End Users Come Together to Pick Winners of 23rd Annual Readers’ Choice Awards

INTELLIGENCE IN NUMBERS
Every single interaction between customer and supplier is an opportunity for providing good solutions. After awhile, these positive moments really begin to add up.

Despite the huge effort and extreme consistency required, the best vendors almost reflexively deliver useful products and services, and continually develop and release new improvements and innovations. Consequently, over months, years and decades, they methodically build reputations for quality, and gain the elusive and precious trust of their customers in the process industries.

Many of those customers have again voted to determine the winners of Control’s 2015 Readers’ Choice Awards. As usual, about 1,000 respondents weighed in on which suppliers provided the best products and services in the main process automation disciplines, primary process industries and in nine overall product categories and 78 subcategories. The respondents include both U.S.-based and international readers of Control’s print magazine and its ControlGlobal.com website. Each was allowed to vote for up to three vendors in each category and discipline, and then their first-, second- and third-
place votes were weighted to yield a rank of up to five top suppliers in each category.

Because of their technical preeminence and unflagging support, the suppliers ranked by responses to the Readers’ Choice Awards survey remain remarkably consistent year to year, even though changing groups of readers do the voting. Certainly, there’s always some jockeying for position and minor reshuffling among vendors competing in the categories and subcategories due to differing respondents and their shifting vendor experiences in the past year. However, tectonic shifts in the rankings typically only happen when large process automation and control suppliers merge with other large players, gain or lose parts of their traditional businesses in spin-offs or acquisitions, carry out large reorganizations that impact how they go to market, or expand organically into new technological areas.

Undoubtedly, this year’s biggest recent change of this kind was Schneider Electric’s more than $5-billion acquisition of Invensys just one year ago. Because the former Invensys was a such a longstanding pillar of the control and automation community, the process of folding it and its Avantis, Eurotherm, Foxboro, InFusion, SimSci, Triconex andWonderware divisions and brands into its new parent company is causing some seismic waves to ripple though the Readers’ Choice categories, and will likely continue to generate a few aftershocks in the coming months as readers continue to get used to the name and organizational change.

The Big Boards
For instance, while the Best in Control categories are broken down by six process automation disciplines and 10 industry verticals (Tables 1 and 2), and their results have remained mostly uniform in recent years, the 12-month-old Schneider Electric-Invensys combination appears to have already impacted the rankings. First, Schneider replaced Invensys at the top of the Safety/Emergency Shutdown category. Second, Schneider took over from Invensys in the Continuous Regulatory Control, Batch Process Automation and Continuous Sheet/Web Monitoring & Control categories.

In addition, within Safety/Emergency Shutdown, Schneider was a new winner in the Chemicals Manufacturing, Electric Power Generation, Oil & Gas Extraction and Petroleum Refining subcategories. Also, within the Supervisory Control & Data Acquisition (SCADA) category, Schneider Electric was preferred in the Electric Power Generation, Oil & Gas Extraction, Pulp & Paper Manufacturing and Water & Wastewater Processing subcategories. It seems that Schneider’s acquisition is already paying technical dividends in the process industries.

Finally, within the Batch Process Automation category, Emerson Process Management and Rockwell Automation switched places from last year in the Pulp & Paper Manufacturing and Electric Power Generation subcategories, respectively. Also, ABB was a new winner in Continuous Regulatory Control's Pulp & Paper subcategory; Rockwell Automation took over in SCADA's Chemicals Manufacturing and Metals, Materials & Mining subcategories, as well as winning several other slots; and Honeywell was a new winner in SCADA's Petroleum Refining subcategory.

New Categories, New Insights
To give users in some more specialized, technical areas a chance to vote for their favorite providers, this year’s Readers’ Choice Awards includes a few new subcategories, which could be added because this year’s survey generated enough responses in these areas for us to declare winners and runners-up.

Two new level-switch subcategories were added, including Level Switch, Mechanical and Level Switch, Ultrasonic. Also, the Pressure Switch and Temperature Switch categories have been restored after a brief absence. In addition, the Contact Radar category has been renamed Guided-Wave Radar because that name includes more products and is more recognizable and familiar to most readers.
While it’s not news that software (aided by faster, cheaper and more powerful microprocessors) has been taking over traditional hardware-based tasks for many years, the ways this revolution is shaking out lately is fueling some far-reaching innovations, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), virtualized computing, cloud-based servers and other smart manufacturing strategies and technologies. Just as in other industries, these changes are having a profound and growing influence on process control and automation.

Similarly, while perennial Software category winners Emerson Process Management won four subcategories and Rockwell Automation won three, there are several new subcategory winners this year: Honeywell won in Alarm Management Software, and Emerson won in Calibration Management Software. Likewise, Schneider Electric’s acquisition of Invensys also appeared to push it up in the standings in Human-Machine Interface Software and SCADA Software.

Software Strides Onward

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Beyond the confines of the control room, of course, resides the larger world of sensors, field instruments, analyzers and countless other components. All of these require extensive networks of cables, connectors, power supplies, safety devices and wireless solutions, which form the avenues for them to get their data back to PLCs, DCSs and other analytical entities to enable optimal decisions.

The irony is that sensors and field instruments enabled by software and microprocessors are more affordable and numerous, and so they’re sending back far more data than ever before via more high-speed, high-capacity networks. Granted, fieldbuses, Ethernet and fiberoptics combine many data paths onto far fewer wires, but there are so many more conversations going on that any initial savings will quickly be eaten up by new and growing data volumes. Truth is, IoT and smart manufacturing is going to need more networking than ever.

Fortunately, there are many experienced vendors in this space, who regularly come out on top in their Readers’ Choice subcategories, too. For example, three years running now, Rockwell Automation, has won in Input/Output Systems; Pepperl+Fuchs has won in Intrinsic Safety; Phoenix Contact has won in Terminal Block; Belden has won in Wire & Cable; and Emerson Process Management has won in Wireless Infrastructure.

The two new winners in the Infrastructure category were Sola HD for Power Supply and Moore Industries for Signal Conditioner. Both of these came in second place last year.

**Control Rooms Founded on Hardware**

While the wonderfulness of software and its groundbreaking capabilities are undeniable, it still needs to touch reality at some point, so there remain many tools that control engineers, system integrators, technicians and operators need to run their process applications safely and with optimal performance. However, because these devices don’t need to evolve and be updated as often as the software and data they display, the Readers’ Choice winners in this category are unfailing experts in their niches and in the eyes of their customers.

As usual, Ametek won in the Annunciator subcategory; Yokogawa won in the Recorder subcategory; and Rockwell Automation won in the Industrial Computer, Operator Interface Terminal and Panel Display subcategories. The only change was that Rockwell also was a new winner in the Process Loop Controller subcategory.

**Infrastructure Accelerates Networks**

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