On being early birds and EMEX

NVSI is a small trans-Tasman integration, engineering and R&D company which was formed in March 2003 and has participated in the last three Auckland EMEX tradeshows. It's run by a couple of Kiwis which is not unusual for a Sydney-based company. In 2004 and 2006 NVSI exhibited as system integrators involved with cutting-edge technology, and in 2008 in partnership with Colin Gracie of Inspyer and Ross McBeath of AVIA showing EnviroPoint, a wireless monitoring system and their first commercial product.

Comparing the shows and responses has been an interesting exercise.

In 2004, as newbie integrators, we chose the latest whizzbang projects and technology. The key, we felt, was to arrest the perambulating engineering public with movement and light. Accordingly, we had a strobe-effect display from a scanning laser on a large screen. Many people were attracted by this but the second most common question asked was, "Can it be used for security?" It could not. It's a scanning laser, people, not a video camera. Most comments were that vision was too expensive.

The most common question was, "How long have you been around?" New Zealand had borne the brunt of many a fly-by-nighter who turned up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, eager to demonstrate the wonders of software and the latest technology only to stall and admit defeat before the project was completed.

Also that year, we took along a newly-purchased espresso coffee machine to offer a caffeine fix to those who stopped to chat with us. With excellent past experience to demonstrate our skills, we did chat with a particular group of people to whom we had previously spoken and cemented the relationship. The result is an exported product. And we made good connections with some of the larger New Zealand manufacturing and industrial companies.

There was a good range of visitor, from apprentices and students to managers, and we re-connected with existing clients. In fact, spotting people in the crowd is half the fun of tradeshows.

By the third day we were offering free coffees to the stand holders around us in support of the fact we were nearly out on our feet and recognized they were, too. As one does not eat in front of others so, too, one does not drink coffee in front of pale, tired colleagues who have none. They were a friendly bunch and we noted their businesses, purchasing from one, and they noted ours.

In 2006, funnily enough, several stand holders had coffee available (I don't wish to suggest we were the one and only in 2004, but there was a definite increase). But we had moved on. This time we shared the space with a business colleague's cameras and lenses who also lent us his spinning can with cameras to identify and pass or fail the print. There was also one of the first industrial lasers borrowed from another hardware supplier – we twiddled our fingers in the laser path occasionally to show the concept – and a carpet edge measuring system. This last was decidedly industry specific and, as

such, a risk to include but gained the only lead from the show that will result in earnings. Not yet, but soon!

The thing was people weren't stopping. They were far more interested in watching a rapid prototype evolving in the next stand and were three or four deep around it at times blocking part of the view to our stand. Then our MD (maybe he's the MD because he has the smarts) went for a walk and found HMI Technologies with their red LED signs. Soon, we had two circulating LED descriptions of exactly what was on the stand and people were stopping to acknowledge what we had. See, flashing lights attract customers, and within half a day those signs appeared all over the show. But again, Kiwis had been burnt by cheap vision 'solutions' that didn't do the job and lasers were so new their potential wasn't recognised.

Despite sending out prior invitations and meeting up with several existing clients known previously only by phone, we never made up for the first part of the show and our follow-up numbers were roughly two-thirds that of the previous EMEX. Several exciting cutting-edge projects were proposed but never got off the ground. Support from other stands was strong – when visitor numbers are low, exhibitors walk the show – but nothing came to fruition. Still, we remain committed to New Zealand. It's easy to do business; companies are export and quality focused. And it's home.

At our second show, it was noticed that quite a few retired engineers dress up and come along to see what's current. They stand quietly at the edge not wanting to take up time but as full of understanding and keenness as they ever were. Students, too, stand shyly but are grateful for any information.

This year, we knew competition was hot. At least two other integrators allied with the same hardware/language supplier as NVSI were exhibiting.

Well, actually, we've been so busy bringing our product to market there hasn't been a lot of time for projects so we shared the stand with our aforementioned New Zealand distributors.

This time the message was simple: EnviroPoint. Pods on the wall; poster of a monitored site; screens with real-time data; giveaway postcards.

There was empty space on the stand, no movement and one barely-seen flashing alarm. You wanted to know more? The postcards were freely available at the front of the stand and you could ask. The posters didn't explain everything but one, in particular, had photos of artillery and tunnels. What better to appeal to the Boy in all of us? And we were the only ones with wireless (no vision stands, either). In the middle of the big machinery area was EnviroPoint: a system for monitoring the production environment for such precision machinery, or the storage area or the test area or the waste from, or electricity used in, the manufacture. Then there are OH&S audits for light and sound.

A year ago, we did a tradeshow in Melbourne. With the equipment in place and reading data, we were frequently asked "Will it work?" No such question at EMEX, people know. The technology has been in place in the northern hemisphere for nearly 6 years and is proven which means southerners are curious. We offer a trial period for

clients to learn how the signal propagates in their site. No wireless system should be sold without such a trial or should be fully installed by the seller on the understanding nothing will move in the future. But who can guarantee that?

While numbers overall were noticeably down, there were fewer tyre-kickers. Many were intrigued enough to ask, “What is it?” People were ready to listen and took their time. It doesn’t matter if they have no immediate need, education is the key. Students, Technology Institute and University representatives were given full information packs. They are the people we want to be familiar with new technology.

I miss the apprentices but they were not the ones to enquire about the sort of cutting-edge stuff we routinely deal with. Retired engineers are treated with courtesy in the hope they can still feel involved. Educational institutions are loaded with information and offered deals. They teach the future.

The good news is this year, for the first time, a potential client rang Colin Gracie after the show to ask about the product. This year, I was able to tell an enquiring engineer, “Your company already has this system.” This year, people for whom we have completed projects came to ask about the product, and were amazed it was the same company. We still do projects, too. That’s where ideas for products come from. This year we proved what we told people at the start – “We deal with the latest technology. We do what others try and fail at. We are here for the long haul and our systems work.” Kiwis can do anything.