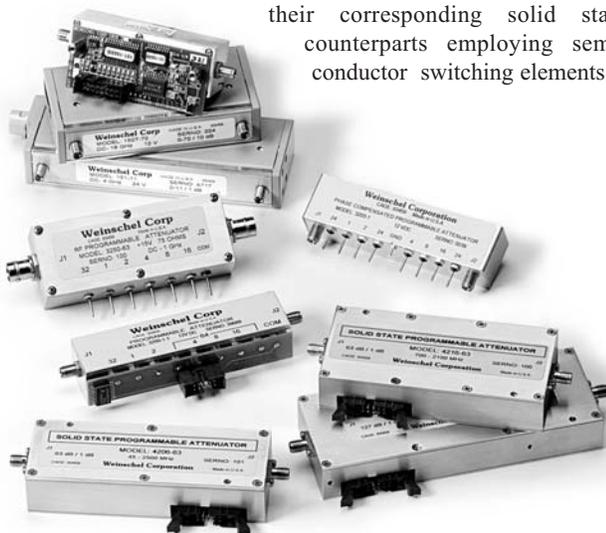


Intermodulation Distortion in Programmable Attenuators...

Weinschel has been a major supplier of programmable attenuators to the RF industry for over 30 years. Historically the most demanding specifications for these components have been low insertion loss and SWR, combined with a reasonable life expectancy of several million switching cycles. This was usually adequate for RF instruments like spectrum analyzers and signal generators, wherein the attenuator bandwidth rather than the switching speed was of prime concern. To achieve wide bandwidths the programmable attenuators were mostly of electromechanical design and the linearity of these passive components was not only assumed but never questioned by any customer. Intermodulation distortion discussions and problems were usually limited to components such as amplifiers, mixers and filters.

In recent years, however, wireless communication systems employing complex digital modulation schemes, increased channel capacity, high transmit power and extremely low receiver sensitivity have put into question the linearity of passive components. Even very low level multi-tone intermodulation products generated by attenuators can seriously degrade the efficiency of a system/ instrument if these products fall within the user pass-band. For two closely spaced tones at frequencies f_1 and f_2 , the third order IM products at $2f_1 - f_2$ and $2f_2 - f_1$, are the most harmful distortion products. They are harmful because they are located close to f_1 and f_2 and virtually impossible to filter out. In today's base stations the multicarrier power amplifier (MCPA) is replacing banks of single-channel amplifiers and their corresponding power combining network. MCPAs have the capability of carrying a number of modulation schemes simultaneously and can also employ schemes such as dynamic-channel-allocation (DCA) to use the allocated frequency spectrum more efficiently. The in-band intermodulation distortion (IMD) performance of these amplifiers is extremely critical and needs to be measured using low distortion programmable multi-tone generators whose IMD performance must be quite superior. This is discussed in the two case studies cited here.

Electromechanical programmable attenuators obviously provide a far superior IMD performance than their corresponding solid state counterparts employing semiconductor switching elements.



However, their slow switch speed, in the order of milliseconds, and short switch life in the order of 5-10 million cycles make them unattractive in some applications like cell phone testing and other ATE systems. Solid State programmable attenuators do overcome these two problems and are therefore included here for IMD performance comparison. It is not the intent of this brief article to go into the theory of intermodulation distortion. The goal here is to provide some good basic IMD test data for a variety of commercial programmable attenuators and let the end user select the most appropriate type for his application.

Measurement System and Parameters...

All test data presented here was generated using a commercially available Passive IM Analyzer, Summitek Model SI-800A which provides a fully integrated system for characterizing distortion produced by cables, attenuators and other passive devices. Although the system is capable of measuring both, through and reflected IM3, IM5, IM7 and IM9, the focus here is only on through IM for the most troublesome third order product, IM3. To carry out a meaningful comparison between different attenuators all measurements were carried out using two equal amplitude input tones at 869 MHz (f_1) and 891 MHz (f_2), the IM3 frequency being 847 MHz ($2f_1 - f_2$). Input carrier power was stepped in increments of 1 dB from -7dBm to +27dBm. All external adapters and cables were carefully selected to maintain the system's residual IM level of around -120 dBm. Although the system permitted receiver measurements between -70 to -120 dBm we restricted all measurements between -85 to -110 dBm by using a calibrated low IM coupler and attenuators at the output port of the DUT. One must be aware that the accuracy of such small signal measurements can easily be off by 2 to 3 dB so restricting the measurement dynamic range helps reduce the receiver non-linearity error. Measurements were done over several days to ensure stability and repeatability.

Distortion Comparison for Basic Types of Programmable Attenuators...

The programmable attenuators discussed here are the switched type with a discrete number of 'cells'. Switching between the zero and attenuate state on each cell is achieved by a DPDT switch configuration. The cell values are usually in a binary sequence. For example a 6 cell/6 bit unit could have 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 and 32 dB sections providing a 63 dB dynamic range in 1dB increments. Four basic families of programmable attenuators are compared, each family being identified by the switch element used to achieve the transfer from zero to attenuate state.

