

**Clifton Vann IV** is President of Charlotte-based [Livingston & Haven](#), a new member of NCTA. NCTA Ambassador, [Mary Storms](#), recently talked with Clifton about L&H and the roles technology plays there.

## SYNOPSIS

L&H is a \$70M, family-owned fluid power, automation, lubrication, and connectors company. Established in 1947 in Charleston as a petroleum-handling equipment company, it is now headquartered in Charlotte, with nearly 200 employees located in NC, GA, SC, TN, VA, and WV. In his conversation with [Mary Storms](#), Clifton Vann IV talks about his company's solutions, the role of innovation plays in his industrial engineering solutions business, and how he expects to benefit from NCTA membership. His interview includes:

- *L&H's overarching goal?* To preserve manufacturing in the US through the use of the technologies L&H sells.
- *What does "innovation" mean in manufacturing?* Any kind of creative thinking that solves a problem, mundane or otherwise.
- *How does L&H get its people to embrace innovation?* In part, by building 8500 square feet dedicated solely to creating new ideas.

You can read more of the interview by clicking [here](#).

### 1. First, who is Livingston and who is Haven?

They were the founders of the company in 1947. *Mr. Livingston* I never knew. They found a project in South America and he went down there to handle it and never came back. *Mr. Haven*, however, was very influential in the company and lived until 1993 when he was 93. He was a Princeton graduate who got a call from George Westinghouse to take on the challenge of selling products in Charleston. Mr. Haven fought in WW I and WWII and was friends with Erwin Rommel. He was the dictionary definition of entrepreneur, was learning to speak Chinese in 1993, and was mad when the mortgage company wouldn't give him a 30-year mortgage about that same time.

### 2. Who are L&H's clients?

That's not easy to answer because they're quite varied. We have about 6000 customers in the Southeast US, from Nucor Steel to small garage businesses. A lot of them are middle-market companies who need help [*that they don't have internally*]. Others are very large, Bridgestone, for instance. They also need our help because they're so large that they may have trouble communicating within themselves.

### 3. What problems does L&H solve for them?

Interviewed by [Mary Storms](#)

The way we help *[our clients]* is similarly varied. The common theme is that we provide an off-balance-sheet engineering resource for them without them having to bear that cost. Obviously, we supply them product required for making whatever they make on a daily basis. But the real value is in sharing our experience because we deal with so many companies in so many industries. We've processed chicken. We've made aircraft carriers. It makes us uniquely qualified to help. My grandfather used to play the Concentration game with us: Where have I seen that card before? That's like our business: Where have we seen that problem before?

#### **4. What sets you apart from your competition?**

Our willingness to dig in beyond what our competitors do. We're willing to take them from the drunken napkin drawing to the end. And I think we're smarter. (I'll hear about that!) We give the unlimited advantage. *[Editor's note: L&H also differentiates itself with a partner certification program, called "[Value-Added Partner Network](#);" a training program for its employees and partners, the L&H [Institute of Applied Technology](#); and numerous awards from the [Progressive Manufacturing Awards' annual events](#)].*

#### **5. As an advanced manufacturing company, why did you join NCTA?**

I wanted to get greater exposure in our NC region. We consistently hear that people hadn't heard about us. As part of our outreach program, we're focused on a bigger picture, which is manufacturing in NC and the US and its loss of the love of manufacturing.

Our goal is to preserve manufacturing in the US through the use of the technologies we sell. That's our goal. I think we need to take a bigger role in the community to broaden the definition of technology beyond IT. My oldest boy is interested in science and is frustrated because his friends aren't usually interested. Is that because they're not interested or not exposed?

Part of me says, I don't know *[what L&H will get from its NCTA membership]*, that I'll find out. The other part of me says I want to bring manufacturing back to its glory days, to talk with people who have the ability to talk with other people and think about things differently. We need to be diversified as a city, as a state, as a country. Meetings in this city are financial and there's no one quite like L&H *[at those meetings]*. Can I change that?

It's not that banking is bad, but if that's all we do, I think that's a risk. We're not telling people that manufacturing is important anymore. *[We should]* think about manufacturing in our community, about how we're shaping our young people. We're all benefitting from those manufacturers, from the 2 guys in a garage, the people with a passion. Where are those people today? They might be in grade school.

**6. L&H websites refer often to innovation. How do you create a culture of innovation?**

Innovation is any kind of creative thinking that solves a problem. And sometimes they're very mundane but impactful. The key is to constantly keep your eyes open. Innovative solutions come from all over our company. When we built our new facility about 3 years ago, we dedicated 8500 square feet to Genesis, an area and a state of mind for creating new ideas. *[We give many of our]* people a space and 100 hours minimum for creative education every year. It's an environment to try out your ideas.

