



TECHNICAL COLUMNS

Official archives of articles and columns written by Ron Hranac for Communications Technology and some of its sister publications, published by Access Intelligence, LLC. Reprinted with permission of the author.

By **Ron Hranac**, former **Senior Technology Editor**, **Access Intelligence** and **Communications Technology Magazine**

Originally appeared in the **May 2005** issue of *Communications Technology*.

450,000 WORDS LATER...

By **RON HRANAC**

When I got my monthly email from Communications Technology magazine's managing editor Ron Hendrickson with the "your May column is due on such-and-such date" message, I wondered about a suitable topic. It occurred to me that this month marks the 20th anniversary that I've been writing for CT. Yikes!

Where it all started

Flash back to late 1984 or early 1985. I was among the speakers at a Society of Cable Telecommunications Engineers Rocky Mountain Meeting Group seminar about test equipment. CT's then managing editor Wayne Lasley came up to me afterwards and asked if I would be interested in writing an article based on the presentation I just did. My response was something like, "Well, OK, but I've never written a magazine article before." He commented, "No problem; that's what editors are for."

That first article, "Getting the Most Out of Your Bench Sweep," wound up being a three-part series that appeared in the May, June and July 1985 issues.

Snapshot of May '85

Fast-forward to the present.

After reading Hendrickson's e-mail, I stepped over to one of my home office's bookcases and pulled out a copy of the May 1985 issue. Thumbing through that 20-year-old magazine brought back a lot of memories. Paul Levine was publisher, Toni Barnett was VP of editorial, and Ike Blonder (of Blonder-Tongue fame) and Bob Luff were regular columnists. Feature articles that month covered system powering, microwave, calculating equipment reliability, plant sweeping and, of course, bench sweeping.

One of the ads was especially interesting. EF Data Corp. was advertising a 19-inch rackmount broadband cable modem that operated from 5-400 MHz, with either a 1.544 Mbps DS1 or 750 kbps V.35 interface for just \$3,450. In contrast, today's barebones Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (DOCSIS) cable modems sell for around \$50 at retail, and cable operators can buy them for even less. And today's cable modems don't need to be installed in a 19-inch rack.

Other ads in the magazine painted a nice picture of the industry's major vendors and then available products. The former Anixter Pruzan was going by the name Anixter Communications, ComSonics was advertising the new Window field strength meter, and Wavetek was showcasing its model 1881 system analyzer. Some of the popular addressable converters of the time included Zenith's Z-TAC, Pioneer's BA-5000, Magnavox's 6400, and Sprucer's impulse pay-per-view (IPPV) box. Remember Catel's series 3000 FM transmission system for supertrunking applications? How about Eagle taps, Jerrold amps from General Instrument, and Hughes AML microwave?

In those days, SCTE's Interval was a small pamphlet-size insert in CT, and the May 1985 issue highlighted the list of persons who sat for and passed-at that year's Cable-Tec Expo in Washington, D.C.-the first-ever



exam offered in the Society's Broadband Communications Technician/Engineer (BCT/E) Professional Designation Certification Program. A couple tidbits for a cable trivia discussion: The test was the technician level Category IV, Distribution Systems exam, and 72 percent of the 90 SCTE members who took it passed.

All manner of subject matter

Over the past 20 years, I've penned several hundred articles for CT and its sister publications *International Cable*, *Installer Technician*, *Communications Construction*, and *Communications Technology International*. Arguably the most popular was the "Tech Book" series that Bruce Catter and I co-authored for CT from 1986 through 1989.

The most controversial? Without a doubt that has to be a sometime-in-the-1990s column in which I compared entry-level installer wages to welfare and called for higher pay and better training. That one piece generated more letters and phone calls to the magazine than anything ever published before or since, to SCTE headquarters, and to Coaxial International, the company where I worked at the time. Reaction was very polarized, along the lines of either, "it's about time someone had the nerve to say that in print," or, "you ought to be tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail." There was no in-between.

A few articles angered a couple advertisers, and they cancelled their ads for several months. At times various vendors have specifically requested ad placement next to my column.

Most of what I've written has been technical in nature, but there has been a good mix of nontechnical stuff, too. Some articles have discussed the dollar value of customers lost to controllable churn; how to calculate service call percentage and put a bottom-line dollar amount on fewer service calls; and even commentary on why we should be concerned about competition from a then brand-new direct broadcast satellite (DBS) industry. Regarding the latter, I even went so far as to subscribe to DirecTV and write about the experience. Someone followed up with a letter to the editor wondering how I could be knowledgeable about cable if I were a DBS subscriber. As we know all too painfully today, DBS turned out to be a lot more than the "don't be silly" moniker some fairly high level executives in the industry gave it back then.

Over the years, I've complained about poor customer service and passed along a tip o' the hat when customer service was good. Regular readers know that I harp incessantly about the need to do preventive maintenance, sweep outside plant, have a good leakage monitoring and repair program in place, keep those F-fittings tight, make quality control part of the daily routine, and never stop training. There's been a common thread of "back to basics" in a lot of what I write, largely because of my own outside plant experience in the '70s.

Thanks

I would be remiss in not saying thanks to all of CT's editors who have guided, corrected and otherwise improved my writing over the past two decades, passed along numerous excellent editorial tips, tolerated receiving manuscripts on or after way too many deadlines, and put up with an engineer's rambling words and the occasional gnarly equation.

But an especially big thanks goes to you, the reader, for spending time with CT each month, for your excellent suggestions and comments-pro and con-and your support.

With any luck maybe I can do this for another 20 years!

Ron Hranac is technical leader, HFC Network Architectures, for Cisco Systems, and former senior technology editor for *Communications Technology*. Reach him at rhrnac@aol.com.