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Slingmax[®] Worldwide How this innovative sling manufacturer has achieved a global presence

By Thomas G. Dolan

This pioneer of synthetic slings has also evolved a unique organizational structure which enables it to market its products worldwide.

The Aston, PA-based Slingmax[®], Inc. is well known for its state-of-the-art sling products. But what is perhaps less well understood is its organizational structure, unique in this industry, and perhaps in any other, which has allowed it, with a minimum of capital expenditures, to become an active player not only throughout the U.S., but the world.

Slingmax is the brain child of Dennis St. Germain, Sr., a man who combines within himself both the imagination of an inventor and acumen of an entrepreneur. He founded I&I Sling Inc., also in Aston, in 1963 as a traditional rigging shop, which he still runs today. It's through working directly with rigging end users that he's gained a thorough understanding of their needs, out of which he's evolved his innovative products. He founded Slingmax in 1987 to manufacture these products. He owns both companies, but they are



Pictured above, from left to right, are: Curtis Blake, Gayle Katz, Dennis St. Germain, Chris Susman, Scott St. Germain, Nick Peticca, and Jeff Susman.



Dennis St. Germain, standing front of his "Wall of Patents."

separate, with different orientations. In 1994 he hired Jeff Susman as president to run the day-to-day operations of Slingmax, though he retains the title of CEO.

But before looking at the organizational structure of Slingmax, let's first look at the products.

Interestingly enough, Slingmax, so well known for its synthetic slings, debuted with its three-part Tri-Flex™ wire rope sling followed by a series of nine-part wire rope slings, all known, says Susman, "for their high break strength and flexibility." Although Slingmax has since moved on to focus on its synthetic slings, the company still retains its wire rope offerings, even though it believes its synthetics now outperform the wire rope slings in all areas. The reason? "We consider Slingmax a rigging solution company," replies Susman. "Many rigging managers, in fact, whole companies, insist on having steel rigging, so we feel it's our job to give those customers what they want."

Slingmax's premiere and most popular product Twin-Path® sling, was introduced in 1988. Susman describes this synthetic product as an endless type of round sling, offered with some variations, such as multi-leg bridles, eye-and-eye, and an adjustable bridle style, as well as a high temperature variation. The Twin-Path sling is basically made up of a proprietary blend of high performance fibers, or the core yarn, called K-Spec®, and the cover, called CoverMax™, manufac-

tured to Slingmax specifications by Southern Weaving Company, Greenville, SC.

"Both the core yarn and the durable cover have undergone continuous improvement over the years as the products have evolved and customers demanded more and more of them," Susman says. "And because it's the most popular product used in heavier, more complex, and more challenging lifts every year, we've had to become experts in protecting our sling products."

Susman explains that several years ago the company thought that abrasion protection was sufficient, but gradually realized that two types were necessary. The one is where there is no well defined edge, but there were rough or very dirty surfaces which could abrade through the cover and do damage. The more recent realization was that of the need for protection when the lifting takes place near edges such as steel beams or concrete structures. So now there is Synthetic Armor™ wear pads for abrasion and CornerMax™ Pads for edge protection. The two are interchangeable, in that one can be taken off and replaced by the other for any particular job. Slingmax offers its G-Link™ connector hardware as a quick connect system, which will work on any type synthetic sling, though it was developed specifically for Twin-Path slings.

"The advantages of the Twin-Path synthetic round sling are that it's the lightest weight product on the market, along with its lack of stretch and durability and reliability," Susman says. He adds that these heavy lift slings are amenable to easy inspections and are also repairable.

Other products Slingmax makes include a pad eye tester, a chain sling saddle ring, and a shackle pin pad that is used to protect a synthetic sling a customer wants to rig on the pin side of a shackle.

What gave Slingmax a jump start in the late 1980s was the power industry. Power generation companies, the subcontractors they use for maintenance and construction, as well as the manufacturers that make the heavy equipment that go into power plants. All these groups were quick to recognize the value of Slingmax slings and their use quickly spread throughout that industry. "It was a great boost for



Slingmax President, Jeff Susman explains, "We like to think of ourselves as a center for our licensed manufacturers, providing them with the technical and sales/marketing backup they need."

Twin-Path slings to be adopted so early by the power industry," Susman says.

Moreover, continues Susman, "Power projects were not nearly as large and complex as they are today, so as they've grown, Slingmax has grown, and as their needs have grown, Slingmax has worked to continuously improve its products."

Since the same subcontractors who worked in the power industry also worked in general construction, the use of Slingmax slings spread to that area as well. Thus, utilities and construction make up Slingmax's two largest customer segments, followed by the military, general manufacturing, railroads, shipbuilding, aerospace, automotive, and others. But, says Susman, "Power plants continue to be the mainstay of our business."

Turning to the unique organizational structure of the company, Susman explains that St. Germain did not want to market his slings through I&I Sling because he would be limiting the extent of their sales. On the other hand, he didn't want to open Slingmax branches all over the country because, Susman says, "he would be creating competitive relationships. Better to align Slingmax with the best shops and have them become a part of the organization."

