesigns.

Faced with this daunting challenge, VPI and Blue Water rolled up their sleeves and devised an apparatus with two distinct parts. The main display is a large, lightweight, circular blue canopy, consisting of aluminum tubing and blue nylon. It comes in two diameters, 10-foot and 12-foot, depending on the needs of each specific store. The canopy resembles the cross-section of a large cone. Suspended by four steel wires, it's quite easy to spot even from the farthest corners of the store. In the center of the canopy is a ceiling-mounted, internal gear bracket for rigging the A/V portion of the display. The bracket supports two large rotating beacons, a spotlight for the floor and a 2-speaker sound system capable of playing back six CDs intermittently.

"One of our specifications for this project was that the finished unit be easy to assemble in all of our stores," said Ron Hudgens, divisional VP of merchandising at Kmart. "Using hired electricians, nearly all of the units were assembled and hung within two hours' time. In my career at Kmart, this project ranks among the smoothest

## Powering the **Blue-Light Sound**

The TOA BG Series amplifiers are 3-channel mixer/amplifiers for paging, background music, and music-on-hold. Available in 15- and 30-watt models, the BG series provides MIC/TEL, PGM, and AUX inputs. An auto-mute provides voice-activated MIC/TEL paging override of the AUX and PGM inputs without interrupting sound coming through the MOH output. The MOH output receives only AUX and PGM channels and is adjustable from line-level to 1 watt at 8 ohms to handle telephone systems.

Users can set the threshold where auto-mute kicks in, and there are external mute screw terminals to activate the mute function from an external contact closure. There are 25/70-volt and 4-ohm speaker outputs with screw terminal connector, and protective cover plate. Bass/treble controls ( $\pm 10$  dB at 100 Hz and 10 kHz, respectively) affect both the AUX and PRM channels, but not the MIC/TEL channels. Protective circuitry prevents damage due to overload or overheating. The frequency response is 50 Hz to 20 kHz,  $\pm 3$  dB, with a THD of less than 0.5% at 1 kHz (rated output) and less than 0.1% at 1 kHz (5-watt output). All connections are balanced, with the exception of the AUX input, and the signal-to-noise ratio (20 Hz to 20 kHz) is 60 dB for the MIC, and 75 dB for the TEL, PGM and AUX sections.



**BLUE LIGHT, BLACK BOX:**  
A TOA BG Series amplifier.

store-wide installs and rollouts we've ever undertaken." In all, VPI and Blue Water

oversaw the manufacture of 2300 Blue-Light-Special units. Approximately 80 remain in

the warehouse awaiting use at special events and new store openings.

"We got really creative," says Chris Warburton, senior account executive with Blue Water Technologies. "The system itself was completely prefabricated and built at one of our production facilities near Trevor City, Michigan. The canopies were assembled there, and the sound systems and lighting packages were all pre-assembled there, too. Then, everything was sent out to all of the stores in kits. These kits also included instructions that allowed elec-

tricians to quickly hang and cable them. Everything worked out very successfully."

**SPECIAL SOUND AND LIGHTING**

While conceiving, designing and delivering 2300 floating kiosks in such a short time is remarkable in itself, Blue Water also had to quickly assemble a sound and lighting system that would work flawlessly in all stores. To power the JBL Control 23 and 25 compact loudspeakers on the rig, Blue Water requested the TOA BG-130 amplifiers (see Sidebar: "Powering the Blue-Light Sound").

"We were pleasantly surprised when TOA said, 'No problem, how many do you need?'" says Warburton.

"In a retail environment, it's really easy to have equipment tampered with because a lot of people are coming and going all around it. One nice benefit of the TOA BG series is that the volume control is in the rear of the unit, so it makes it harder to tamper with, unless you've been specifically told how to do so." Warburton also liked the portability and flexibility of the BG series, especially the microphone and auxiliary inputs.

