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System Integrators Strike Back

In addition to products, many of the larger automation suppliers provide a wide range of services. These services often are offered in direct competition with system integrators, ironically some of their best customers. In response and to better serve the needs of their own clients, some system integrators are striking back by developing products.

System integrators' products tend to be intensely market-driven and developed in response to a specific client need not being addressed by the traditional automation supplier base. Concept Systems (www.conceptsystem-sinc.com) in Albany, Ore., is a good example. "By productizing solutions that we develop for one client and then selling them to other customers, we can offer our technologies to the marketplace with a reduced per-system engineering cost," says Michael Gurney, principal at Concept. "This benefits our customers and is a good business practice for us."

Concept's latest product offering is RailHawk, a fully automatic railcar gate opening system that dumps a railcar's contents as the car is positioned over a pit. The system also tracks when the contents are fully unloaded, automatically triggering the gate closing sequence. [See <http://tinyurl.com/cudt6r> for a video of RailHawk.] 

"We do a lot of work in the grain industry, and we were working with a customer that had problems unloading railcars, which is a hazardous and backbreaking job. The railcars are massive, and people typically unload them with hand tools, but sometimes the gates get rusty and are hard to operate. Many of the tools are hydraulically operated to provide the torque needed to turn the capstans that operate the railcar dumping gates," explains Gurney.

Concept developed RailHawk to eliminate safety hazards arising from manually unlocking the railcars with a hand tool. The resulting system also eliminates the use of hydraulics, makes the unlocking, unloading and re-locking process considerably faster, more precise and efficient; and reduces the labor required to unload the cars.

AES Global (www.aesglobal.com) in Anaheim, Calif., is another system integrator in the

product business. Like Concept, AES develops products to satisfy specific client demands. "Product-based vendors sometimes don't meet customer needs because they're aiming for the broad market," observes Joe Bingham, president and CEO of AES. "But as a system integrator, we can focus on specific vertical markets and serve particular client needs."

One AES water industry client needed a DIN rail-mountable battery holder that could toggle from 12 VDC to 24 VDC output and with high-temperature and battery-leak detection alarms. Finding nothing to meet its needs in the marketplace, the customer turned to AES for a solution.

AES was happy to help, not only to provide superior client service, but also for other reasons. "As a small firm, internal development of products helps keep us at the top of our game, and this gives us a technical edge when clients come to us with extremely complex problems," comments Bingham.

Another AES product under development is water reporting software to help customers track water use. "We're working with consultants in industrial and commercial irrigation systems to make sure we meet client needs. Our Project Aqua software will provide an accurate water reporting system from multiple zones and areas, will generate custom reports and will be able to access existing irrigation systems databases," explains Bingham.

An existing HMI or SCADA software vendor might claim that its software could do the same thing as AES's Project Aqua, and given enough customization and development effort, the assertion would probably be correct. But AES is betting that its clients want software developed specifically to meet their particular needs, instead of customizing a product designed to serve a wide variety of vertical markets. ■

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