

Automotive News

“THE SUPPLIER SPEAKS: STEVE RODE
AUTOLIV ELECTRONICS”

Autoliv exec: Stereo cameras are next big thing in safety



Blind-spot detection is becoming the first collision-avoidance technology to reach high volume outside luxury vehicles. From 2008 through 2011, Autoliv Inc.'s sales of blind-spot radar units jumped tenfold, with production of 1.1 million units worldwide last year, said Steve Rode, president of Autoliv Electronics.

"We are going to see very wide adoption," Rode, 50, said in an interview with Special Correspondent David Sedgwick.

After a series of acquisitions, the Swedish airbag maker offers adaptive cruise control, night vision, blind-spot detection and other collision-avoidance technology.

The next big thing? Rode is betting on stereo cameras that can provide functions such as pedestrian detection, lane-departure warning, roadside recognition and collision alerts.

Q: Which Autoliv product has the most revenue potential in North America?

A: Blind-spot radar is growing very quickly. This system typically comes packaged with a rear cross-traffic alert system, which alerts you to vehicles approaching from the side when you back out of a parking space.

How much does blind-spot radar cost automakers?

It runs about \$100 per sensor, and this is a two-sensor system. The price is going down pretty fast.

Is blind-spot detection in most mass-market automakers'

is highway-speed adaptive cruise control essential for a full package of collision-avoidance technology?

Yes, that is important. We have a full portfolio of products, and for certain customers it's absolutely important.

What is the market potential for short-range radar for use in city traffic?

I think it has strong potential. You can have a midrange radar that sees ahead about 80 to 100 meters, instead of 200 meters [for a highway radar unit]. I think there's a lot of value and a lot of utility, and the hardware is less expensive.

Ford rolled out a system like that in the European Focus, so it's already mass market, right?

It's already here.

Do you have any customers for your low-speed collision-avoidance product?

We're selling sensors for that application. Daimler uses them.

You are developing forward-looking stereo cameras for pedestrian protection, right?

It's in development. It can do lots of things. The most common feature would be lane-departure warning. It can also control your high beams and low beams, which is very convenient. It can recognize traffic signs, and it can warn you about forward collisions and pedestrians.

Do stereo cameras work better than radar for collision avoidance?

There are certain things you can do with cameras that you can't do with radar, such as traffic-sign recognition.

How does the cost of stereo cameras compare with that of radar?

The cost is not very far away from a radar sensor.

Are stereo cameras in production?

There are certainly some coming into production in the next year.

Will they be Autoliv products?

No, but we're working hard on that.

Will automatic braking be widely used in collision-avoidance systems in the next five years?

Absolutely.

But you have to get motorists accustomed to it.

Absolutely. I think the industry is moving very rationally. First, they are being introduced as warning systems. As people get comfortable, then the industry will do more with it.

You can reach David Sedgwick at dsedgwick@crain.com.

AUTOMOTIVE NEWS:

Are you marketing rear-facing video cameras to automakers? That technology could prevent pedestrian accidents.

STEVE RODE:

I think it's a very practical, useful solution, but we don't have anything in that market today. It's a low-cost video camera that does nothing but show you an image. We specialize in products that require software to assess obstacles.

product plans over the next five years?

We are going to see very wide adoption. From 2008 to 2011, our unit volume went up by a factor of 10 for blind-spot radar. Chrysler and Honda are introducing these systems into their midrange vehicles. You're seeing it in minivans. Those are our systems.

How many units are you producing?

Last year, we produced 1.1 million radar systems worldwide. The majority were produced in North America. And we've expanded production into Europe. We're building it in Sweden.

What is the revenue potential for your rear cross-traffic alert system?

Since it uses the same sensors as our blind-spot detection system, those two always will be linked. You just add software. The secret to collision avoidance is that the sensors are relatively expensive. But once you've got them on the car, you can do a large number of things just by adding software.

Do you have high-speed adaptive cruise control ready for the market?

Not yet. It's still under development. We have some requests for bids.

What are the prospects for high-speed adaptive cruise control?

I am not optimistic about that segment, globally. It was the first radar product to come into production, and the industry hasn't seen big growth. I'm not as bullish on that one. I think its growth will remain moderate, and we'll see much bigger growth with other features.