Cautious optimism is the tone for 2012. For those in the metal powder industry, however, that caution is yielding, with optimism – and relief – paving the path for the future.

Players involved in the powder metal industry will gather to discuss technical innovations, concerns, business prospects and successes at PowderMet 2012, scheduled to be held from 10 to 13 June at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. The event, which is the MPIF/API International Conference on Powder Metallurgy & Particulate Materials, will offer technical sessions, business presentations, exhibits, posters and networking opportunities for exhibitors and attendees alike.

The North American powder metallurgy industry has been on the upswing since early 2010, according to Michael E. Lutheran, former president of the Metal Powder Industries Federation. “The industry’s real turnaround actually began during the last quarter of 2009, when customer inventories were at their lowest point and the pipeline needed refilling,” he commented at PowderMet 2011 in San Diego, Calif.

For 2011, double-digit growth was expected for powders and powder metal parts, and that growth is expected to continue in 2012 and well into the future. In fact, demand is so high for powder metals and parts that manufacturers have been finding it difficult to keep pace.

“We don’t see any slackening in demand,” reports Toby Tingskog, regional sales manager, NAFTA, Sandvik Osprey. “There has been a shortage in the industry on the powder side, but that is going to be pretty much taken care of over the next year or two. After that, we’ll be able to see what the real trends are.”

William Gasbarre, sales and marketing director, Gasbarre Products, concurs that the powder metal industry itself is doing quite well. “We’ve seen a drastic turnaround,” he offers. While it does not compare to the booming business being done prior to 9/11, it is up over the last few years, he says, adding that business is good.

Tingskog notes that Sandvik Osprey is seeing a strong demand for all of its products. In fact, the company is expanding its capacity midyear to meet demand. “Though our plant is in the UK, we’re one of the big suppliers into the market in the US, and one of the reasons we are increasing capacity is because of the strong demand here,” he comments.

According to “Powder Metallurgy, A Global Strategic Business Report” produced by Global Industry Analysts, Inc., North America is the leading region in the global metal powders market, with automotive constituting the largest market for metal powders. It cites that a steady expansion in shipments of industrial machinery and a revival in production of motor vehicles will drive market demand.

“The market will grow this year, probably more certain in North America, with slowed down growth in Asia, and a question mark in Europe,” offers Bob Wang, global sales manager, Metal Powders, Rio Tinto Iron & Titanium.

Jim Adams, director of technical services, Metal Powder Industries Federation (MPIF), agrees that Europe appears to be a little softer “just because of everything that’s going on over there with Greece and those economic issues. But when you look at the numbers over the last couple of years with how companies have grown, we’re anticipating the same growth here,” he comments.

And that growth is translating to the numbers expected at PowderMet 2012. Attendance has been running around 800 people the last few years, and MPIF expects to be pushing the 1,000 number again in 2012.

“Everything that we’ve seen this year, every area has been up compared to the same time last year, so it’s been extremely positive,” adds Adams. “Our
advanced registration is exceeding where we were last year. While we can’t get too excited, we are extremely enthusiastic about the numbers.”

People were very cautious over the last few years with what was going on in the industry, according to Adams, but now companies have seen that this is sustainable growth, and they’ve started to rehire. “And, as they rehire, we see the results at our conferences and seminar training. So, I think it’s a direct indication of the health of the industry,” he reports.

Rebirth of the auto industry

Move over, Detroit.

There is a new auto industry emerging in the US, and its location is situated well south of the famed city that has long been the home of The Big Three. Though Ford, Chrysler and General Motors appear to be in recovery after hard times the last few years – including bankruptcy for the latter two – these American automakers are being upstaged by the emergence of foreign automakers settling in the US.

“We’ve seen a shift of foreign-owned automobile companies coming to the US, with most of them setting up in the southern US,” reports Jim Adams, director of technical services, Metal Powder Industries Federation (MPIF).

This shift – and its impact on the future of the metal powder industry – will be addressed by Drew Winter, editor-in-chief of Ward’s AutoWorld magazine and senior editor of WardsAuto.com during PowderMet’s keynote presentation on the first morning of the show. Winter will take the stage following opening remarks and the annual MPIF State of the Industry Report presented by MPIF Executive Director/CEO C. James Trombino, CAE and MPIF President Matthew Bulger.

Focusing on “America’s New Auto Industry,” Winter will discuss the newly emerging automobile production cropping up in the US. Overseas car manufacturers are building massive plants and employing thousands of workers to build foreign cars for sales and distribution in the US and beyond.

Indeed, attention for the US auto industry is migrating from Detroit to places such as Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. The strong Yen in Japan and Europe’s economic strife are making those areas less than ideal for car manufacturing and exporting, and North America is picking up the slack. Toyota has begun production of its Corolla at a new US $800 million plant in Blue Springs, Mississippi, while BMW has found a home in South Carolina. Volkswagen is considering additional capacity in the US following the launch of its US $1 billion plant in Chattanooga, Tenn., and Mercedes is expanding its operations in Alabama to serve global markets. And there are others that have opened shop or are in the process of building or expanding in the southern US.

What does that mean for the metal powder industry? Winter will touch on that and many other points during his presentation.

Special events

There is plenty of fun built into the three-day event for attendees and their guests. Pre-show activities include the APMI Golf Tournament and a Welcome to Music City tour.

On Sunday evening, guests mingle and network at the opening night reception and continue their socializing on Tuesday night at the main social event, “An All-American Evening at the Grand Ole Opry.”

