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## ART OF THE TAKEOVER

The dos and don'ts of finishing  
what other integrators started.

PAGE 40

+

### HOW AUTOMATION ENHANCES ALS PATIENTS' LIVES.

PAGE 48

Jack Goldberg, Westco Smart Homes, at a  
six-figure Bel Air, Calif., takeover project.



# WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS ...

Westco Smart Homes evolves from a commercial electrical contractor to a residential lighting specialist, and finally to a full integration company that targets existing homes. *by Jason Knott, photography by Rafael Ortega*

**I**T WAS KENNY ROGERS — “The Gambler” himself — that started Jack Goldberg in the residential automation business. Now nearly 28 years later, the move turned out to be a jackpot.

Back in 1984, Rogers needed someone to automate his 35,000-square-foot home renovation and turned to then commercial electrician Goldberg. The rest is history, as they say. That first big job formed the seeds for the launch of Westco Smart Homes, which nearly three decades later is still a small, niche custom installation firm that specializes in takeover jobs.

All along the way, Goldberg evolved his company to fit market changes and conditions. Among Westco’s latest projects is a massive takeover job of a 12,000-square-foot home in ritzy Bel Air, Calif. (See sidebar.) The pursuit of business has even led Westco to installations in the Middle East and the establishment of a training facility in Abu Dhabi and three offices in the U.S. Not bad for just a seven-person company. The lesson for other integrators is that your company can never stop evolving.


## FOLLOW THE MONEY

Even before Rogers’ job, Westco Smart Homes had migrated from a commercial electrical service company.

“We started in 1982, doing mostly commercial projects. As time went on, a lot of the commercial owners asked us to do the electrical in their home, so we started doing residential,” Goldberg recalls. “The Kenny Rogers’ home in 1984-85 was the first big project we did. We were installing the electrical

## QUICK STATS

**Company:** Westco Smart Homes  
**Location:** Rolling Hills Estates and Lake Arrowhead, Calif.; New York City  
**Principals:** Jack Goldberg, owner  
**Revenues (for 2010):** \$980,000  
**Years in Business:** 29+  
**Number of Employees:** 5-7  
**Specialty:** Making the use of the smart home system to control lighting, temperature, shades/drapes/skylights/awnings, pools, fire places, etc.  
**Top Brands:** Vantage  
**FYI (one piece of advice to another dealer):** Always be honest with your customer, even if it costs you the job, or a piece of the job. I find what is best for my customer is a good deal for us too.

A middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a blue and white striped button-down shirt and dark trousers, is sitting on a wooden staircase. He has his hands clasped in his lap and is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The staircase has wooden steps and a dark metal railing. The background is a wall made of horizontal wooden planks.

**“IN THIS ECONOMY,  
SALES IS THE MOST  
DIFFICULT PART  
OF OUR JOB.”**

**—Jack Goldberg,  
owner, Westco  
Smart Homes**



systems in an office building project in Los Angeles for him, and were asked to look at his Beverly Hills home that was also being remodeled.

"The construction manager told me that he felt that the electrician working on the project was charging too much for the rewiring of the 25 air handling units and a cooling tower. I was asked to consult on this project. I looked at the project and ballparked what a fair price for the work would be. A month or so later I had asked him what the outcome was on the HVAC wiring. He said that they were replacing the electrical contractor, and could we start the job on Monday?"

Westco went on to do more than \$250,000 worth of electrical work on the home, which had an existing finicky Touch-Plate Lighting control system.

"This was one of the first home automation systems around, a simple relay turned on and off each lighting load," recalls Goldberg. "We needed to troubleshoot and rework the system, making it operational. In addition Rogers wanted to be able to dim his bedroom and some other lights from both of the eight-button Touch-Plate keypads at his bedside. As the lighting to be controlled was more than 1,000 watts and electronic dimming as we know it today was years away, we installed several Luxtrol commercial dimmers (the size of large shoe boxes), researched and found some small bi-directional motors and set them up so that one button on the keypad operated a relay that turned the dimmer up, and another turned the dimmer down. It was a pretty expensive way to do this, but it worked! That was automation at the time. From there we went on to do work for some of his friends, Lionel Richie, Luther Vandross, Lisa Hartman and Al Jarreau. That was our start in custom homes."

That job guided Westco into its next iteration as a residential lighting and shade control specialist. "We continued doing custom homes, one or two a year, until the late '90s when the retail work dried up somewhat. As home automation and smart homes became more prevalent, we started doing larger and larger systems, becoming more proficient, and working for more celebrities. Gene Simmons, Queen Latifa, Maria Sharapova, and Rudy Tomjanovich, are among our clients," says Goldberg.

