

Elon Musk says cleantech will attract top IT talent

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In what has become an evolving stump speech, Technology Partners' **Ira Ehrenpreis** opened his welcome yesterday to IBF's annual clean technology summit in Palm Springs, Calif., by declaring that there is no trade-off between pursuing environmental goals and financial returns. And it certainly is more true today than four years ago, when traditional energy source prices were beginning to creep up but still rendered solar and even pre-inflated corn ethanol costs uncompetitive.

This time around, a flattening of inflated commodity costs for traditional and alternative energy sources and declining costs for true renewables such as solar and wind power present a much clearer view of the future for cleantech, so conference participants were much more willing to let their green flags fly.

Ehrenpreis, who leads Technology Partners' cleantech investment practice, cited six key drivers for the industry: public interest, political support, sector diversity, global applicability, corporate interest and exit opportunities. Noting that "2006 was the year that cleantech crossed from a movement to a market," Ehrenpreis further posited that 2007 was the year "the market got to critical mass."

Indeed, that's what people are here to find out. Inclusion of discussions of cleaner coal and nuclear power suggest that the cleantech industry is not entirely turning its back on what many believe are critical non-green technologies.

Elsewhere at the show, Tesla Motors Inc. chairman and tech entrepreneur Elon Musk took the stage before nearly all 600 conference participants to state his belief that space travel is a more important issue than cleantech in facing up to climate change. But in the meantime he is devoting much of his attention to Tesla, maker of a ballyhooed electric **sports car**; SolarCity, a solar power integration startup he chairs; and **SpaceX**, a space exploration company.



SpaceX was the first company Musk bankrolled with his huge payout from selling PayPal to eBay Inc., relocating from the Bay Area to Southern California five years ago to take advantage of a talent pool in the highest concentration of aeronautics engineers in the world. That venture was widely ridiculed at the time, but SpaceX turned a profit last year, largely on contracts with NASA, and has had two test launches of its Falcon rocket (above right) and will soon launch the rocket with its Dragon spacecraft. (You might have guessed, Falcon is named after a spaceship from Star Wars, and Dragon derives from Puff the Magic...)

After citing Google Inc. as the most successful human resources operation in the world, Musk said that much as the most ambitious and talented engineers once gravitated to the car industry personal computers in the 1980s and the Internet in the 1990s, he believes that top engineers will focus on cleantech, even if they pay isn't quite as good at first, because that's where the excitement is. And even though all such movements are ultimately driven by institutional money in this day and age, there definitely is a feel of movement thinking among even the financiers in emerging cleantech businesses. - *Clifford Carlsen*