

## Sole safety solution partner

By Kevin Kevany



Mike Brockway

“It depends on what value you place on a life”. That’s the sanguine comment from the Singer Group managing director, providing background to the decision by the company to become a Siemens Safety Solution Partner – the only company in New Zealand to qualify for this ranking.

Discussions leading up to the special relationship between the two companies have taken some two-and-a-bit years, as both companies evaluated the benefits of the arrangement, conscious of the message it would send to the local market – given the global status of Siemens and the fact that Singer, in its 56th year of operations, is a leading player in the local electrical services market.

“Very clearly, we did not go into these protracted negotiations lightly. Not only the fact that it took so long for both sides to eye each other up and down and recognise and evaluate all the pluses and minuses involved, but also in terms of the commitment we made in having a number of our specialists go through a grading process with Siemens,” says Jeff McLaren, managing director of the Singer Group, which provides a “full suite of services” to a spectrum of New Zealand industry – from a major power company to three-man manufacturing shops.

“I’m enormously proud of the fact that one of our top guys, who has been with us for many years now, achieved the highest ranking ever

achieved in a Siemens evaluation, anywhere in the world, and two others were well above average. That’s great for them and all of us, because I feel it demonstrates to Siemens that we have the skills and experience to bring to the relationship which will give new definition to the term ‘added-value.’

“As my colleague who handled the better part of the negotiations with Siemens and our safety and automation executive, Mike Brockway, puts it – this is a whole lot more than ‘teaming-up to get a sticker’ and guessing your way through a multiple choice ‘test’: this is a full-blown practical examination of each individual’s skills, experience and ability to solve highly complex problems, under real pressure.

”They (Siemens) make damn sure you are more than up to it.”

Siemens’ national channel programme manager, Peter Dixon, says that over the past five years his company’s factory automation safety offering has become extremely sophisticated and it now sees this offering as a real point of difference in the marketplace.

“Over the same period of time our channel strategy has also been developing in New Zealand. The appointment of Singer as a trained and certified Solution Partner in the area of safety is strategically important to the ongoing growth path of the technology. Additionally, with Singer as a member of our exclusive Solution Partner community, we can further enhance our delivery to continue to meet the highest service expectations of our existing and expanding customer base.”

McLaren notes that in terms of the deal, Singer has to commit the first three automation experts to ongoing training with Siemens on their latest products to keep up with the evolution of technology, and up to six new staff will go through the process each year to build up an even more formidable knowledge of the latest in the safety and automation field.

The Siemens Solution Partner Programme seeks to join the global giant to leading companies in their individual markets to provide their customer base with experts delivering superior, tailored and future-proofed solutions, under the banner of “perfect teamwork for your business success”.

Brockway believes the tie-up couldn’t have happened at a better time.

“NZ industry and manufacturers are finally moving away from the ‘she’ll be all right, mate’ attitude of the past, when they relied on a combination of ‘safety training’ and a hefty insurance policy to cover them for any fatalities; knowing that ACC would take care of any injuries.

“It hasn’t helped that the local legislation has trailed far behind the rest of the OECD, to the point that we are finding that the majority of the leading companies are now adopting the Australian safety regulations and conforming to them. They’ve come to realise that all the safety training in the world – as important as it is to raise awareness of the risks involved – cannot guarantee that there will not be a human lapse in any situation where something going wrong can lead to a fatality or grievous injury.

“At the same time, companies have begun to recognise that their true assets are in their trained and experienced employees. It’s easy to replace a piece of damaged equipment, but you can seldom, if ever, find a direct replacement for a skilled staffer – and that’s without going into the emotional and legal side of losing or maiming one.”

While the specific details of the agreement are confidential, a Siemens spokesman said their Solution Partner Programme relied on total cooperation between all stakeholders to ensure a successful project delivery, from early design and concept to post-commissioning and full operation.

“In a fast-changing world in which businesses are faced with increasing competition and commercial uncertainty, it is gratifying to know that partnerships can still thrive, trust can grow and loyalty between organisations is absolute.”

According to Siemens, members of the Partners Programme are carefully trained in specific technology environments.

“Their skill sets are monitored and tested constantly to ensure that when you engage with a Solution Partner, you are engaging with a company which has the latest tools and employs the highest-trained personnel.”

“If you like, we are performing the pathologist’s job in cases where companies have neglected maintenance and safety repairs in a short-sighted attempt to save money. It is a slippery slope which can only end badly,”

says McLaren, whose career is steeped in the maintenance side of the industry and is convinced Singer's maintenance and service pedigree has given them the inside track in the current environment where safety, efficiency and risk management considerations rate so much higher with employees, bosses and shareholders.

"I tend to say to people in these situations – how much is a life worth? Yes, you might get away with it for a while, but in the end, and the 'end' in these scenarios inevitably comes a whole lot sooner, do you want to have on your conscience the fact that you might have saved the company or yourself \$20,000 but you've ended up with a horribly injured or even dead employee?"

"The hidden costs of a tragedy or a major accident quickly send the costs spiralling – production losses; the time and costs of an inquiry; legal costs; replacing a skilled person; dealing with the bereavement; and the impact on staff confidence can take this into the stratosphere.

"Certainly, in days gone by, some people got away with short-cutting on safety standards; and it was too easy to toss the responsibility back on the responsible authorities and OSH and others. The number eight wire philosophy has always meant that Kiwi companies, industry and even our authorities were more unstructured and regulated than most, but globalisation and the focus on exports, with the quality and efficiency which goes with that, has ended our insularity," says McLaren.

Brockway emphasised that Singer would continue to integrate all appropriate platforms to meet individual customer needs.

"Right now, there is no question Siemens is at the very forefront of machine safety globally. We are in no way giving up our independence and neither has Siemens taken a stake in us, or the other way round. Our 56 years in the local market have given us the credibility and independence which Siemens has no intention of undermining. What would be the point?"

The Singer safety and automation leader said while Siemens were "unquestionably" the market leaders in their field right now, from what he had seen they were continuing to invest heavily in people and product to maintain that leadership into the future. This had been the clincher in gaining the Singer commitment, he indicated.

"Particularly where it comes to wireless safety protocols, they are the sole certified provider. We believe that wires and moving parts of machinery are only compatible to a limited degree. Face facts, if you want the perfectly safe environment, then don't mix them up.

"That's looking at safety from a defensive point of view. But our Singer philosophy tends to focus on the gains to be made from flexibility and efficiency. It's here that we believe we are only at the beginning of a massive evolution in wireless protocols to deliver a winning package of safety, flexibility and thereby, efficiency, that is going to bring a massive surge in converting to that Siemens technology," Brockway adds.



Jeff McLaren

**Singer**

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WWW.SINGER.CO.NZ



16 Edinburgh St  
Newton  
Auckland

PO Box 816  
Auckland

0800 474 643