By 1997, Goldberg had discovered Vantage and immediately employed it into a 43,000-square-foot home. At that point, the company was still primarily doing lighting and shade control, as well as lifts and just about anything with motorization. Westco was only doing A/V sporadically. Using Vantage as his platform, Westco evolved to its current business as a whole-house control expert, having done more than 150 large Vantage projects over the years. All along the way as it continued to branch into new areas, Westco kept the skills and market pres-

**"There are bad integrators out there who should not be in business," says Goldberg.**

*Continued on page 46*



## How to Handle Takeover Jobs

Westco Smart Homes' attitude of taking on any job in any situation has led it to become a specialist of the dreaded "takeover" job where the previous installation company has either been thrown out or abandoned the project.

"If a system is not intuitive and very easy to use, it's not worth putting in. The last thing we need is a homeowner that is unhappy that they put the system in," says Jack Goldberg, owner of Westco. He says the company is often called by unhappy homeowners to reprogram systems installed by other dealers. As a company that has often subcontracted its lighting control services to other integrators, Westco is not shy about bringing in "sister" companies if the networking, security or large A/V portion of the job is beyond its scope.

The key to pleasing those takeover clients is simple, according to Goldberg: "Every customer is important. We return a call within minutes and not days, and do everything we can to make our clients happy." He categorizes general contractors, electricians, audio/video contractors, and most importantly homeowners as his "clients." From a service standpoint, Goldberg's philosophy is: Don't put off until tomorrow, what you can do today.

"We've had clients call late in the day, after hours or on weekends with a service-related matter, and many times fixed their issue within a few hours," he touts.

Doing takeover jobs highlights a pet peeve of Goldberg's: bad integrators. "There are bad integrators out there that should not be business. They convince the homeowner or general contractor — who is not really familiar with the capabilities of systems — that they know what they're doing, and that they are providing a great system. They then lowball the pricing, throw in an inferior system, pay little or no attention to the programming, and leave the homeowner with a hot mess. They give the industry a bad name. But unfortunately they got the job. It's an uphill battle, but many times the homeowner sees through this, and we do get the jobs."

## Controlling a Bel Air Mansion with \$250K in Equipment

Some houses are just jinxed. That might be the case with this Westco Smart Home project: a 12,000-square-foot modern-style masterpiece that sits in a perfect location in wealthy Bel Air, Calif.

In the past six years, the house, which was originally designed as an Italian villa, has suffered an indoor fire, a lightning strike and an earthquake. Through all of that, the house has changed ownership, changed contractors and changed developers. But that's just the sort of challenge that Jack Goldberg likes.

Westco took over the job in 2010 from another integrator who had completed the automation and A/V systems "to about 80 percent." The \$14.9 million home has six bedrooms and nine baths, automated waterfalls, whole-house music, climate control, lighting control, 47 Vantage Bticino Axolute keypads, four in-wall touchpanels (one 10-inch and three 6.5-inch), two 7-inch wireless tablets, seven enclosures with 22 modules and 180-plus lighting loads. The Vantage InFusion control system also manages the access control to the front gate and is linked to a single CCTV driveway camera. In the backyard, the system drives a Jandy pool and spa controller and four 2,000-watt outdoor heaters.

In terms of audio, there are three 4-zone Vantage Axium systems, some of which are being pre-amplified out to Niles amplifiers for large common areas. In all, there are 12 audio zones. From a source standpoint, there is an iPort FS23 in-wall iPod dock. Other equipment includes a Lexicon MC12 processor, Conrad Johnson amps, a Samsung Blu-ray player in the theater and a Digital Projection projector. The cabling is from AudioQuest and Monster.

For climate control, there are 17 zones of thermostat control running in parallel with a Honeywell dampening system. There are three external temperature sensors also. In all, there is an estimated \$250,000 worth of equipment, including over six-figures for the Vantage system alone.

"There's really six ways to control this house," says Goldberg. "You can control it from desktop software, the keypads throughout the house, through the in-wall touchscreens, through the wireless tablets, from the owner's iPad, and from an Android/BlackBerry. Also, we have RTI integration throughout the house, with the RTI T-2C+ and the XP6 we can get full 2-way communication with our controller."

The biggest challenges were related to the construction. When the fire happened about two years ago, it tore out most of the center of the house. Also, because there had been so many integrators and owners in the house, and changes of style, there have been a number of philosophical changes as well. Indeed, some of the equipment in the rack is discontinued and old. Some of it was original equipment installed from the beginning of the very first installation.

Prior the recent sale of the property, the automation system was set up to allow Realtors to showcase the home with a "Welcome" mode that turns on all the lights, all the zones of audio, the theater and the pool fountain. So within 20 to 30 seconds, the house is a complete showroom.

