Surplus Stores Are Still The Best Source For Many Electronic Products

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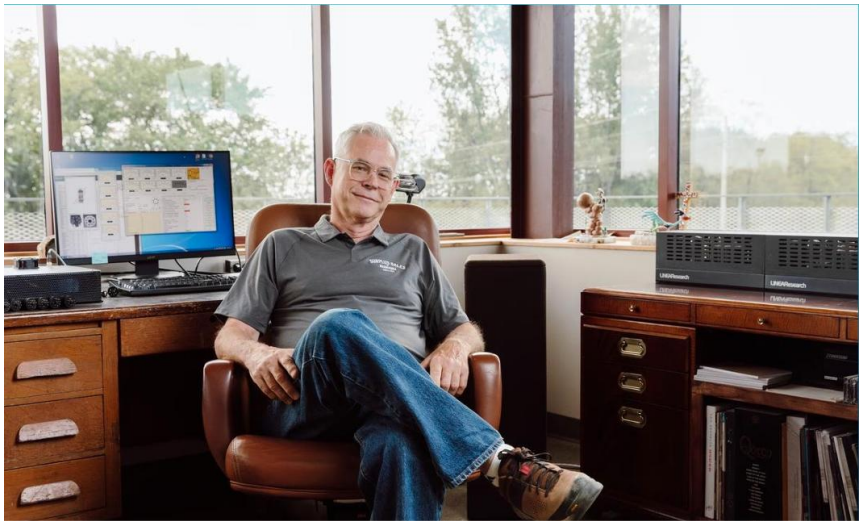
As engineers we must have components, materials, test and measurement equipment and other supplies to build, test and develop electronic systems. Not everything is available from Digikey, Mouser, Newark and RS electronics. Among those things which aren't necessarily in the online distributor catalogs are surplus electronic goods.

These encompass a wide range of products, from small electronic components to large industrial equipment. Though some of these products may be available from online sellers, at the surplus stores they are often discounted way below their usual list prices. And sometimes the products on the surplus store shelves are simply things that are not otherwise available. Plus, they are often NOS—new old stock—new but never opened before. In these and other ways, surplus electronics suppliers can offer great value.

I was recently very blessed to meet and spend the day with Bob Grinnell, the president and founder of Surplus Sales of Nebraska,[1] one of a dwindling number of surplus electronics businesses. Bob, who is a fellow ham radio operator (call sign WD0FDE), gave me a personal tour of the vast building that comprises his organization.

Bob graciously spent time explaining the history and philosophy of Surplus Sales, and showing me its inventory. In doing so, he shared customer stories that helped to illustrate the many reasons that engineers and vendors still depend on surplus electronics businesses, and who some of the niche customers are.

Bob also discussed how the business has grown by acquiring the inventory of other surplus electronics companies and the challenge his company faces in finding qualified employees. Shipping poses challenges too, as he explained. Indeed, some of the more interesting customer stories relate to how they get the products delivered to them.



Bob Grinnell, founder and owner of Surplus Sales of Nebraska.

Why Buy Surplus

There are many reasons why engineers can benefit from buying surplus electronics. It's already been noted that some products are not available from electronics distributors or other familiar sources. But that's not the only reason to buy from surplus. There are potential cost savings. Often the surplus item was purchased at list price at one time and now it's available for less. So, there is value there—more for less.

These products may be still-in-production parts. Contrary to the myth that "excess equals obsolete," much surplus stock represents current-model or high-spec parts made available due to overproduction, project cancellations, and overpurchased or inventory adjustments. These "surpluses" have made the products available quickly at high-value competitive prices.

Sometimes a vendor decides to get out of a business and needs to unload inventory. I was working once for a company that had a portfolio of LED lighting power supplies. Over time this power supply market became highly competitive. Eventually the "race to the bottom" dictated that unless you were operating in Asia, you simply could not compete on the pricing, features and functionality pace of the industry.

My CEO at the time asked if I could quietly sell off all of our inventory and I contacted Surplus Sales of Nebraska. We came to terms and sold our pallets of excess inventory to them. Now, many years later, they continue to sell the same power supplies. Thus, they serve a need of manufacturers too.