For this reason, Slingmax has become a manufacturer who manufacturers only part of the necessary raw

materials and licenses dealers to put the finished product all together. The dealer will receive the core yarn and fiber optics from Slingmax and the cover from Southern Weaving Company and then put it all together on the Twin-Path machine designed to make a sling very quickly. Usually, it's a 2-4 day turnaround, but in an emergency the big slings can be made in a day.

The dealers thus become licensed manufacturers of a unique product through which they can distinguish themselves in their market area. But it takes far less overhead, cost, and other resources than it would take to manufacture a sling like this from scratch. Basically they are assembling the three different components of core fiber, cover, and fiber optics on a machine designed to help them do this very quickly.

The dealers also receive the support from Slingmax to make this possible. "Slingmax works primarily as a technology company and marketing company," says Susman. "We like to think of ourselves as a center for our licensed manufacturers, providing them with the technical and sales/marketing backup they need. We'll send people out to them when necessary." Slingmax also offers several training courses for rigging, safety, and equipment inspection, and has a full time rigging instructor. Slingmax's first dealers were Lift-It Manufacturing in Los Angeles, CA, and Strider-Resource in Toronto, Ontario, which is the master licensor for all of Canada. Currently there are 21 U.S. dealers, 6 in Canada, 3 in Asia, and 1 each in Europe, Mexico, and Australia. The most successful foreign dealer is Shibamoto, Ltd. in Tokyo, Japan.

Just as the organizational structure benefits the dealers so it does Slingmax. At its own plant it has only 12 employees. But, as Susman puts it, "We say that Slingmax is a fabricator organization that has 1600 employees with 240 outside sales people working from 90 locations throughout the world." Slingmax's annual sales volume is \$12 million.

Since Slingmax has its dealers doing the finished sling work, isn't it an issue that these are technical products with exacting specifications, requiring quality control? Are there problems in communication with so many coun-

tries, with different languages and cultures so far away?

"We have been lucky because in Italy, Japan and Mexico where the native language is not English, the companies have a strong American presence within them. The owner of our Italian company has worked in the USA and always has several employees who speak excellent English. The president of our Japan dealer went to the University of Michigan, worked in the U.S. and has made it a requirement that his employees speak English," Susman replies. "The Mexican company is owned by an American one, so there is a good English speaking presence there."

Susman says that though a small competitor of synthetic slings will come and go. Our combination of products is not available elsewhere anywhere else in the world."

He adds that "among rigging shops we are very well known and respected as one of the best brands to have. There is also a lively market in secondary sales. Most of our slings are sold directly to end users by a Slingmax dealer, but then many are sold through reselling companies."

Yet, though Slingmax has no direct competition, it still competes with traditional lifting devices, and that is mainly due to the resistance to synthetics. When asked just how much of the U.S. market share Slingmax has, Susman replies, "I can't say for sure, because there is no organization that provides a unified set of statistics. But we feel we certainly have a nice chunk of the market, and a majority of the heavy lifts are done with Twin-Path.

Why doesn't Twin-Path have the entire market?

"A lot of people in the late 80s and early 90s did not believe that a textile strap could lift really heavy loads. In the late 80s our heaviest lift was 420 tons. We lifted an entire ship. Since then our slings have lifted up to 1200 tons. But a lot of people still don't believe it can be done. That's perhaps our greatest challenge. We're working to refine our marketing approach. They say the last 10-15% of any market is the hardest to get. Maybe we're at that last 20% of the rigging population who still have doubts or reservations about lifting up such heavy loads with synthetic slings. We're working hard to

instill the awareness that it can be done, and done safely."

How did Susman become associated with Slingmax?

"I previously worked for a company in Philadelphia and was involved in both vacuum lifting and also international trading," he responds. "I was looking for partners for international trading and came upon this company that sold high performance fiber lifting slings. I liked that idea. I did a little inquiring overseas. It seemed like a good product to export. I got involved with Slingmax in that way in the early '90s. In 1994, when I wanted to make a change, Dennis offered me this job."

When asked what dimensions he brought to the company, Susman replies, "The initial attraction was my international experience, and shortly after I became president I signed up some foreign dealers and began looking for vacancies in this country to sign up more. I had a strong technical background, and was able to work in this very technical environment with a good technical understanding of the products. But I also had a sales and marketing background."

Susman, 58, enjoys his grandchildren and traveling with his wife, Christine, who works as office manager at I&I Sling. His job keeps him busy. When asked whether he is a hands-on manager or likes to delegate authority, he says, "Since I am working through so many dealer companies, I am, almost by definition, delegating most of the authority, as well as overseeing everything that goes on."

Has Slingmax reached its peak, or is there still area for growth?

"We feel that even in a market like power generation, that we've been in since the start, there are always new plants being built, and these companies are always finding new applications for our slings. So we feel we still have excellent opportunities there. And, since the product there is always evolving to more complex and heavier lifts, they tend to trickle down to general rigging in many other industries." Though there's not much room for new dealers in the U.S., there will be a new one coming on board shortly, as well as at least one or more in other countries. "There's definitely room for expansion overseas," Susman says. □

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