

# The day Hollywood called

YOU'VE SEEN THOSE MOVIES where the unknown (but worthy) actor gets that once-in-a-lifetime call from Hollywood. The part suits the actor to a T. But can he get to Hollywood in two weeks? That's what played out at Rice Lake Weighing Systems one Thursday afternoon before the Fourth of July weekend.

When Pat Ranfranz, director of marketing, took the call, he thought it was one of his longtime vendors. "You're the prop master from *The Office*®?"

"From NBC? You're joking, right?"

This was no practical joke. The *real* prop master for NBC's hit TV series *The Office* was calling to inquire about using one of our indicators and scales for their fall premiere episode. Pat recognized a golden opportunity and moved quickly to discuss the idea with Mark Johnson Jr., director of customer service, and Steve Parkman, chief operating officer.

A television or movie prop master creates a realistic setting for the story line. In this case, the Dunder Mifflin team would be filmed in a warehouse where they are about to be weighed en masse. The prop master couldn't call just any prop company and ask for any platform scale. After searching the yellow pages and Internet, he hit our site [www.ricelake.com](http://www.ricelake.com) and found his star scale system: our RoughDeck® and 920i®.

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## Scene 1 – The Crew Rallies

Soon they were discussing many more ways Rice Lake's expertise and service could assist. The prop master requested pictures of a warehouse scale application so they could recreate it for their set. Pat set the project in motion. The emails were flying. Dozens of people were called into the act. Julia Buergi, product manager; Tina Slayton, marketing specialist; Steve Parkman; Mark Jr., and a host of others rolled up their sleeves. It was showtime at Rice Lake.

Typical product placements in movies and on the small screen vary from paid placements like the famous Reese's Pieces in the *E.T.*™ movie to unpaid placements like the Rice Lake RoughDeck® floor scale and 920i® programmable indicator on *The Office*®.

## Scene 2 – The Call

With any star, the wait is unbearable. Will they pick me? Will I get the part? For Rice Lake, Hollywood liked what they saw and called back before the end of the day. But with one caveat; we had to provide the scale to their specifications and within their time line. As the team worked through the expected delivery schedule and their unique specifications, it was time for Rice Lake to get their 15 minutes of fame as the warehouse scale system was designed to become the star of the warehouse set.

The original crew from the Rice Lake office that worked to meet the deadline. From left: Mark Jilec, Michelle Buckmaster, Randy Ritchey, Tina Slayton, Melissa Hjelle, Levi Zueger, Pat Ranfranz and Stacy White.



## Scene 3 – The Custom Build

The writers of the script called for a scale to accommodate 12 people, the primary cast of *The Office*, with the flexibility to control the total amount displayed on the indicator. From the start, the Hollywood client wanted a real-life scenario. Julia assured them that the RoughDeck platform with the yellow bumper guards and matching indicator stand would suit their needs because it's the same product sold to our customers. Working on a very tight deadline of two weeks, the order was entered and the custom build began, a common scenario at Rice Lake. That's why 90 percent of our products are the result of a custom build for a client. The prop team requested the system to be freestanding so it could be moved into various locations on the set depending on the needs of the director, other props and the script. Brian Lotton, designer/engineer, started working on the custom drawings and special production work orders for the 48in x 80in platform, 5,000 lb capacity super-star RoughDeck with built-in shelf and bumper guards.

The real magic behind the curtain involved all the customizing on the 920i indicator/HMI controller. At this juncture, Gary Hackel, programmer, focused on the 920i

requirements, selected for its star power and superior programmability needed to accommodate the story line.

Using iRite IDE® programming software, Gary configured the 920i to be easily adjusted within the user-defined mode. "The operator is able to configure the weight reading on the scale while the up and down keys allow the operator to switch between the modes of operation," Gary explained.

## Scene 4 – The Rehearsal

As an element of custom software development, we often ask customers to preview the indicator software. This test ensures the end-user that the interface meets their expectations while allowing for adaptability in the process. It's a necessary step since customers' needs often evolve as equipment is implemented to the desired application.

After viewing the initial demo and capabilities of the 920i, the prop team, with input from other stakeholders, requested some modifications. They wanted additional text to be added to the operation screen to provide flexibility and to accommodate a number of target weight situations. The modifications were executed the same day, and the indicator programming demo was

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"I admired the prop guys. You only see the actors out front, but the crew behind the scenes really pays attention to detail to create the show's realism."

