

HVACR

Supplement to Penton Publications



August 2007

Distribution Business

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M&M CONTROLS
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M&M Controls Sells Solutions

For Pat Marsala and the employees of M&M Controls, selling HVACR controls is serious business. The Timonium, MD-based distributor does not “sell boxes,” as Marsala puts it. Rather, the company has made its reputation by selling solutions – not just controls – to their customers. Twenty years after its founding, the company continues to thrive by staying on the leading edge of HVACR technology and simplifying complex and sometimes confusing issues for its customers.

“Any wholesaler distributor can sell boxes,” says Marsala, who founded the company in September 1987 along with his partner, Bruce McPhail. They created a high-end distribution business where their employees could explain every product to customers and intimately work with them to ensure a quality job. As president of M&M Controls, Marsala attributes the company’s success to three basic principles: a passionate and dedicated workforce, a commitment to continuous training and a focus on core products.



Both owners worked for Honeywell – Marsala as a distributor sales representative and McPhail as a salesman of service contracts. They decided to establish their business in Timonium, MD, just north of Baltimore, to serve the Baltimore-Washington, DC, area. While the company began as the Marsala-McPhail Co., the partners shortened the name to M&M Controls in 1989. Nine years after forming the company, McPhail died from a long illness at 39. Marsala says he has never forgotten the principle upon which he and McPhail founded the company: focus on controls and offer the best solutions.

Today, M&M Controls serves areas all over Maryland, southeastern Pennsylvania and Virginia. In 2006, Marsala opened a branch in Springfield, VA, to take advantage of the established businesses in that area. “We’ve been able to further expand our service and our offerings in



Pat Marsala keeps an eye on the counter.

that area by having that physical presence,” he says.

Contractors constitute the majority of M&M Controls’ business, while institutions such as hospitals, schools

and universities, military bases and property management companies make up the rest.

In a crowded and competitive marketplace, M&M Controls breaks through the clutter by embracing new advances in HVACR controls technology and educating customers on how to use them most effectively to help their own businesses. It’s been one of the company’s hallmarks since day one. “One of the things that we’ve always offered, and what continues to be a staple of our business, is ample product training,” Marsala says. Between training and education seminars offered by both M&M Controls staff and manufacturers, customers get a full complement of knowledge in the company’s specialty areas of direct digital controls (DDC), flame safeguard and pneumatics. Marsala stresses that the training seminars are not sales seminars in disguise. “We are educating with specific hands-on training,” he says.

The training seminars have been so successful that they have helped to attract new business. In fact, word-of-mouth about M&M Controls customers about the quality of its training seminars has been the company’s most successful marketing tool, resulting in new and repeat business. With product upgrades and new technological advances in the industry, Marsala sees a “huge hunger” among customers for training and retrain-

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Circle 8



ees are always working with clients – whether in the field, on the phone or at the sales counter. The company has 14 employees in all. “We like to offer our family of customers the extra knowledge that they don’t get anywhere else,” Marsala says. “We try to open up the boxes at the counter so as to explain the nuances of the product. That’s something that you don’t get in this day and age.” While his employees receive training regularly, Marsala says his people provide that extra edge – the passion – for what they do. That comes through in every interaction with customers. “What I look for in new employees is an energy, enthusiasm and a passion to help people,” Marsala says. “The rest can be learned.”

ing. With their own passion for education, M&M Controls is delighted to fill this niche.

Customer education does not stop at seminars. M&M Controls employ-

Employees know that M&M expects much of them. “They know they’re not in a place where customers come in just to pick up a box,” Marsala says. “We’re heavy on the features and the

benefits of the product. I ask everyone who works here to do whatever it takes to get the job done and exceed expectations.”

After all, Marsala and his employees know that this industry is one where another entity – whether it’s an Internet company or a manufacturer itself – can come in and offer a rock-bottom price. But at the end of the day, is that what customers really want? For Marsala’s customers, they’re looking for solutions, and that’s where M&M Controls is a steady leader. “We compete when it comes to explaining what’s inside the box,” Marsala says. For example, a contractor servicing a strip mall shopping center with four roof units and multiple tenants comes to M&M Controls with a problem. He knows that an M&M Controls expert will give him a range of options to solve his heating and cooling needs and will work with him to make sure that he is satisfied. “That’s where we

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really shine," Marsala says. Solutions come from knowledgeable people, not from a box.

In each of the company's specialty areas, M&M Controls appoints "champions" to take the lead and then train other employees. For example, its Direct Digital Controls champion is Paul Burke, the company's vice president. He joined the company only three weeks after it began and has brought the DDC business to a level beyond all expectations. He has assembled a tremendous DDC team led by Todd Pumphrey, and a new addition to that team is Merv Wunderlich – an on-staff engineer. Other champions include Mike Cirri (Flame Safeguard Controls) and Jean Chelton (Pneumatics), who is also responsible for quarterly newsletters that help keep customers informed. Joe Kinnear handles the purchasing duties. Longtime industry veteran John Bush manages the Springfield, VA, store, assisted by Chuck Atwell. Karen Zechman leads the administrative staff, as does Bill Murray in the warehouse. Shirley Brown handles the shipping with meticulous scrutiny. No matter what the training need, all customers and employees go to Ann Fadoul, training coordinator. Fadoul is an exceptionally detailed person who develops and coordinates all training. The highly regarded training center achieved its stellar reputation in large part because of Fadoul's contribution.