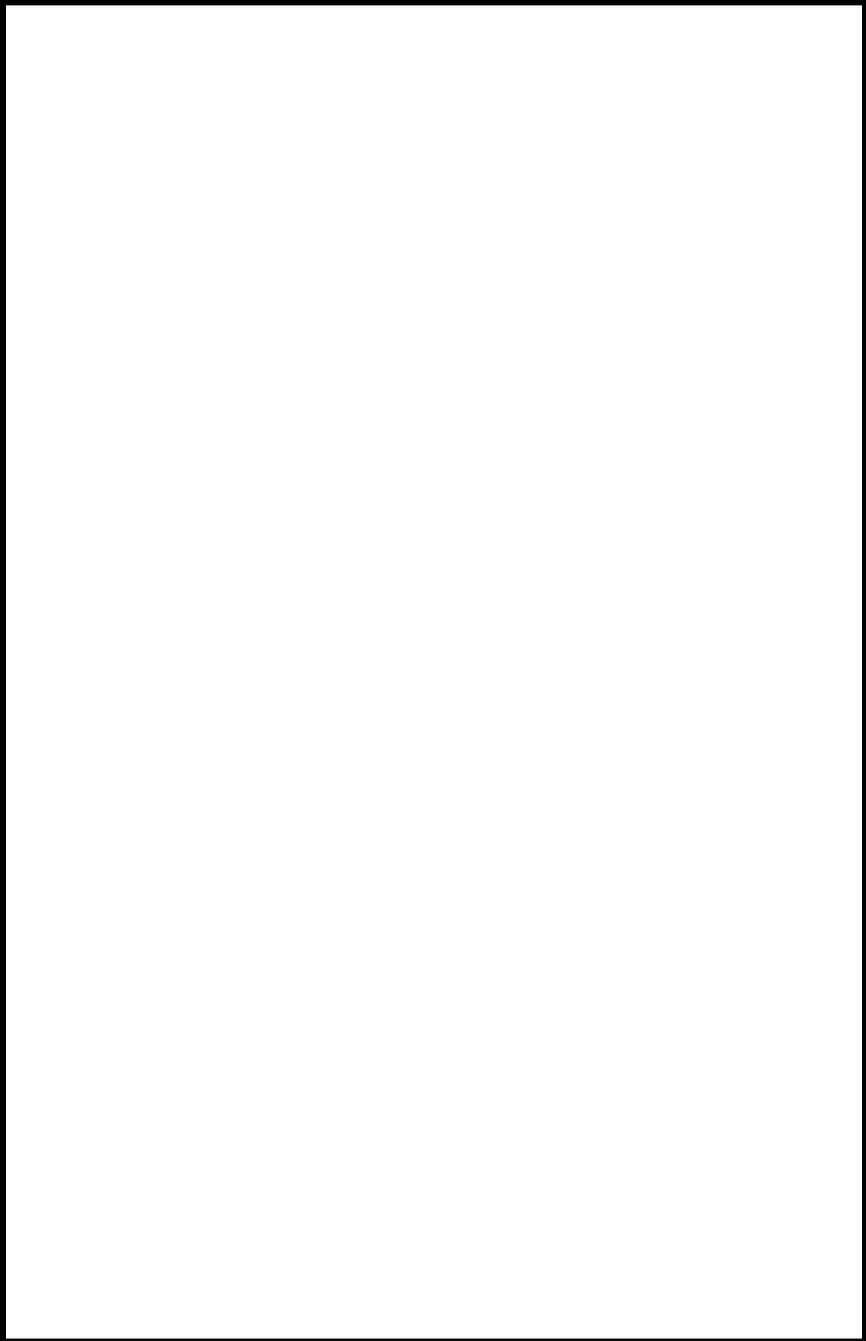
Where to place the amplifiers was left up to the discretion of the stores. Generally, the amplifiers were located in a back warehouse but as close as possible to the canopy. Once the Blue-Light Special would be announced, a main switch would be flipped to power up the lights, amplifier and CD player.

The lighting system includes individual rotating beacons, very similar to what you'd see on top of a police car or an emergency vehicle. The main fixture is an ETC 750 spotlight, commonly seen in theater spaces, that shines directly down on the ground. The ETC 750 includes a gobo rotator, or pattern rotator, with a blue gel on the end. When the Blue-Light Special starts, the fixtures cast a blue-light logo on the ground that rotates and attracts people to the area.

**VIRTUALLY EVERYWHERE**

In tandem, Kmart has also launched virtual Blue-Light Specials at [www.bluelight.com](http://www.bluelight.com), its online shopping site. While even CEO Conaway admits the effort is "no silver bullet" for boosting sales during these trying economic times, it's likely that future generations of Kmart shoppers will first discover the Blue-Light Special online. In the meantime, keep your eyes peeled for a hovering blue canopy with flashing lights at the Kmart near you. **S&VC**

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