The Marketing Communications Consultant—Perry Sink Marshall

Interview by George Thomas, Contemporary Controls

George Thomas learned that Perry Sink Marshall had resigned from Lantronix/Synergetic so he contacted him and asked "what's happening?" Perry has some great marketing ideas, and George wanted to share his conversation with Perry in this Extension supplement.

You have a knack for getting yourself in print. I marvel about the many times you appear in the various magazines. What is your secret?

A lot of vendors seem to think that magazine writers and editors work for them. Actually, it's the opposite. I treat magazine editors just like I treated my OEM customers when I was a sales manager. If they need something, I get it for them. If you want the press to cooperate with you, you have to develop a relationship with them. You have to become a reliable and friendly source of interesting information and angles. And not just about whatever you're trying to sell today.

It probably doesn't hurt that I was once a magazine editor myself during college. But in any case, for me writing has been an interesting way to bring my technical skills and my sales skills together to bridge the gap between vendors and customers.

What it really comes down to is this: as a sales person I used to spend most of the day pounding the phone and trying to get appointments. Publicity is a much better, less difficult way to find new customers. That idea has become the cornerstone of my business.

I understand you have made a career change. What are you doing now?

When I left Synergetic, the phone started ringing with job offers etc. Most of them were companies who were looking for easier ways to publicize themselves and their new products. So I started a consulting practice called Perry S. Marshall & Associates. I do marketing and communications work for companies in the controls industry and the audio industry. I also sell a system that teaches sales and marketing people my methodology, which is described on my website.

Perry Sink Marshall is author of a new book from ISA, entitled "Industrial Ethernet Made Simple."

How did you develop the approach you use in your consulting work?

Six years ago I was working in Chicago as a manufacturer's rep, and having a fairly difficult time with it. The problem was, I spent more time trying to get through gatekeepers and set up meetings with customers than I actually spent seeing the customers. It was enormously wasteful.

Plus at the same time I was trying to sell new network technologies like DeviceNet and AS-I, which compounded the problem. I learned the hard way how long it takes our industry to adopt new technology.

I said to myself, "there has *got* to be a better way." I looked around and started to realize that there are thousands of companies out there who do not chase customers at all. They may not even have sales people on staff. The customers *always* come to them. And some of them are innovative companies that sell new technology. Take for example the *Skymall* airline catalogs with all the hi-tech widgets.

Well the thing about those kinds of companies is that they have to be very smart about their marketing and advertising, because they don't use sales people. The piece of paper or the website does all the selling. And people like it because there's nobody calling and annoying them. They relax in the airplane and look at a catalog for an hour, whereas they'd be uptight if they had to spend that hour with a sales guy.

So I started studying those ideas and adapting them to industrial automation. IA is a traditional "sales guy" kind of business. And it will always be that way because there's tons of customization and application specific knowledge. But I discovered that if you take those non-intrusive marketing concepts from other industries and "bolt them on" to the front end of a sales channel, suddenly the sales guys have more leads than ever before and their job becomes much easier.

Many of the reps and distributors at Synergetic told me they got more sales leads from us than they got from their other principals, even though in many cases we were the smallest company on their line card. And when we were not perceived as peddlers but as credible sources of information. Why? Because we marketed information about solving problems, instead of just information about our products.

Perry Sink/Perry S. Marshall—What's the deal with the name change?

Marshall was my mother's maiden name, and I always liked it better than *Sink.* Better to be a sheriff than a kitchen appliance. I'd thought about changing it for about 10 years, and with two small boys at home, a career change and an increasingly public life, I decided it's now or never.

What is your educational background and where have you worked?

I have a BS in Electrical Engineering from the University of Nebraska. I designed OEM car speakers at Jensen for $2^1/_2$ years, then became a manufacturer's rep at WD Engineering Sales here in Illinois where I sold automation products. Then I became national sales manager at Synergetic. I left my position there in October 2001 and now I'm independent.

Why did you leave Synergetic after the Lantronix acquisition?

I was feeling ready for a change, and I'm more of a "small company person" than a "big company person." Mergers can sometimes be rough, and I decided to roll the dice outside the company rather than inside.

At Synergetic you were selling both boards and chips. Which is harder to sell?

Categorically, chips are harder to sell, but the deals are bigger when you succeed. The design cycle for a PC card can be a few days, for an embedded board it's months. For a chip it might take over a year. Our whole mission to create a multi-fieldbus chip was fun, because we believed the chip was the "holy grail of networking" that our industry craved. And as we talked to people about it, the feedback was extremely positive. I understand they're doing well with that product now.

You frequently talk about the Fieldbus wars. Who are the winners and who are the losers?

In my book, the winners are DeviceNet, Profibus, Modbus, Foundation Fieldbus and Industrial Ethernet. I think Ethernet and a combination of several automation protocols on TCP/IP will overtake all the rest but users will find it's not a panacea.

Last year I was talking to ISA press about writing a book, and I suggested DeviceNet. They weren't willing to do that, but Ethernet was very high on their priority list—a hot topic. I ended up writing "Industrial Ethernet: A Pocket Guide" which just hit the streets this month. I'd say Ethernet is going to take the lead, but all of those I mentioned are here to stay.

The losers: I don't see a big future for SDS or Interbus or Seriplex, or any number of

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other also-ran networks. The proprietary ones like Modbus Plus and Remote IO have such a large installed base that they'll be around for years, but I don't know why anyone would choose them for a Greenfield installation.

Whose idea was it to produce Fieldbus Blues? Who composed it?