That means that any customer can get up to speed very quickly in any controls application – whether it's DDC, flame safeguards or pneumatics. That assistance can come in the form of a telephone call, an e-mail exchange or a visit to the job site. "We have an extremely high level of interaction with our customers," Marsala says. The backgrounds are varied – some worked at major manufacturers like Honeywell and Carrier. Others came from the service industry, while others bring engineering experience. Marsala says their varied backgrounds have helped to make M&M Controls a stronger company. But it's their experience working for M&M Controls that really serves as their formative knowlege and learning.

Keeping employees engaged and motivated is a high priority. Marsala says "team-building" events throughout the year help to maintain a high level of morale among employees, whether it's free employee lunches several times a month, family picnics or trips to baseball games. Marsala also involves employees in customer events to build those relationships. A regular newsletter to customers with a mixture of fun features and informative industry information also helps to keep customers apprised of what's happening in the company.

But there is no greater challenge for Marsala and M&M Controls than staying in front of the latest trends. Whether it's technology, products or management trends, Marsala tries to keep a few years ahead of what's happening in the industry. This is no easy feat, Marsala acknowledges. But as someone who has connections with many different organizations, including Controls Group North America and HARDI, Marsala is always learning. "From conventions to vendor events to trade shows, I learn so much from my counterparts in this industry," he says.

Listening is the key, he says. "I consider networking within our industry one of the most important ways to remain aware of what's going on today and what's going to happen in the future." Customers know Marsala and his company's reputation for being ahead of the curve, and they rely on them for the latest industry and technology knowledge.

Marsala thinks that the wholesaler distributors have gotten smarter in recent years about how they run their businesses. He recalls a time when vendor meetings were nothing but complaining sessions about such issues as how many screws were included in a box. Today, they focus on the bigger, more important issues – staying competitive and making money.

Not only has technology improved HVACR, it has improved the ease and efficiency of inventory. Customers demand more from their distributors because they know that if their regular distributor can't deliver a part overnight, another one will. "We've made the U.S. very small," Marsala says. "Everything and anything is available tomorrow with the right carrier. We can't have it all, but we have access to

M&M Controls at a Glance

President & CEO	Pasquale (Pat) A. Marsala
Vice President	Paul W. Burke
Headquarters	Timonium, MD
Operations	Two stores – Timonium, MD, and Springfield, VA
Employees	14
Breakdown of Sales and Business	Direct Digital Controls Flame Safeguard Controls HVACR Controls Pneumatics
Major Product Lines	Honeywell Johnson Controls Invensys/Robertson TAC Fireye Functional Devices
Annual Sales	n/a
Website	www.aireco.com/mmcontrols



WHOLESALEr'S SPOTLIGHT

massive amounts of inventory all over the country, and we're able to facilitate moving that inventory to a customer in 10 to 24 hours." The company also prides itself on being able to locate hard-to-find or nonstock controls and deliver them to customers within 200 miles of its delivery area.

M&M Controls has taken advantage of EDI and Eclipse software to help manage inventory and allow for such just-in-time delivery. Every M&M Controls terminal at both its Maryland and Virginia branches can e-mail or fax spec sheets from a manufacturer to a customer. "We've managed to [make] obsolete the file drawers of spec sheets," Marsala says proudly. "Those 15 file cabinets of spec sheets that have been around wholesalers for 100 years are not found in this office."

In its 20-year history, M&M Controls has used technology to its advantage so it can compete with any distributor in the mid-Atlantic re-

gion. But technology alone does not keep a wholesaler distributor on top. Any wholesaler can dazzle a customer with the latest gadgets. But this smart and savvy company has remained a leader because Pat Marsala and his employees understand that the latest controls products are only as good as the people who are knowledgeable about them. M&M Controls puts a premium on service. Offering solutions – not just selling product – is what really matters.

"We don't just sell a product, we offer solutions," says Marsala. "Next time you're in Timonium, stop by for a visit, 'take a look inside the box' and find out what solutions M&M can offer."



Michael Maynard is a business writer based in Providence, RI. He writes frequently on HVACR, construction and architecture issues. Contact him at michael.maynard@lvcos.com.

Best Practice

Definition and Example: Technical training and support to a very specific group of specialty control companies.

Significance: One focus: Controls.

Benefits: One-stop shop for controls, whether it is Direct Digital, Pneumatic, Flame Safeguard or basic controls, and the expertise, knowledge and inventory to back it up.

Procedure: With multiple solutions to a problem, the customer can choose what is best for his/her application.

Timing: This has become a year-round, nonseasonal business.

Cost: n/a

Other Considerations: n/a

Contact: Pat Marsala
410/252-1221