Other programmed modes are "Chill," "Party" and "Away." There are several built-in widgets, including one for the security camera and one to check the weather.



MICHAEL WIESCHLER PHOTOGRAPHY



## CE Profile

*Continued from page 42*

ence necessary to thrive in each specialty — electrical, lighting, shades, commercial, retail, residential, motorization, etc. It's come in handy with the ebb and flow of the economy.

"You have to keep your hand on the pulse of the business market you are in," advises Goldberg. "Early on, I could see that you need to keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities. You need to keep reinventing yourself and be on the cutting edge. When my company started nearly 30 years ago, our work was mostly electrical contracting for the then-popular Hollywood studios, including United Artists, Paramount, AVCO, Embassy and ABC/Watermark.

"As some of those companies came and went, we began working on commercial office spaces throughout Beverly Hills and downtown L.A. Through working with general contractors on our various projects, we were able to make some great contacts in the retail world, such as Neiman Marcus, Bullocks, The Broadway, Ferragamo, Rodeo Collection, and Saks Fifth Avenue," he says.

A great example of how Westco has benefited from this vision recently is the work the company is doing in the United Arab Emirates. "An opportunity came to us a few years ago to work with a large corporation in Abu Dhabi, called UTT, to provide smart home technology for a multitude of condos on Al Reem

Island, a nearly barren island just off of the coast of Abu Dhabi," says Goldberg. "We have since set up a training facility in the UAE, and a separate company, called HAME (Home Automation Middle East), to provide the systems in Abu Dhabi. We have already supplied around 50 systems, and over 2 million feet of station bus wire for the system keypads. As soon as the first 5,000 units at Marina Square begin to become occupied, we expect to become really busy over there."

He adds: "Basically, it is important to go with the flow, learn how to differentiate yourself from the crowd, keep up with technology, and redefine yourself if necessary. Always, keep an eye open for opportunities!"

### WILL DO ANYTHING

Today, Westco's main focus is high-end custom projects, both new and remodel, for controlling lighting, shades/drapes/skylights/awnings, temperature, pools, fire places, cameras, audio/video, etc. Goldberg says about 95 percent of his revenue is coming from automation versus electrical work, because "the economy is so bad." Whether as the primary integrator or as a subcontractor, Westco works for general contractors, electricians, audio/video contractors, lighting designers or interior designers. No project is too big or too small.

"It might be a 2,000-square-foot home or a 43,000-square-

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foot home,” says Goldberg. “We really enjoy our work, we like the systems we install and pride ourselves in making easy to use interfaces.”

That chameleon-like mentality has come in especially handy today. “In this economy, sales is the most difficult part of our job. In the past, we priced a job, and received the approval to go ahead within a few days, and most of the time for complete systems for the homes. Nowadays, most homeowners have cut back on their expenditures, and our systems seem to be the first to go,” says Goldberg.

He notices a growing trend of homeowners wanting automation only in the “public areas” of the home, i.e., halls, stairs, kitchen, living room, den, family room, great room. In most cases, they add automation to the master suite (usually at Westco’s suggestion), but other bedrooms are being cut out.

“The design is easy for us, as I am also an electrical contractor and a registered professional engineer, and thus we either perform the installation or supervise the client’s electrician. We design the system, provide simple-to-use CAD plans, and actually have not found an electrician who had a hard time installing the system. In fact many times the electrician asks what else he needs to do, when he is done, not believing his work could be completed,” he says.

Even though the company is small, Goldberg believes it is

important to be able to demo systems for clients. Thus, Westco has three local showrooms in Los Angeles, and one small sample showroom in New York. The L.A. office (in Rolling Hills Estates) is a fully working showroom of “pretty much every

**“Nowadays, most homeowners have cut back, and our systems seem to be the first to go,” says Goldberg.**

Vantage system component,” he says. It includes automated shades, A/V equipment, thermostats, pool valves, fans, cameras, etc., all interfaced with a Vantage control system with keypads, touchscreens, iPads/iPhones and Android devices.

The company also has a small renovated vacation home that doubles as a showroom in posh Lake Arrowhead, a mountain resort area east of Los Angeles. Goldberg allows area contractors access to the home to showcase control systems for prospective clients. The newest showroom is an unmanned area inside a local custom lighting store in Torrance, Calif. Westco has a small system there that controls several of the lighting booths, including Swarovski, Schonbek and Bruck. The idea is that clients purchasing lighting fixtures for their residences can also see how an automation system can benefit them.

Fittingly, it’s just another example of how the light bulb never goes off for Goldberg. **CE Pro**



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