I walked into Hannover Fair in 1998 in Germany and heard this awesome American blues at the HMS booth. Turns out it was Pia and the JMB (www.piablues.de) which is a darn good party band! It revved me up, and I had this eureka moment: "That's IT! The FIELDBUS BLUES." So I wrote lyrics about this gal who says

*"When it's time to take control
I've got a fieldbus man for my I/O."*

Pia wrote the Music with guitarist John Marshall and recorded it in Germany. We added interviews with the directors of the major trade organizations (Profibus Trade Organization, Open DeviceNet Vendor Association) and made it an educational tape.

Honestly, I don't think too many users listened to it, but a lot of sales guys who spend time in their cars did. We got quite a bit of PR from it and had a good time in the process. By the way you can listen to all or parts of it on MP3. It's at www.perrymarshall.com/blues.

I guess you think our dull industry needs some fun added. Don't you feel an oil-tight push button is interesting enough?

Nothing's ever interesting until you get to the part that involves people. I suppose the unfortunate thing about specialized technical disciplines is that people think it's about the product, which therefore means it must be boring. I disagree. Heck, there's a company called New Pig (www.newpig.com) that sells supplies for cleaning up spills. Can you think of anything more mundane than that? Well, they don't seem to think so. They have this wacky catalog and crazy contests for their customers. Or how about an upholstery company I know of—isn't that an exciting

category—that sponsors an "Ugliest Couch Contest" every year. They get international press from it.

The only reason anyone does business with a boring company is there isn't anyone else to do business with. So I told my reps about the Five Fs: "Food, Fun, Fieldbus, Fame and Fortune." Sure, it was cheesy, but everyone still liked it. There are people who think that's unprofessional, and if they want to spend their life trying to decide whether the term "anal retentive" should have a hyphen or not, that's fine. But life's too short to be boring.

The purpose of a business is not to make oil-tight push buttons. The purpose of a business is to get and keep customers. I think that's the fun part, regardless of what the product is. Having said that, I think most oil tight push buttons are boring. But a few of them are really cool.

What is the impact of Industrial Ethernet on Fieldbuses?

It's making them run for their lunch money. Quite frankly, it makes most of the old guard in the automation business nervous. Everybody's afraid people will wire their plant with cables they bought at Office Max, and the next version of Windows will include a free copy of *Microsoft Factory*.

I don't think the issue is Ethernet *per se*, rather I think it's the larger expectations that have been created by PCs and the Internet. McDonalds permanently changed the world's definition of "fast" as it relates to the subject of food. Federal Express did the same for package delivery. Now there are restaurants everywhere that make meals in 90 seconds. And nobody dares say "4-6" weeks delivery" in mail order anymore.

The Internet defines connectivity to mean any time, any place, for any person—point and click. You don't have to edit some .INI file or use TELNET. So nobody thinks they should have to do that with automation equipment either.

What I see is that the big companies are taking a bath in the recession, but the small innovative companies are still doing quite well. At the National Manufacturing Show

in Chicago, I met two people within a 30 minute time span who said that March 2002 was a record month for them, and March isn't even over yet!

What upsets customers the most about Fieldbuses?

To the extent that manufacturers are still using them to create barriers, people are annoyed. It's only natural to ask, "Now wait a minute, if my kid can play *Quake* over the web with some kid in Singapore, then why won't your PLC talk to my encoder?"

On the other hand, some companies love fieldbuses. Most people in the Semiconductor business are happy with DeviceNet. I think it all comes down to the sophistication of the customer—how capable he is of taking a powerful tool and using its full potential.

What upcoming consumer technology will impact our industry the most in the future?

If you look at all the webcams and digital cameras out there, it's pretty clear that vision systems are going to get a lot cheaper; they already have come down significantly. It's going to be interesting to watch new applications develop that were formerly cost prohibitive.

Another interesting thing is to note how little of the consumer robotic technology, as in the Sony AIBO, has reached the automation world. But it will, and in the future it will be much easier to automate the assembly of complex products. That kind of innovation, by the way, is what automation companies are going to have to do to keep their prices from being driven into the ground by commodity consumer technologies.

Do you think Linux will impact our industry?

Yes, I think it already is—but more in terms of philosophy and expectation than actual market share. If you look at Europe, there's definitely more comfort with all things open, including Linux in automation. The European culture is inherently more geared towards open solutions, as we've already seen with the Euro currency and the faster adoption of industrial networks.

The main problem with Linux is that it's driven by idealism, and the automation definitely is not idealistic. It's as pragmatic as can be. So Linux will succeed when people sell its practicality rather than its ideals.

How are the big companies coping with open standards?

They're doing everything they can to impede the process. This month in *InTech* I said that Allen-Bradley might consider supporting ModBus/TCP protocol after their market share falls below 40%.

And I've always said that the Foundation Fieldbus committee was a great way to delay the progress of open standards for 12 years while appearing to embrace them.

But even for FF, it was inevitable that a standard would eventually emerge and now it's popular. I see a great opportunity for small companies who want to create innovative products, but I don't expect that most of the big companies will seize the opportunities. Their management will blame their problems on the recession while they continue to perpetuate their happy slogans and outdated business models.

Is this a good time to be in business?

My observation is, it's good if you're a small innovative company. It's been good for me. It's a lousy time if you work for a company that's so big that the sales department is on the first floor and marketing is on the fourth floor. With the economy being what it's been, I think it's a great time to think about starting something new.

How can people contact you?

Just visit my website—**www.perrymarshall.com**, and you can call or send me an e-mail. I'm always happy to hear an old voice.