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Another benefit on the customer side is that it's in stock now—so no waiting for lead times and such. If you need it, it's ready to ship. For example, if your business needs a huge transformer to keep running you might even want to drive over and pick it up—one customer drove 1300 miles one way for this very reason.

Quality also merits a few words. It's a misconception that the quality of surplus electronics is poor. Often these items are premium components or equipment purchased for military or high-end industrial or scientific uses and the items were just excess inventory. Or perhaps they were only needed for a limited time such as test equipment might be.

While many of the above advantages of buying surplus concern products available elsewhere, there's no denying that surplus is sometimes one of a few, or possibly the only source. Hard-to-find items such as RF transmitters and amplifiers, high-voltage and high-power capacitors and power supplies can be obtained through surplus. So, when these types of items are needed for a project, rather than buying a long-lead-time, build-to-order part that may carry MOQ (minimum order quantities)— maybe you just need one and not 500 high-voltage capacitors—you can buy one from surplus.

Inventory Growth Through Acquisitions

Visiting Surplus Sales of Nebraska was like taking a tour of a battleship or an aircraft carrier. The sheer size of the building (2 million square feet) and number of products simply overwhelms your senses. Some of that scale has been obtained by buying other surplus electronics companies.



Surplus Sales of Nebraska's main warehouse occupies 2 million square feet of floor space.

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Another view of the vast inventory.

Bob is a humble man, so you would be unlikely to read about these acquisitions in the trade news, but when competitors close, they often call him to buy the remaining inventory, or perhaps just take it over. Often the inventory comes to Nebraska to be integrated into their six million cubic foot facility so they can sort and store the inventory along with what they have acquired in the last 51 years (this stocking of materials is no small feat—more on that in a bit). They then make it available on the website and eBay store for us engineers, hams, hobbyists, builders and makers along with large industry customers who can buy the materials.

Bob told me that Surplus Sales has acquired about 20 businesses over the years and that overall, they don't seek inventory, it finds them. Perhaps it's like the high-tech equivalent of storage wars?

The list of companies acquired by Surplus Sales of Nebraska is long: Fair Radio Sales, Fistell's Electronics, Commercial Radio's Extensive Vintage Broadcast Parts Inventory, Gateway Electronics, All Electronics, Dennis Brothers-Western Nebraska Electronics, Bage Industries, Halted Electronics and others. (My friend Martin Rowe has written about his experiences visiting some of these companies in his columns for EEWorld online and EDN. It's interesting to read his impressions of the surplus electronics industry [2,3] as well as his experiences at the MIT swapfest.[4])

Given all the acquisitions, it's hard to tell who's left. When I lived in Minneapolis, we had Ax-Man Electronics, but I think they have moved out of electronics. I can't tell from their website. In any case the list is shrinking. An online Wiki list provides one reference, but keep in mind, it's a bit old.[5]

While acquiring another company's inventory sounds like a potential windfall, the scenarios are not always so rosy. For example, Bob noted that with one company he bought, only 5% of the inventory obtained was deemed usable materials.

Sometimes, the circumstances of a particular acquisition are memorable. Right after 9-11 Bob went out to Paterson, New Jersey to absorb the inventory of Compass Technical. There they had the logistical challenges of sorting through vast amounts of surplus—about 30 to 40 semi-loads—post 9-11 while watching the still-smoldering wreckage of the World Trade Center off in the distance.

Serving Specialized Products And Customers

To this day, organizations continue to contact Surplus Sales of Nebraska since they are known as aggregators in the industry. Manufacturers, distributors, and other surplus organizations call them when looking to quietly sell inventory. This means that daily inventory increases by 50 to 200 items per day or more on average. This steady growth in inventory expands the number of unique items that are not available elsewhere.

Bob shared some examples of interesting transactions such as selling a Norden bomb sight to the Smithsonian. Museums aren't the only ones seeking historically significant objects. I was surprised to learn that Surplus Sales of Nebraska does significant business with movie studios buying items for movie production to create scenes that are historically accurate.