Two luncheons of note will take place on consecutive days during the show. On Monday, the presentation of MPIF’s Kempton H. Roll PM Lifetime Achievement Award – an award given every four years to an individual who has devoted his/her career to the field of powder metallurgy – will take place at the Industry Recognition Luncheon. The programme will also recognize recipients of several other industry awards, including the APMI Fellow Award, the Howard I. Sanderow Outstanding Technical Paper Award, the Excellence in Metallography Award, the CPMT Conference Grants, and the APMI Golf Tournament Winners.

The following day, the PM Design Excellence Awards Luncheon will recognize the winning parts from the “Showcase of PM Excellence,” the latest PM engineering innovations and applications that will be on display at the exhibit hall.

Technical angles

Of course, technical education has always been a primary focus for PowderMet, and this year’s programme does not disappoint. Five to seven technical sessions and/or special interest programmes are scheduled to take place concurrently throughout the three-day event. More than 150 industry experts from around the globe will present the latest research and technology in powder metallurgy and particular materials; each of the 35 technical sessions will consist of three technical papers. At the end of each session, a 15-minute informal discussion period will be conducted at the rear of the conference room. This year’s topics run the gamut, touching on everything from metal powders and presses to processing and technology.
In addition to the technical sessions, special interest programmes will be held. These include “Delubrication Science, Problems & Development”; “Magnesium Powders & Composites: Technologies & Applications”; “Spark Plasma Sintering & Associated Processing Technologies”; and “Dual-Phase Materials: Processing, Microstructure & Properties.”

Poster sessions are also part of the technical portion of the three-day event, with the presentation of international posters dealing with a range of aspects of PM and particulate materials technologies, including materials, processing and properties. Authors will be at their posters for discussion on Tuesday afternoon. Awards will be presented to “Outstanding Poster” and “Poster of Merit.”

**Business strategies**

In addition to the technical programmes, PowderMet is offering something for attendees in management positions. For the second year in a row, the conference will present management-focused programmes that run concurrently with the technical sessions. These presentations are open only to employees of MPIF-member companies registered for the conference.

“The management session is for people who are not as technically minded, but want to be at the conference,” offers Adams. “We responded to upper managers who, while they may have started off in the business on the technical side, as they advanced through their companies have moved more to a business and management focus. While they still have some interest in the technical side, they’re a little farther removed.”

Adams notes that, with this programme, managers now have somewhere to spend their full days, “whereas in the past they may have only come in for a day because there were only one or two things that they wanted to see. Now they can stay for the whole conference experience.”

While conferences are “great places to exchange technical knowledge, the amount of networking that is done is invaluable,” continues Adams. “If we can’t get them to justify enough time to get the networking in, we have a problem. This program seems to really fill that void.”

Gasbarre sees the management session as one of the positive changes made to the show. “You always want to make some changes. Otherwise, it gets stale,” he says. “I think you just need that freshness.”

On the first morning of the conference, the management-focused programmes include Powder-Handling Concerns and OSHA’s “Combustible Dust National Emphasis Programme,” as well as future metal-dust regulations.

On Monday afternoon, representatives from John Deere & Co., Emerson Climate Technologies and Ford Motor Co. will discuss the value of PM during the presentation “Outside Perspectives on PM’s Value.”

On Tuesday, the management programmes will turn their focus to Powder Metal Activities at North American Universities. The programme will look at the possible synergistic activities between the powder metal industry and North American universities and opportunities to build relationships and promote growth. Guests from universities that offer powder metal programmes will be on hand for presentations and discussions.

Gasbarre notes that the booth will still do,” he remarks. “We keep that positive attitude that there is somebody out there that needs us.”

**Wednesday’s two-part session will review recent powder metal technology.**

“Our MPIF technical board will be giving a technology scan of what they see in the industry,” says Adams. Part 1 will examine lightweight powder metal materials, as presented by panel members from Carpenter Powder Products, Drexel University and Bodycote. Representatives from Abbott Furnace Co., Global Tungsten & Powders Corp., Hoeganaes Corp. and Phoenix Sintered Metals will present the afternoon’s Part 2 on Alternative Energy.

**On the show floor**

The trade exhibition, which is open all three days of the show, presents an opportunity to learn about products established and new. Approximately 100 booths showcasing items from leading suppliers of powder metallurgy and particulate materials processing equipment, powders and products will be featured.

The international marketplace is a must for the major players in the industry, according to Tingskog. “We find that PowderMet shows are a great opportunity to meet with potential customers and end users of metal powder,” he offers. “We have great attendance at our booth and get the opportunity to present new products and find out specific needs from customers.”

Tingskog adds that the show also gives his company a good impression of the state of the industry, with all of the main suppliers and customers attending.

“For the conference, our primary objectives are to be present at this industry gathering and stay connected with our customers,” notes Wang.

“We’ve been at the show since 1980, and we haven’t missed a year,” offers Gasbarre. Gasbarre Products will have a larger booth this year to showcase posters regarding the purchase of a furnace company last year. Gasbarre Products features its nine corporate divisions within the space. “It’s definitely good exposure for our company, all in one spot,” he explains.

While his company is well-known, Gasbarre notes that the booth will still get visitors who don’t realize the scope of what his company does. “So, we just have to be there to reiterate what we do,” he remarks. “We keep that positive attitude that there is somebody out there that needs us.”

Delegates enjoying company at the most recent PowderMet show.