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Micron invents its way to No. 5 ranking on national patent list
Boise company outperforms Samsung, Intel

Micron Technology had more patents than Intel, Sony and even the U.S. government in 2004.

Coming in just below technology mammoths like IBM, Canon and Hewlett-Packard, Micron is ranked No. 5 on the annual U.S. Patent and Trademark Office list of organizations receiving the most U.S. patents for their inventions last year.

"It is very rare air up there," Dave Parker, director of corporate communications for Micron, said of his company's lofty spot. "It helps boost morale in attracting and retaining talent. It spans a lot of different areas. This is really something that all members of the organization, all team members, are very proud of. And they should be."

Sherry Garber, an analyst with Semico Research of Phoenix, said Micron has reason to be elated over its ranking, "I would say the day you have more patents than Samsung or Intel, that's a day to be really excited."

Garber called the ranking more significant than a film winning an Oscar.

"I really wouldn't like to liken it to a movie award because it's so much more significant," she laughed. "Lots of people invent things, but there's a great discipline that has to be in place to get those patents issued. So this says not only do they have the expertise, not only do they invest in it, but they have the discipline to do it," she said.

Garber said patent activity is important for a company's long-term success — a positive indicator for Idaho's largest private employer, with 10,000 workers in the Treasure Valley.

Micron edged up from sixth place in last year's list of top patent recipients.

"It really speaks to the expertise of the company from an innovation standpoint, from a technology standpoint," Parker said. "Micron is on the cutting edge of technology, and our ranking signifies that. And if you look at it from the standpoint of our size or number of employees we have or the R&D dollars spent versus some of the other folks in the top 10, it becomes really quite a dramatic achievement."

Parker said Micron spends about \$400 in R&D per patent generated. In comparison, he said, most companies in the top 10 spend at least three times as much, and in some cases up to seven or eight times as much.

Garber said the ranking is indicative of a company that's going places.

"You look at the companies that continue to invest R&D dollars, and they continue to be the winners in the marketplace," she said. "Anyone who is going out and getting a lot of patents is protecting their intellectual property for future products. Patents are normally on a new process or new development, and those are things that will turn into revenue not this year but next year or the year after."

Thomas Edison holds the No. 1 spot of all time for individuals holding patents, with 1,093. He died in 1931, after inventing things like the light bulb, phonograph and movie projector. Nothing on Micron's list of patents for last year is quite so recognizable.

"For the naked eye, to really be able to see it, is probably not that easy," Parker said.

Most of the inventions seem somewhat obscure and deal with things like imaging, core DRAM, specialty DRAM, NAND Flash memory, process technology and manufacturing — nothing quite as tangible as the light bulb to most folks. But Parker claims inventing these things will propel the company in new directions.

"What that does, at the end of the day is keep our R&D grounded in our business model and the products that we wish to develop and in the core pieces that we have to develop to stay competitive and to stay on the cutting edge of technology," Parker said.

He said there's no way to know whether the inventions will lead to profits.

"That's a whole different question, realistically, in terms of revenue per patent generated. It's really difficult to quantify that," he said. "But you can bet with this many patents, with this type of innovation, it's extremely beneficial in the long run."

Parker said it's hard to speculate on 2005, but said you can bet Micron will try to surpass what it accomplished in 2004.