

Microchip bets on new touch-sensing technology

by **Andrew Johnson** - Feb. 10, 2009 12:00 AM
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Microchip Technology Inc. is betting on new touch-sensing technology that it says can prolong the life of medical devices, household appliances and industrial equipment.

The Chandler-based manufacturer of microcontrollers is currently working with potential customers who may incorporate the company's mTouch Inductive Touch-Sensing line into everything from stoves and dishwashers to gate entries for apartments and commercial properties.

The company expects products containing the technology to hit the market later this year. It is an advancement over sensing technology that Microchip debuted in 2007 called capacitive touch.

The mTouch technology is one of Microchip's efforts to boost sales of microcontrollers, central processing units and other semiconductor products. Makers of such technology have been hard hit during the recession because the markets for which they make chips - automotive, consumer electronics, information technology and others - have deteriorated.

Microchip recently reported its third-quarter profit for fiscal 2009 fell to \$73.2 million, down from \$80.1 million a year ago.

Although similar in concept, the capacitive touch and mTouch lines have key differences.

Products using capacitive touch technology do not need to be physically touched to operate.

For example, a person trying to make a selection on a control panel with a capacitive touch sensor could put his finger close to the button but not directly on the button to make a selection.

The sensor is intuitive enough to feel the finger's presence. However, capacitive touch can only be used in products that use a thin layer of plastic or glass over the sensor, and does not work well outdoors or when a user is wearing gloves.

Yann LeFaou, product marketing manager with Microchip's security, microcontroller and technology development division, said inductive touch solves those problems.

Although inductive sensors require physical contact to perform a function, they can work in devices made with wood and metal in addition to glass and plastic.

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The sensors are not affected by water, making them a viable option for equipment used outside, said Fanie Duvenhage, a marketing director who works with Microchip's mTouch technology.

None of Microchip's customers are currently in production with the inductive touch platform but several are testing the technology, LeFaou said.

Inductive touch sensor products could be in production by the middle of the year, Duvenhage said.

Microchip is marketing the technology to appliance makers, automotive parts makers, medical device manufacturers and industrial product developers.

Both capacitive and inductive touch solutions can prolong the life of devices because they eliminate the need for buttons, which leave control panels open to dirt, water and other materials. Also, neither sensor needs to be pressed hard to operate, reducing wear and tear.

While the new inductive touch line won't be enough to weather the downturn that has caused mass layoffs in the [semiconductor industry](#), it's one way for Microchip to stay competitive, said Tony Massimini, chief of technology for [Phoenix](#)-based Semico Research Corp., which tracks the industry.

"You have to compete against other companies regardless of the economic conditions," Massimini said. "Inductive touch is one more thing that they can offer that sets them apart from the competition."

It could be difficult for Microchip to crack the automotive market with inductive touch because the supply chain is established in that market, he said. But Microchip is a strong player in the industrial controls and appliance markets, he added.

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