**7. In 2008, your company won the [Innovation Mastery Award](#) at the annual Progressive Manufacturing Awards event. What did L&H do to earn that recognition?**

The Mastery award was on a specific technology, the K (kinematic) Rig. Kinematics is the study of spring rates, like the spring in a mattress. K is the constant for Hooke's law. The reason *[we received it was related to]* NASCAR compliance. *[We developed]* a solution *[that could be used by]* every team in NASCAR and it created a new initiative for us that operated for 5 years, called ADI – accelerating developments international. They put the car on the machine *[we developed]* and they could run tests to look at force and position on the tires and, ultimately, run simulated laps around the track.

In 2006 we won the Progressive Manufacturers Award in total for preserving American manufacturing. No one was more surprised than we were since we were up against companies like GE and IBM.

**8. L&H's tag line is "Driving Efficiency." How does your company drive efficiency?**

That tagline is to open our own minds and not be isolated in our own worlds. We tend to think that our technology is the only solution for our customers. Because we're not really a manufacturer, lean is the big answer for us internally. We use lean as the overarching value for driving waste out of internal structure.

We use the same mentality for our customers. It could be anything from how we process an order *[more efficiently]* to how your plant runs to how your product is packed when it leaves our warehouse. We've taken on the risks for our customers and parlayed that into better opportunities *[for them and for us, rather]* than waiting for the train to come to us.

**9. How does L&H integrate technology into its business efforts?**

One, we're a VAR for Oracle and developed our own ERP system on the Oracle platform in 1987. Several distributors like us also run our system. Another example is

our warehouse technology that's an automated carousel with automated retrieval and inventory management. [MROstop.com](#) is a trial balloon to test some things for our own website and has taken our business global. *[Our green initiative]* [RECON](#) was born out of freedom of thinking about energy for what we do . . . an efficiency issue our customers are wrestling with.

**10. At your video blog, [HomeForInnovation.com](#), you sound like a man on a mission.**

Yes, I am a man on a mission. I look at great leaders in history. It seems like they moved above their business to offer bigger solutions. Andrew Carnegie moved beyond making steel to providing education. Now it seems like we've given up *[on making things]* and become a service nation. John Q Public needs to know the value of building things for today, for my boys, and for generations to come. We're going to struggle to secure our country if we're so dependent on other people. It's not as if we have a stable globe. We can't count on other countries.

It seems like we've gotten so politically correct that nobody is willing to take a stand. My concern about saying nothing has started to far outweigh my concern about saying something *[that might be politically incorrect]*. That's why I started making videos. My point is to present the problem and, as the show goes on, we'll present the opportunities for change and where we're innovating and where people are finding the answers to solve problems. Instead of looking for solutions that are out there, we've got to go create them.

**11. L&H is a [family-owned business](#). How did your family get involved with the company?**

My dad did contract work for L&H in Charleston, for then-president John Flint. John was impressed with his work and offered Dad *[Clifton Vann III]* half-salary to come to work for a small company. In those days you didn't leave a large papermill to make half the money the same year your first son was born *[Clifton IV]*. Seemed a little crazy. But it was that kind of vision that has been a part of our family and our company culture since the very beginning - to see what *could* be versus what *is*.

In 1973 my family moved here from Charleston to start the Charlotte branch. My dad ended up trading a commission check for equity in the company. He had 2 kids at that point. We've owned the company since about 1980.

I started working at L&H at a very early age - my start date was 27 years ago. By the time I was 13, I was working in the summertime, sweeping warehouses and packing boxes. I did that for most of my school career. I went to Charlotte Country Day, then to NC State and got a BA in business management. Probably the most valuable thing I learned from college is that life is full of roadblocks and you have to figure out most stuff yourself. Then I came back to the school of hard knocks to

finish my education. I worked in sales and was sales manager and served just about every position in the company before becoming president at 32.

My dad is still involved in the business . . . [primarily in] [MRO stop.com](#), an internet business selling the same products worldwide that we sell as a distributor.

**12. I hear you're a rocker.**

That's a fact. I've been playing the guitar since 10th grade. The last 10 years, I've played in a band that has raised \$850K for handicapped children to go to Disney World, [sponsored by radio's] [Second Chance Prom](#) by Ace & TJ. They put together a band from their listeners, to play one night and make some money [for charity]. Then we played about 30 week-ends a year for about 8 years. We've played with Kelly Clarkson, Bon Jovi, Train, you name it. It's a clear example of who you know - we had inside tracks because the band was with Ace and we were raising money for a good cause. Ace is the lead singer. I play the guitar and sing some back up. We play cover songs - ACDC, Prince, Guns & Roses.

**13. What else do you do to relax after you leave the office?**

I work out every evening and have a wife and 8-, 6-, 3-year-old boys, so there's not much relaxing.

**14. What's your secret for keeping so many plates spinning?**

Number 1, I give up sleep. Truthfully, I have a great team. My job is to put together the best team I can. I'm surrounded by some great people.

*You can reach Clifton Vann IV, President of [Livingston & Haven](#), at 800-825-4969, [cb4@lhtech.com](mailto:cb4@lhtech.com). Mary Storms is an NCTA Ambassador and a tech sales recruiter at [STORMS Associates](#). You contact her at [Mary@STORMSassociates.com](mailto:Mary@STORMSassociates.com), 704-607-9118.*