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Video & Audio Center Aims To Redefine Technology Retailing

New L.A. flagship store will focus on bleeding edge technology



Westfield executives, contractors and designers flank VAC co-owners Joseph and Mayer Akhtarzad and chief technologist/corporate director Tom Campbell at the site of new construction.

For decades, the Westside of Los Angeles was the epicenter of American entertainment as the home of 20th Century Fox studios. This fall it will offer a glimpse into the future of American consumer technology retailing.

Video & Audio Center, the high-end technology showcase chain, based in Southern California, is building out a new flagship location that promises to offer an array of cutting-edge electronics, appliances and content sources, according to chief technologist, corporate director (and CT Hall of Famer) Tom Campbell.

The new flagship store will occupy a key anchor slot in the newly refurbished \$1.4 billion Westfield Mall in Century City, adjacent to another new flagship store under construction — Apple's — and across from Nordstrom's. The location will serve as a testing ground for all sorts of bleeding-edge technologies, including 5G smartphones, "never-before-seen" smart interactive major appliances and robotics.

Expected to open in the fall, the store will feature store-in-store boutiques from VAC partners such as Samsung, Sony and LG, and will focus on hands-on demos and vignettes that will allow consumers to "see, touch, experience and learn" the scope of the newest innovative products on the market, according to Campbell. "And we promise a grand opening event to match our enthusiasm." (The rumored appearance of a robotic bartender caught this reporter's attention.) Movie studios and content providers will be active partners with VAC, creating a showplace for new titles, new formats and features. Specs on the selling floor were not disclosed, but VAC said the store's footprint will be "substantial, with tremendous frontage."

A job fair will be held so the store can attract "the best of the best digital electronics specialists" to serve consumers, VAC co-founder Joseph Akhtarzad told TWICE. VAC will work with its vendor partners to provide ongoing training for its sales floor personnel. Eighty-five to 100 jobs are expected to be created by the time the store opens.

Service is priority one for the location. Akhtarzad will draw on more than 20 years of experience in the custom installation and integration business, with his Just One Touch Home business, to work with consumers to customize home technology systems. "We want to make it clear to our customers that home theaters, smart homes and custom kitchens are within their reach. This will be a turnkey operation for clients interested in home integration."

Non-traditional retail partners such as Crestron and Control4 will allow customization options few other brick-and-mortar stores can offer. Home theater seating, custom lighting and home automation will be on the menu. In addition, the new flagship will offer black-card custom platinum concierge service, offering same day delivery and set-up within three hours of purchase. Smart home technologies will be a large part of the store's focus, including both Google Home and Amazon Alexa voice-controlled ecosystems, as well as smart appliances. Virtual reality demos will also be featured.

Campbell referred to the "genius of Joseph" when asked about the origins of the store. Akhtarzad has a master's degree in electronics which helps his rapport with his vendors. "When I started my business 36 years ago, retail was already changing. As the products got more sophisticated, people needed more direction and understanding of new technologies. I decided that just opening another retail store wasn't enough. I want customers to have fun with this. Come in, be amazed, see, touch, feel and learn," Akhtarzad said.

"We want to present the consumer with total solutions for all their technology needs," said Campbell. "This will be a destination showcase. We want people to drive to get here. The three keys to selling: discovery, desire and demand, is our mantra." VAC has a long history of working with vendors to debut new technologies. In the past the local chain has held gala events to introduce GPS, the CD player, CD recorder, DAT recorder, plasma TV, HDTV, Ultra HD 4K TV, OLED TV, the Ultra HD 4K player as well as the first Ultra HD Blu-ray title.