For the purposes of distortion comparison it was deemed necessary to select units with similar electrical length and/or programmability. Both the electromechanical units, TO5 relay and edge-line type, had an electrical length of about 20 cms. The two solid state units had 6 cell programmability yielding 63 dB in 1 dB step size. All IM3 vs P_{in} measurements were done with the attenuators programmed to be in their characteristic zero insertion loss state. The zero state was selected because it generated the highest IM3 levels. The graph below shows the obvious compromise in IMD performance for the two solid state

types. It is worth noting that the IM3 vs Pin slope is not exactly 3:1 as would be the case in a perfect third order device.

The theoretical two tone third order intercept point, IP3, commonly used as a figure of merit for comparing linearity is shown in the following table at two different input power levels. The input IP3 is derived from the following relation:

$$\text{Input IP3} = \frac{3(\text{Pin}-\alpha)-\text{IM3}}{2} + \alpha$$

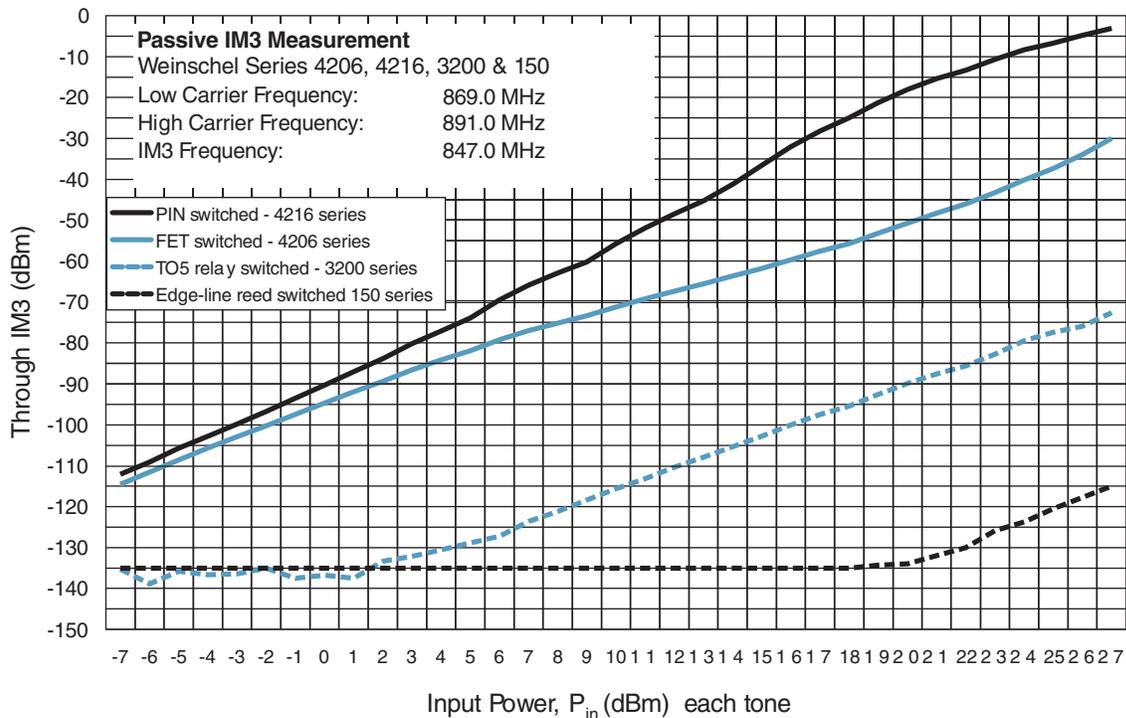
where α = zero insertion loss of each unit @ 847 MHz, the IM3 frequency. IM3 and Pin are selected from Table 1.

TABLE 1. SPECIFICATION COMPARISONS:

Parameter	Attenuator Type			
	PIN	FET	Relay	Edge-Line
IP3 @ 10 dBm	42.0 dBm	48.0 dBm	72 dBm	98 dBm*
IP3 @ 24dBm	39.0 dBm	53.5 dBm	75 dBm	98 dBm
I. Loss	2.0 dB	5.0 dB	1.5 dB	0 dB
Switching Time	2 μ sec	2 μ sec	5 msec	20 msec
Switch Life	∞	∞	10 million	5 million
Frequency (GHz)	0.8-2.3	0.01-2.5	dc-3	dc-26.5

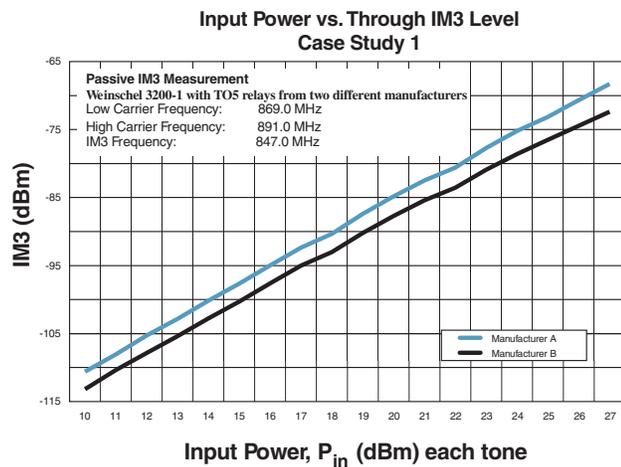
* NOTE: Although the actual IM3 was not measurable the curve for the edge-line unit is linear and predictable unlike the two curves for the solid state attenuators. If we were to extrapolate this curve we would get the same IP3 figure of +98dBm as expected.

