



# Quiet Please

By ROB KIRKBRIDE

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**T**he trend toward open offices continues to gain steam as panel walls fall and collaboration in common spaces becomes the norm. But that trend has created a problem few in the office furniture industry are addressing: Noise is on the rise.

That problem isn't limited to offices either. Noise issues are affecting schools, healthcare facilities, government buildings and indoor public areas like libraries, concert halls and museums. All this noise we are making reflects off hard surfaces (like desks) creating echoes. The echoes make the conversations we want to hear even harder to understand.

Enter Snowsound Acoustic Panels, an Italian import designed to make these open spaces a little easier to hear in and create beauty in the space as well. We will spare you the science behind noise, but basically, unwanted sound is formed by waves that are reflected from solid surfaces that have limited absorption, such as stone or wood floors, glass, walls and ceilings. Ideally, sound travels in one direction from the speaker to the listener.

The sound absorbing panels attenuate high, mid-range and low frequencies and are designed to improve sur-

rounding acoustics. According to the company, lab testing has verified significant sound absorption across 0 to 4 kHz.

Michael Dardashti, Snowsound USA Director of Business Development, explained, "We have all experienced acoustic reverberation, or echo, in large open spaces. Working or being in a noise polluted environment is stressful and reduces productivity and enjoyment."

There are some low-end acoustic panel products on the market (and a small number of higher end offerings)





today, but Snowsound claims none can match the commercial grade, high and sound absorbing performance, aesthetics, design and ease of use of its products.

The Snowsound acoustic panels are made of variable density polyester, a 100 percent recyclable material. Surfaces of Snowsound acoustic panels are covered with fire retardant Trevira CS polyester bonded to the inner wadding, forming a single body without breaks. These panels are thin (1.4 inches), light weight (less than 6 pounds) and fire tested.

They look good too, constructed with a smooth contour and tapered edges. When grouped, especially in different colors, the Snowsound panels create a sculptural effect. They are available in three configurations.

The Corista panels (62 inch by 17 inches) are free standing, with an optional steel base. Mitesco panels (62 inches by 17 inches) are free standing, hanging or wall-mounted, while quadrilateral shaped Flap panels (23 inches by 19 inches) are smaller wall or ceiling mounted panels that tilt and rotate 360 degrees for optimized sound attenuation. Corista is offered in black, while Mitesco and Flap are available in a variety of colors.

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Atlantic Inc., which is distributing the Snowsound products in the U.S., sees two distinct markets for the sound-absorbing panels: for home use and for commercial applications. In fact Atlantic is a company that has a decidedly residential tilt. It has about 30 years experience introducing consumer electronics accessories. Still, the company had a booth on the eighth floor of NeoCon and won several awards at the June event.

Noise certainly isn't limited to the office or commercial spaces. Today, 74 percent of American households have flat panel TVs and multiple speakers. According to the *U.S. Consumer Sales and Forecast 2009-2014* report (recently released by CEA), there is optimism about home audio segment sales. This report finds many consumers are ready to upgrade their current AV systems to "foster a more immersive entertainment experience." Atlantic is counting on this "immersive" experience to include bet-

ter sound systems, yet most homes are not set up to buffer this noise from other areas of the house.

Snowsound was initially launched in January at the CES. And the company will be in Denver in a few weeks for the Custom Electronic Design & Installation (CEDIA) show.

Spokesman Ron Lien said the second market is commercial and the applications for the office market are immense. "Our primary market is commercial — offices and other large open spaces," he said. "It could be an open office, conference room, concert hall, auto dealer, classroom. Anyplace there are acoustic issues that weren't there when the space was constructed."

Atlantic "discovered" the Snowsound product while the president and founder of the company was on a business trip to Europe. Europe, which started the open plan office trend, has been addressing noise issues a lot longer than North American office designers. Acoustic products are much more accepted in Europe, perhaps because of the smaller spaces and more offices in older buildings with stone and brick walls.

Until recently, office dwellers in North America have been protected from noise by cubicles. All that is changing as the panels drop or are removed completely. Collaboration also is a buzzword, but comes with its own set of noise issues.

Snowsound products just began shipping and Atlantic plans to distribute through the audio channels—at least initially, Lien said. "They (Atlantic) will do what makes sense," he said. "First we want widespread acceptance for the product. Once it becomes more acceptable, it will be easier to broaden out. There is no set distribution roadmap right now. We are currently getting stocking up and selling through audio dealers."

Architects and designers are next. Snowsound wants to tackle the design world who can take the products into the commercial markets. Because of the acoustic properties involved, it is hard to say how much it would cost to install in an average office. It depends on how many hard surfaces are involved. Each site has its own characteristics. The products are not cheaply made and they are not inexpensive either. Prices range from \$225.00 to \$385.00.

Snowsound products are available now and the company hopes to dim the din in offices around the country. Quiet please. 



