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Asset InterTech's Dehne: seeking growth in embedded instrumentation

By Rick Nelson, Editor in Chief -- Test & Measurement World, 7/31/2009

Tim Dehne, until recently a longtime executive with National Instruments, has joined the board of directors of Asset InterTech. Over a career stretching more than 21 years at NI, Dehne led global marketing and R&D at the company, which reported \$824 million in revenues in 2008. During his tenure at NI, he held positions including vice president of strategic marketing and senior vice president of R&D. EDN recently interviewed Dehne as well as Glenn Woppman, Asset's chief executive officer and chairman of the board.

Tim, his move represents a major change for you.

Dehne: Yes, you could say that. I had been looking at a number of different options, but Asset InterTech presented a nice opportunity based on my experiences and relationship with Glenn [Woppman]. It made sense to me, and I was happy to join the board.

What do you see as the similarities and differences in the directions of the two companies? National Instruments started out as a test company, but, as it grew, it's gone in lots of different directions, including control and design.

Dehne: Growth potential is one of the things that got me excited when Glenn and I first started talking after I announced my departure from National Instruments. Asset's history is in boundary scan, which basically "niched out" as a market. Asset did very well and is one of the leaders, but the space didn't grow as much as Asset and the other players in the marketplace hoped it would. But Asset is still fundamentally a hardware/software play, and that [approach] is very similar to National Instruments'.

But where the company is going is what got me excited. The semiconductor world is moving to many, many cores and even to multiple IP [intellectual-property] cores from multiple vendors. That world needs a kind of test strategy not only at the semiconductor level, where you figure out what's going on with the silicon and what may be causing some of the yield or performance issues, but also at the board level to monitor the interactions among all those different chips with all those multiple vendors' IP. Addressing these challenges involves structural test, which is different from what National Instruments does, but it seems to be an area of growth and an exciting technology development. We feel that embedded instrumentation is an area in which the company can grow to quite a good size if we do things right.

How is the economy impacting Asset's strategy at this point?

Woppman: We really loved 2008 all the way to the very end. We had significant growth and record profits. Since we are private we don't publish the numbers, but I can tell you that we did quite well, and some of the reasons that we did well was we got traction with the embedded-instruments story that we launched about a year ago (www.tmworld.com/article/CA6561005.html). We are getting lot of interest processor controlled testing and are in the multiple-evaluation mode right now. That's a technology that's been there for a while—we bought [International Test Technologies (www.tmworld.com/article/CA6526796.html)] and have integrated [its technology] in. We still have a little bit more work to do, but we are really hearing that people are onboard with boundary scan but recognizing that boundary scan alone isn't enough. The other area where we got traction was with the Intel IBIST when the Nehalem launch happened at the beginning of '08. We really got traction because of the QPI 6-gigabit/second bus, so we got what I'll call a beachhead with the Intel installed base on design validation.

You mentioned a successful year in '08. What about the first half of '09?

Woppman: We tried to hide, but unfortunately the recession did find us in the first quarter. The first

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quarter was definitely weak, and the beginning of the second quarter was weak. Right now, and we don't know if it's a blip, but we're beginning to see some encouraging signs. We think we will have growth in the second half of the year right now, but it's tough to see based on those first five months if we are going to be able to pull out growth year over year.

What are the prospects for mergers and acquisitions?

Dehne: I'm not saying what Asset's plan is, but, in the design space, mergers and acquisitions happen all the time. They're not as frequent in the test area, but, of course, they occur there, too. But the most important thing now with Asset is to get the company growing organically with these new initiatives with the processor-controlled test and embedded instrumentation, so that's what we are going to focus on doing.

What about partnerships with complementary vendors?

Dehne: "Partnerships"—and I use that term loosely—typically fall into three categories. There can be a sales/distribution agreement, there can be just a marketing or message story, or there can be some in-depth joint development. The last type can be significant. Examples are the partnerships that NI had with Analog Devices [regarding NI's LabView graphical-development module for Analog Devices' Blackfin processors] and Luminary Micro [regarding a LabView graphical-development module for ARM targets on a Luminary Micro evaluation board]. These partnerships involve developers' sitting down and co-developing and creating something new in the marketplace. With joint-development efforts, generally there's money on the line; you are committing real resources, so you work harder to make those things work.

What is your role as a board member—the traditional board of directors' governance role?

Dehne: Certainly, anybody on the board has that role. But I'm a little bit different from the other board members, and I'm thankful to Glenn for recognizing the ways he could leverage my experience. When I started at National Instruments, the company employed 100 people, and I went up the marketing ranks for about a decade and then went into R&D for another decade. So, given that experience base, Glenn and some of the other board members felt I could probably play a different role in addition to the corporate-governance role. I could also be a little bit more active in the marketing and R&D aspects.

Woppman: From my standpoint, Tim's dead-on. I saw a twofold value here—to add someone from the test-and-measurement world to my board, which I didn't have, but also Tim was unique in being with National from the early days as a smaller company and having a role in taking it public and growing it to over \$800,000 in revenue. Tim's experience going through all those phases of the development of a company and his ability to look at tradeoffs and make decisions is invaluable. We see him helping and advising and not only in at the strategic board level. He is so strong operationally that he will be involved at some of the department levels—not in terms of execution but reviewing things and sharing his thoughts.

—Interview conducted and edited by Rick Nelson

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