IM3 Performance of Electromechanical & Solid State Programmable Attenuators



Case Study 1

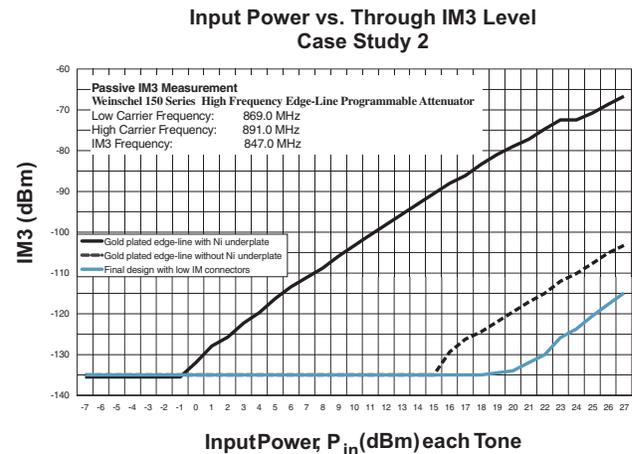
Company A offers its IMD series Phase Aligned 8 tone generators to test intermodulation distortion in multi-carrier power amplifiers. The output level of these generators is accurately controlled using a Weinschel TO5 relay based programmable attenuator offering over 60 dB dynamic range. Eight +13 dBm carriers are input to the attenuator. In MCPAs with feedforward correction, in-band IMD levels could be as low as -75 dBc so Company A wanted at least -85 dBc at the output of their generator. The first problem was that Weinschel could not simulate the exact test conditions. This was readily resolved by establishing a good co-relation between our two tone IM3 measurement and Company A's 8 tone test. Having employed the best plating techniques and using good low IM connector design the attenuator was still short of the required IMD spec. The final improvement was achieved by extensive testing on relays from three different manufacturers. Figure 2 shows IM3 plots of the two best performers. Manufacturer B consistently provided a 4 to 5 dB improvement at the two tone level at Pin of +22 dBm and higher. This corresponded to an acceptable output distortion level for the Company A generator.



Case Study 2

Company B manufactures ultra low distortion multi-tone signal generators. Their units offer up to 160 channels from 5 MHz through 1 GHz. Each carrier can be leveled as high as +10 dBm. One of their most stringent requirements is a cross modulation test. The Company B generator specification is -100 dB below the sideband of a 100% amplitude modulated carrier, which is -110 dBc. The actual components used in the critical path had to measure -120 dBc or better. Their generator needed an ultra linear attenuator to provide a programmed output level in 0.5 dB increments. Relay based units were tested and found to be unacceptable. The high performance edge-line attenuators were expected to solve the problem but at first they too fell short, but mainly in their zero attenuation state, which generates maximum distortion. Prior to supplying these units to Company B no customer had asked for a distortion specification on these supposedly passive attenuators. Environmental performance had warranted the use of nickel underplate on the

edge lines. This was disclosed to the customer and suspected to be the prime cause of high IMD levels. Since the unit was going to be mounted in a benign environment, elimination of the nickel underplate was not thought to be a problem. Figure 3 demonstrates the tremendous reduction in IM3 levels upon elimination of the nickel underplate—a significant 40 dB! A further 10-15 dB improvement was achieved by redesigning the connectors to reduce their passive IMD. The IM improvement in these connectors would have served no purpose prior to the elimination of nickel. This is because the main source of distortion lay behind the connector back plane, along the edge transmission line, which had a far greater electrical length than the two connectors.



Conclusion

Abundant intermodulation test data for four families of programmable attenuators has been presented in an easy format, together with their other key performance features. This should enable instrument and system designers to select the most suitable type for their application.

The two case studies have also demonstrated that an OEM component supplier cannot possibly simulate the different distortion test scenarios of every customer. Such tests would be extremely varied, complex and cost prohibitive. The IM analyzer used at Weinschel was indeed a narrow band instrument and one might be concerned about the unit's performance at other frequencies. This is a legitimate concern for the solid state types, in which the distortion mechanism is a strong function of the operating frequency. For the broadband electromechanical types this is not a major issue. However, with a meaningful two tone intermodulation measurement it is quite possible to get an excellent correlation with the customer's test conditions and thereby come up with a corresponding specification under the two tone test. It is helpful though, to be able to replicate the total power level that the unit would be subjected to in the field.

Author: Jimmy Dholoo, VP Engineering @ Aeroflex / Weinschel
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