Roger Kimber, western regional director



¼ to 12 miles above the ground. As they develop this charge, the excess negatively charged electrons begin to descend to the positively charged ground in a seemingly random, but “staircase” pattern, called a leader. This leader is not visible to the naked eye but can be monitored using specialized equipment.

Once the leader reaches a few hundred feet above the earth, a more positively charged region develops between the leader and the earth. This region includes the “tallest object” – which can be you, if you are not careful!

Once these two regions meet a few hundred feet in the air, the circuit is complete and the lightning bolt travels from the ground up into the cloud (at approximately 90,000 miles per second!), relieving it of *some* of the excess charge. The cloud still retains some charge, and the path of the first bolt, made by the leader

and the positively charged ground region, can be used again and again. This is what we see when lightning “flickers.” Many lightning strikes consist of three or four bolts, or discharge paths, along the same path. So, yes, lightning not only CAN but many times DOES strike in the same place twice! (The Empire State Building in New York City is struck by lightning on average 23 times each year and was once struck eight times in 24 minutes.)

Lightning can take a number of forms and all of the details are still not fully understood. The common cloud-to-ground lightning can consist of a 1-million-volt bolt, from ½ to 2 inches in diameter, traveling at approximately half the speed of light. The current in that bolt can be 40,000 amps or 200 times all the current available in the average household!

Cloud-to-cloud or “heat” lightning is simply the discharge of electrons within the

same cloud or to an adjoining one. It is called heat lightning by tradition, but heat really has nothing to do with it.

The thunder that accompanies a lightning bolt results from the expansion of the air around the bolt. A lightning bolt heats the air through which it travels to about three times the temperature of the sun (about 20,000 degrees F) and does it almost instantly. The air immediately around the bolt is pushed by this rapidly expanding air which produces a shock wave, that we hear (later) as thunder. The delay occurs since light travels at approximately 300,000 km/second (186,000 miles per second) and sound travels at approximately .346 km/sec or 1/1,000,000 of that speed. So, when you see the lightning, count the number of seconds until you hear the thunder and divide by 5 to get the distance that the strike is away from you, in miles. ■

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re-recorded and sent to the prop team for its second viewing.

“No different from any other custom solution we build,” said Mark, Jr., “Rice Lake excels in custom program development by keeping customer feedback and programming results flexible in order to achieve optimal results. Although software can be modified in the field, our goal is to build in enough structure to the program while still allowing flexibility so the system can be adapted to the application after installation.”

After uploading the requested additions to the 920i®, Gary delivered the indicator to Rice Lake’s Testing Engineer Keith Kaiser to ensure the indicator was ready to be calibrated with the scale platform. As the deadline loomed, the scale and indicator were packed off to Hollywood.

As the cameras were placed and the lighting checked, Roger Kimber, western regional director, stepped through the target weight settings and weighing modes so the props team would be familiar with the programming established earlier through the

video demo. While standing on the scale and adding more weight, the props team requested that the displayed weight be set up to simulate the needs of the script. Roger quickly created realistic set points in the user-defined mode which aided the props team during its training and filming and provided the Hollywood-style illusion of specific weight changes.

Soon the props team was ready to present the scale to the director of the premiere. It was important that everything on the scale, from bumper guards to indicator text, was authentic to a warehouse. Form and functionality for the RoughDeck® and 920i system were on the mark.

## Scene 5 – Taping the Episode

The stand-in rehearsal allowed Roger to assist with a few more set changes. “I had picked up two cables the night before thinking they may want to operate the scale out of the shot,” he explained. Indeed, the props team requested the option to target the scale out of sight. Within 45 minutes, Roger was able to communicate the necessary changes to Gary in Rice Lake.

The command changes were added to the custom programming, and the scale was now equipped with keyboard shortcut key commands to display the desired target. One last modification to the programming allowed the indicator to display a target weight and then decrease as one of the cast members de-scaled from the group weight. It worked great!

As the final credits rolled on NBC’s *The Office*® season five opening episode, Rice Lake’s legendary attention to customer service and flexibility in meeting customers’ custom requirements shined brightly. Rice Lake provided the same celebrity treatment it provides every customer.

Maybe we’ll receive an Emmy for our dramatic role on a hit television series. ■

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