

America's power(ful) industry



I recently attended the 2011 Applied Power Electronics Conference (APEC) and was struck by how strong and vibrant the American power electronics industry is. The exhibit hall was full of engineers discussing new technology as well as new business, and the well-attended seminars addressed issues and topics important to the industry. (My panel on AC vs. DC power distribution was SRO, but then again who can resist re-hashing Edison and Tesla?)

America has fingers in many pies, industry-wise, and the electronics industry is no exception. We have a strong presence in many areas in electronics, but it is in the area of power (and precision analog, a closely-related field) where America shows a great deal of leadership and has a very strong and fraternal community. Engineers in the power space not only create new businesses, they move about the industry and cross-pollinate ideas and technologies. This of course occurs in every industry, but in my years covering electronics only the embedded space comes close when it comes to camaraderie.

One can point to many reasons the power industry in America is so strong. You could say that power is the fundamental electronics infrastructure, and America's long history with tech lends itself to leadership in the older disciplines. One could also say that the overall electronics industry's fascination with digital, and the subsequent treatment of the power supply as an odd gray area on the board last paid attention to gave the American power community time to mature its industry and develop new technologies internally. Whatever the reason, America's power industry now distinguishes itself by its achievements in the field.

Power is also an area where America isn't involved in a race to the bottom. I hear executives in other industries talking about lowest-common-denominator business with commodity products making profits only at high volumes. Power is noteworthy in that many companies dominant in the space reside in tax-heavy old-school states and stress quality and value over volume and price. America isn't going to improve their balance of trade by flipping burgers or making fractional-margin plastic goods. The international community is a vibrant marketplace where each country participating can provide a value-add, and America demonstrates this on a regular basis in the power industry.

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The biggest take-away I had from the APEC event was that smarts are now available at every point in the power chain, from generation to point of load, and American power engineering community is leading the way. Maybe other American industries can take a lesson from their example, who knows?

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