

Kevin Engram of Illinois Tool Works Making Words Count in Engineering

By Peter Slavin



Kevin O. Engram, a sales manager for ITW, has been working with a customer to design a way for hunters to drag deer out of the woods. An ITW division sells an exceptionally strong, tear-resistant polyethylene film called Valeron, and the idea was to put deer carcasses on a Valeron tarp. This venture has inspired Engram to try to devise similar uses of Valeron for the military and the medical industry. He's a salesman who applies his engineering training and entrepreneurial talent whenever the opportunity arises.

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Engram was also the lead account manager and part of a small team that solved the problem of how to keep salad dressing fresh and tamper-resistant for Kraft Foods. They did so by adapting the ITW Unipac division's Lift'n'Peel seal, making the Kraft product not only safer but giving it a longer shelf life. It's Engram's proudest accomplishment.

Engram has found that sales work, which he has done in both information technology and manufacturing, gives him a chance to be highly creative at times. The variety of customers and need for different applications also make life interesting.

"No day is the same," he says.

Engram spent seven years selling to government customers at IBM Corporation, EDS Corporation, Sprint Corporation and a startup named Tyonek Technology LLC, before joining the commercial side with ITW in 2004. ITW is a diversified manufacturer that makes thousands of industrial products that include everything from industrial kitchen equipment to welding technolo-

gies, from zipper closures on resealable bags to the plastic rings holding six packs among many others.

Engineering seems to have been in Engram's stars.

"I was kind of born into it," he says. He grew up in Naperville, Ill., the home to installations of Bell Laboratories, AT&T and Lucent Technologies. It was a company town, and his father was an engineer at Bell Labs. Engram also excelled in math and science. He won full scholarships to Howard University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, *summa cum laude*, and Stanford University, to get his M.S.E.E.

At Stanford, he was drawn to the business side of technical companies and excelled in industrial engineering classes. As much as he liked design, he found the business of engineering intrigued him more. He realized that a sales position would let him to stay technically adept, "because I need to know what I'm talking about." A conversation with an IBM engineer in technical sales cemented his new ambition.

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"Technology is always going to change," he observes, but the ability to communicate does not. In sales, he says, "you live and die by that (ability)."

For Engram, a sense of humility about one's accomplishments and other people's circumstances is also important. He remembers walking to class at Howard and seeing the same homeless person every day. These days, he says, "it's only a couple of paychecks that separate me...from being the guy sitting in the train station with a beat-up jacket trying to stay warm."

Winning full rides from two schools has helped inspire Engram to do more than his share of good works: mentoring in high schools, donating money for scholarships and working with his fraternity's foundation that runs programs for young people. ■



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