



Industry Week's **RFID Strategy**

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The Boxes Can't Drive Yet

Separate hype from reality with RFID claims.

By Paul Faber, Principal
Tompkins Associates

You have probably seen the commercial by now. It begins with a large truck rolling down a desert highway. It suddenly brakes in front of a lively consultant sitting behind a desk in the middle of the road. In front of her is a conspicuous red "help desk" phone. One of the truckers rolls down the window and asks her what she's doing in the middle of the road. She replies, "I'm here to tell you you're going in the wrong direction." When he asks her how she knows where he should be going, she replies, "The boxes told me." The trucker's buddy looks at him in exasperation and delivers the punch line, "Maybe you should let the boxes drive."

Hype Is Still A Problem In RFID

This commercial manages to do three things very effectively. It instantly grabs your attention (after all, it managed to distract me from a dismal football game for awhile). It positions the advertised consulting group as innovative and customer-focused. Lastly, it uses 15 seconds to spread an astonishing amount of misinformation as to the kind of results RFID technology can currently deliver.

Just think about the implications of the claim, "The boxes told me where they should be going." In the mind of the non-technical public, this can only serve to reinforce the idea that RFID tags are miniature radio transmitters that broadcast information 24/7. Add to this the implied claim of pinpoint tracking accuracy in real-time, and the viewer quickly forms a picture of omniscient spy satellites recording the motion of shipments from their point of origin right to your very door.

Now, I have heard occasionally from the tinfoil-hat and black-helicopters school of paranoid thought in RFID. These folks are sure to use such commercials as further proof that RFID technology enables "Big Brother" to know what you ordered from Amazon and why. The rest of us would perhaps say that we want our shipper to have accurate information on our delivery status, but would balk at an independent third party (no matter how perky) getting into the act.

The truth is that RFID tags will remain a passive technology for the conceivable future. They transmit data only when in the close proximity of an antenna and computer designed for the job. This means that RFID tags provide meaningful information when they pass a designated point in a distribution cycle, in exactly the same way as barcode technology currently operates. The true potential of RFID tags over barcodes is in the amount of data that can be handled by a reduced expense in labor.

It's All About Data Integration

The fair question raised by our sample commercial is, "How can RFID help increase accuracy in shipping?" As is frequently the case, such questions inevitably lead to what data is desired from a particular technology and how it can be integrated into a company's existing operations.

There are many companies working to improve the efficiency and accuracy of truck scheduling and routing. At the Tompkins Emerging Technology Center, we recently hosted one such company, Microlise-america.com. They are representative of their industry segment. The technology varies by vendor, but the basic idea is to help companies manage their trucking fleet by using the existing global positioning satellite system (GPS). Trucks are outfitted with an onboard computer and a GPS antenna, much like the navigation systems found on some automobiles. The truck also contains a radio or cell phone transmitter that transmits small bursts of data over a leased network. This system allows company transportation managers to monitor the motion of their fleet in real-time. It does **not** allow third-party monitoring, however.

This industry is currently adding RFID data integration to their products. The idea is that the shipper will run their product through an RFID portal prior to the load entering the trailer. The trailer itself will have a permanent RF "license plate" that will be associated with the bill of lading. When a truck delivers one trailer and picks up another, the RFID license plate can be automatically scanned to allow the trucking company to verify that the correct load is going to the correct place.

Such systems are emerging onto the market now. The underlying technology is not, however, unique to RFID tags, but simply integrates the collection of RFID data into a well-thought-out system of computers, check-points, and data collection.

Conclusion

RFID technology continues to evolve and develop new applications. Consultants will continue to pitch the blue-sky potential of the technology. Don't automatically discount what you hear from them-but do have a chat with your Director of I.T. before you formulate your next RFID strategic plan.

Paul Faber is a Principal with Raleigh, N.C.-based Tompkins Associates, a supply-chain-solutions consulting firm. As the chief manager of RFID equipment implementation at [Tompkins Emerging Technology Center](#), he possesses extensive experience in material handling solutions, systems integration, and installation. Paul has managed field integration and operations activities at material handling sites around the world.