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The Word "Wireless" is Still Being Used and Misused

Gary Breed
Editorial Director

Sometime back in the late 1980s, the word "wireless" emerged as the most common way to describe the rapidly growing commercial market for cellular telephones and other radio-based communications devices. Although this single word had become the common buzzword, it was often misused and misunderstood then—and it still is today.

Actually, the first group to use use the "new" wireless buzzword were the PCS providers. They wanted to differentiate themselves from the 900 MHz "cellular" technology they were competing with and chose a new word. I had some conversations at that time where the wireless telephony crowd actually got upset that any other area of RF technology would also use their chosen terminology.

OK, we got over the turf battles, and wireless' usage became the first choice to describe the entirety of newly-commercialized RF/microwave technology. This was certainly OK with me, and Marconi would probably have agreed with this usage.

Then wireless (the technology) got to be a hot commodity. Suddenly, everyone with a product remotely related to this market wanted to jump on the wireless (the word) bandwagon. Companies manufacturing voltage regulators and LCD displays began describing their products as "wireless components," despite the fact they they could just as easily be used in a hundred other electronic devices.

Now that the economy is turning around again, "wireless" is on the rebound, and the trend of using the word for non-RF products is growing again. Large companies in the computer and software world ("I" and "M" and others) fill their marketing and advertising literature with the word wireless. I recently have seen several ads with headlines that practically screamed "wireless" — yet they referred to DSP chips, microprocessors and IC development tools. Not one of these products creates RF signals—at least, not intentionally.

Although I am an editor and appreciate the role of semantics, I am an engineer first. On the one hand, I appreciate that some of really big players in the "glamorous" world of digital electronics are giving wireless technology so much attention. On the other hand, I just wish they would use the word correctly.

Don't call a microprocessor a "wireless component" just because it's used in a handset or WLAN hub. Just call it a microprocessor and then it's OK to tell everyone that it can be used in a wireless product.

The Way Engineers Get Their Technical and Product Information Keeps Evolving

I do my best to pay attention to what our readers tell me, what my engineering friends say in casual conversation, and what I see happening around me. One of things that I realized recently was how dominant the Inernet has become for engineering communication and information gathering.

For engineers, who were among the first to embrace online communications in a big way, Internet usage has become the overwhelning choice for getting certain types of information, mainly *specific* information, such as technical reference data or product specifications.

The surprise to me was *how* they use online resources. As we analyze our own web site traffic, we've found something unexpected—82 percent of the visitors to our web site are categorized as "direct," which means they typed our URL into their browser (or hopefully, have us in their Favorites list!). The remaining 18 percent get to our site from other sites, with about 3/4 of them using Google, some using Yahoo and the rest linked from other sites and search engines.

This revelation is a "good news, bad news" story. The good news is that lots of engineers are finding our web site; every month's numbers are larger than the previous month, sometimes a *lot* larger. The bad news is that it has become extremely difficult to demonstrate our influence to our advertisers. If 82 percent of our visitors are typing in our URL, they are almost certainly doing the same for each company where they saw an interesting product in an ad or New Product announcement.

Neither we nor the advertiser can easily tell what caused a particular engineer to view the data sheet of their latest product. New methods of market research need to be used—surveys, special URLs, advertising specific products in different places. All of these require time and effort that can be hard to justify. We will let our advertisers know if we discover any breakthroughs.

Despite the popularity of the Internet, magazines remain important to engineers. We pre-sort hundreds of new products for them, and we publish articles on a wide variety of topics. And, of course, magazines are completely portable without requiring batteries!

Engineers rely on magazines to give them a steady flow of new ideas and product information. Then, they go online and track down the details.

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