Another category of customers are the national labs. These are facilities such as Ames, Oak Ridge, Lawrence Livermore, Los Alamos, Argonne, Brookhaven, etc. which have lots of high-power, high-voltage and physics-type projects requiring specialized components and power supplies. Such customers generate lots of repeat orders once the word gets out that they can provide unique items.

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Some experiences with customers reflect unpredictable needs and purely chance encounters. For instance, there was the time when Surplus Sales was in a previous building and had the warehouse doors open at a time when a big football game was being held nearby. Some fans from Florida were tailgating in the Surplus Sales parking lot when a member of their group spotted a wooden crate in the warehouse. This gentleman liked the stenciled military style lettering and verbiage on the crate. He thought it would look good decorating the walls of his bar in Florida.

However, the crate was really just packaging for the transmitter inside and Bob could not sell them just the wood. The customer said that's fine, and he bought the transmitter! After the game, they loaded the crate into the customer's truck and he drove it back home to Florida.

This is one of many fascinating stories that Bob tells of the business he's conducted over 50-plus years. For a guy who started as a steamfitter, it would seem so unlikely that he would be the one to found and grow a surplus electronics business. But perhaps the business *found* him.



Surplus electronics stores are a source for high-voltage, high-power products.

Now, so many years later, Bob is a legend and a rock star in this industry. Moreover, he is a survivor! Good management = staying power.

Staffing And Shipping Are Challenges

I asked Bob what his constraints were in running his business and he explained that it's finding people who can go through inventory, categorize it properly and then place it on the website for sale. One selling point for Bob's company is that it's in a suburb of Omaha that's a great place to live with low cost of living. So, someone wanting interesting work might be able to come and find a good career working at Surplus Sales.

Another selling point is the company's emphasis on quality. For example, the shipping department has outstanding quality control processes to make sure your order is accurate—right items, right quantity, packed right and documented.

Speaking of shipping and logistics. One of the other constraints we all face is the dismal state of shipping in this country. Bob mentioned that since some of the items are large and heavy the shipping costs can often equal or exceed the cost of the item. Small items can go via USPS, UPS or FedEx or freight services of the big two. After that motor freight is the only other option.

Bob noted that, sometimes for large items, he has had individuals drive across country to pick up a product in person at the facility and drive it back to their location.

We have all had interactions with the insurance for shipping companies and they tend to blame you, citing their 200-page list of policy and exclusions to weasel out of any claims. They can destroy your properly packaged item, blame it on you and then tell you all they can do is refund you the shipping cost: "Sorry we destroyed your $10,000 high-voltage power supply."

Hence, sometimes it's best for the customer to move the product.

Some Final Thoughts

Surplus sales organizations occupy a unique and perhaps lesser-known position in the electronics supply chain than the bigger and marketing driven distributors and other sales organizations. While their numbers are shrinking, they remain a valuable source for both commonly available items as well as the otherwise impossible to find. Bob and Surplus Sales of Nebraska keep growing organically, by acquisition and by excellent management.

Explore more of what Surplus Sales [1] and others have to offer by visiting their websites and when the opportunity arises, visiting them in person to experience the vast array of products they offer. Getting to know

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more about their offerings now, will pay dividends for those times—in some cases emergencies—when surplus suppliers are the best or only source for what you need.

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About The Author



Kevin Parmenter is an IEEE Senior Member and has over 30 years of experience in the electronics and semiconductor industry. Kevin is currently the leader of Pins Out Engineering, a consulting firm providing expert consulting across power electronics, semiconductor applications, and technical sales and go-to-market execution. Previously, he served as director of Field Applications Engineering North America for Taiwan Semiconductor. Other past roles include vice president of applications engineering in the U.S.A. for Excelsys, an Advanced Energy company; director of Advanced Technical Marketing for Digital Power Products at Exar; and various positions in management and applications engineering at leading semiconductor companies. Kevin also has design engineering experience in the medical electronics and military electronics fields.

In addition, Kevin has served on the board of directors of the PSMA (Power Sources Manufacturers Association) and was the general chair of APEC 2009 (the IEEE Applied Power Electronics Conference). He holds a BSEE and BS in Business Administration, is a member of the IEEE, and holds an Amateur Extra class FCC license (call sign KG5Q) as well as an FCC Commercial Radiotelephone License.

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