



## Integrator Column Vision and Sensors Magazine

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### All About Partnerships

As an system integrator and product design house, my company regularly works with the latest technologies. We pore away in labs, on ESD-protected workbenches, designing circuit boards, and software, turning ideas on whiteboards into code, or collections of parts, putting together intimidating wire harnesses, with big connectors and hard-to-reach screw terminals.

We design graphical user interfaces for our contraptions, and, as my mother still calls them, “rig-ups,” using Windows and Linux, VB and Java, browsers and oft-cursed canned app builder apps. And on and on we go, thinking that maybe the reason our business keeps motoring along, growing year after year, is because we’re just, well, really good at what we do and the world is rushing to our door.

But that’s not the whole story. I mean, we are really good at what we do, but there are other companies equally-capable in most of our applications areas. True, we have the advantages of a long history in many industries, plenty of education and training, and the operational advantage of working out of central NY state where cost-of-living is low, the workforce is skilled and anxious to work, and average blood pressure, due to a whole ton of reasons, is just plain lower than it is in the bigger cities.

But why do we really thrive?

Partnerships. We’re a small company, and partnerships are terrifically important in making business happen. This column is a reminder about how partnerships can help your business grow, thrive, and prosper.

### Getting Business

Every person you ever do business with should be treated as a critical part of your future plans. My first machine vision job in 1984 was for a startup company called Control Automation in Princeton, NJ. I left in 1985 but continued consulting with CA through grad school, until they were acquired by another company. Over the years, I’ve done work at five other firms as a result of my CA contacts: a huge manufacturer of cell phones, a medical robotics company, a medical software company, and two companies manufacturing handling robots for biological fluids. One of these latter companies is a current long-term large customer that sought us out because the CTO remembered me from the 1980s. Another long-term embedded systems customer is head of systems engineering at a wind power startup. Three large contracts for a major military contractor were won from relationships forged while I was engineering manager at a fuel cell startup. That same company spawned another relationship that has turned into a long-term program we are doing for the US Army.

Protect and grow your professional, corporate, and personal relationships, and always keep doors open and relationships strong.



### **Building Business**

Once you have a good customer, you must keep looking for more ways to help them. At least 50% of our current work is follow-on work for existing clients who either have let us keep on going after the original contract, or who think of new needs or developments that can make use of our skills. Everyone is busy- it is important to help your clients figure out what these next steps might be! A major 2009 client has been quiet all year. I recently made a special trip to visit them just to say “Hi” and show them some of the latest things we’re working on. That visit stimulated a new conversation, and a meeting with the company’s President last week, and the start of two new development programs including one which may result in a new product that generates ongoing income for my company for years to come. The value of mining your current clients for new work is never to be underestimated.

### **The Next Big Thing**

What about using partnerships to find the next big, new product idea? The most potentially lucrative, and risky, form of partnership results when you try to bring some combination of your clients and vendors together for a joint development effort. Often, you will find yourself in a position to see how products and ideas and capabilities at different companies can be brought together to create a new product or market. In our industry, this could be a camera manufacturer, a lighting manufacturer, and a small company selling software components, for example. We are working a deal like this right now to develop a new security product that has the potential to sell in very high volume. Another possibility is to find two clients, say, whose product focus overlaps in some areas but fills gaps in others- we are currently selling one client’s technology to a different client, with our company acting as integrator and distributor for the first client’s products. We’re even driving modifications and customization necessary to deploy the product into the new application. These deals can be tricky due to the need to protect IP and honor NDAs, but as long as the deals are put together slowly and transparently with all parties well-aware of what the goals, opportunities, and advantages are, you should be able to keep everyone comfortable.

So the next time you’re looking to increase business, find new opportunities, or design a next-generation product, get out of the Not Invented Here mindset and go mine your relationships and partners. Every time I have done this I have come up with new and lucrative ideas that benefit from the addition of stakeholders and engineering talent that come at problems from new and different angles. And in the current economic environment, that approach can be just what is needed to get over the speed bumps and back out into traffic.