

Don't Screw It Up

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In the latest Electronic CEO Fireside chat, Steve Schott, President of Comark discusses some of the landmark projects he has had an intricate role in — from aircraft carriers to engine monitors for the Landing Craft Air Cushion (LCAC).

PD&D Design Daily: You're coming up on your 6th year as president of Comark, what has been the most memorable moment thus far?



Steve Schott: My first visit to a pork processing plant. I had misconceptions of what it would be like but found it to be very clean, and highly automated. I have no hesitation buying the products they produce, and routinely do.

PD&D: What has been your biggest challenge in six years?

Schott: Doubling the size of the company and not screwing it up in the process. The company was founded in the middle of a recession in 1974 and has made it through four others since — when many other companies didn't. I don't want to be the one that breaks that trend.

PD&D: What one project sticks out among the rest? Why?

Schott: The machinery control computers and displays for the CVN-77 George Bush aircraft carrier.

We spent a long time in negotiation and refining requirements with the customer prior to receiving the contract while the end date remained the same. That really put the squeeze on design and manufacturing time. We were able to complete

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several new designs and major modifications, run full military testing on them, while ramping up production in parallel. We were able to go from concept to a fully military qualified system in under six months.

PD&D: How did you get your start in the industry?

Schott: I started as a hardware and software test development engineer for Data Terminal Systems. I was surrounded by smart people, technical challenges, new technology and I learned a lot. I've always kept that model throughout my career.

PD&D: What is Comark's specialty?

Schott: Flexibility. We love a challenge and if we don't have a standard product, we can modify or design one for the customer. We have a great engineering team and don't need huge volumes to make customized products feasible.

Our manufacturing then takes over with flexible stocking and delivery options. Many of our products are custom configured and even drop-shipped to our customer's customers. Our clients range from start-ups to Fortune 50 and have been very loyal to us, in some cases over multiple decades. We will generally keep building a product for as long as a customer wants to buy it and service it forever. We routinely repair and return to service systems which are older than the technicians working on them.

PD&D: What is you most popular product? Your most powerful?

Schott: We have such an extreme variety of products, its difficult to say which is most popular. One of our most powerful is a series of liquid cooled multi-core computers that are the backbone of machine vision and package sorting applications in warehouses with a wide range of environmental challenges including vibration, temperature extremes, oily smoke from idling engines and cardboard dust.

PD&D: What would you say is the current state of the industry?

Schott: We cover four major market segments; each one is a little different. Building automation has been strong, driven by commercial real estate completions, building codes and green initiatives.

Industrial automation is weak but showing signs of recovery. Although many companies chose to go into hibernation and wait for the economy to recover, smart companies are spending carefully, taking the opportunity to retool and automate and will come out of the downturn stronger and more productive than their competition.

Our military segment is strong but there is concern that trillions of dollars in bailout money will ultimately result in defense cuts. Many of the programs we are involved with are asset life-extension or automation projects, which are justified on saving the taxpayers money, so we are optimistic this area will continue to grow for us.

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Our Self-Service Kiosk and Digital Signage business is the newest segment we have targeted. It has grown significantly in the past few years but there is significant competition and cost pressure. The shakeout has begun with a couple competitors not making it through the slowdown. There are countless good ideas but projects with clear ROI are the key to success or the deal will likely die at the CFO's desk.

PD&D: What keeps you up at night?

Schott: Keeping our customers happy. When you design and ship enough products, inevitably something isn't going to work right or arrive on time and cause our customer pain. I take that to heart if that happens.

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