

A Scary Thought: IP Provider CAST is Fifteen Years Old Today

Woodcliff Lake, NJ, October 31, 2008 (Halloween) — Silicon Intellectual Property (IP) provider CAST, Inc. was incorporated fifteen years ago today, a time when “IP” as a market didn’t exist and reusability as an essential electronic design practice was just being considered.

“We’ve always had a straightforward approach of just anticipating and then doing whatever our customers needed, so it’s a little frightening now to realize fifteen years have flown by, and to have people recognizing CAST as one of the IP industry’s real pioneers and trailblazers,” said Hal Barbour, president of CAST.

The company started off selling simulation models, written in VHDL. Customers soon asked for synthesizable versions of the models, and CAST created and packaged what may have been the first intentionally-reusable, register transfer level (RTL), IP products. These early functions — mostly counters, transceivers, encoders, and registers — were far simpler than today’s complex cores, but the company learned the principles that still serve it well today: quality design, effective documentation and packaging, and rapid, helpful support.

Customers responded, and to meet their evolving requirements CAST augmented its own development team by striking a partnership with Evatronix SA in Poland. Taking advantage of graduates from the innovative HDL-based design program at the Silesian University of Technology, Evatronix began developing “virtual components” in 1997. This led to the 8051 microcontroller core and other products that still form a major part of CAST’s offerings.

The early Evatronix partnership also set the pattern for a successful “virtual organization” model: CAST takes the lead on marketing, sales, and front-line support, and partner firms with application-area expertise handle development. That model continues, with close development partnerships with Alma Technologies in Greece (graphics and encryption), SoC Solutions in Georgia, USA (systems), and Fraunhofer IPMS in Germany (interfaces), as well as Evatronix. The model also extends to sales, with CAST partnering with proven distribution firms best equipped to help local customers, especially in Asia and Europe.

CAST applied other innovative organizational principles before these became popular. Employees overcame time zone challenges by working at all hours out of home offices (the phrase “24/7” wasn’t yet coined). Most communication relied on email and instant messaging (when “IM” was still considered a novel toy). And perhaps most importantly, CAST remained completely self-funded, with a lean operations model and an uncommon freedom to follow its own path in satisfying customer requirements.

In 2001 CAST expanded its own development capabilities by buying a small company with a team of interface and bus engineers. This became a CAST division in the Czech Republic (the first employees to work daily in a formal office setting). Another turning point came in 2003, when CAST made a tough decision to abandon its lucrative contract design services and focus completely on IP. This choice proved to be wise: CAST became a key source of deep expertise that customers could rely on. In contrast, many firms selling the IP from their design services operations disappointed customers with a misunderstanding of true reusability requirements and a lack of fanatical technical support.

Increasing customer satisfaction — and early attention by editors and publications quick to notice the newborn “IP market” — helped CAST grow as that market also grew and matured. The company had a role in many IP firsts, including being early partners with both Design and Reuse and Chip Estimate, and charter members of the IP partner programs of Altera, Xilinx, and most other semiconductor manufacturers. Evolution of the marketplace was especially visible at trade shows — CAST’s first DAC booth was in 1995 — as over the years questions changed from “what the heck is an IP?” to “do you have these particular cores I need next week?”

Through these fifteen years, CAST has done well even as the industry repeatedly debated the feasibility of an IP-based business model and dozens of firms were spawned and then died without finding their own IP success.

Barbour reflected: “We knew when starting CAST that a successful foundation required something more than technology, and previous experiences told us that customer service was the key. Throughout the troubled evolution of the IP industry, CAST has simply focused on putting the customer first. There have been tons of panels and articles and debates about what makes the best IP business model, with no clear conclusions ever reached. We’ve meanwhile survived — and thrived — for fifteen years by realizing that merely providing great IP products isn’t enough, but focusing on helping designers succeed in using great IP is.”

Today CAST continues to move forward with the principles and partners that have helped the company do well. The current product line covers about 100 different standards-based IP cores, plus pre-integrated systems IP products and libraries.

Significant new cores and system IP products will be rolling out this year, and a new “CASTcores” branding will help differentiate these from lesser IP. The major advantage of CASTcores™ are the benefits that CAST’s employees and partners provide:

- Fifteen years of IP experience means that CAST knows how to make IP that works,
- CAST remains totally focused on customers’ IP needs, without also selling tools or semiconductor manufacturing, and
- CAST continues to be engineering- not sales-based, meaning customers work with people like themselves and get sharp answers, fast responses, simple licensing, and good value.

More information is available on the web:

- CAST, Inc. — <http://www.cast-inc.com/>
- CAST news archive, 1994–1999 — <http://www.cast-inc.com/info/pr/news/pre2000/index.shtml>
- Development partners:
 - Evatronix SA — <http://www.evatronix.pl>
 - Alma Technologies SA — <http://www.alma-tech.com/>
 - Fraunhofer Institute for Photonic Microsystems — <http://www.ipms.fraunhofer.de/en/>
 - SoC Solutions LLC — <http://www.socsolutions.com/>
- International sales partners — <http://www.cast-inc.com/info/dist/>
- Other aspects of Halloween — <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween>

About CAST, Inc.

CAST provides over 100 popular and standards-based IP cores for ASICs and FPGAs. Privately owned and operating since 1993, CAST has established a reputation for high-quality IP products, simple licensing, and responsive technical support. The company is headquartered near New York City, partners with IP developers around the world, and works with select sales consultants and distributors throughout Europe and Asia.

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