

RFID for Meat Eaters

At Metro Group's RFID Innovation Center, a kiosk displays the detailed history of meat products a shopper is about to buy.

By Jonathan Collins

July 19, 2004—Earlier this month, European retailer Metro Group opened an RFID demonstration and testing facility to help its suppliers familiarize themselves with the technology (see [Metro Launches RFID Test Center](#)). As it carries out that mission, Metro's RFID Innovation Center is serving as a forum for many RFID technology companies to deploy a range of potential RFID products.

One such company is [MCRL](#), a developer of software for retailers. MCRL is showcasing an interactive kiosk using RFID technology to provide consumers with a way to quickly retrieve data on the meat they are about to purchase.

“This is just a demonstration working at a level of item tagging that doesn't exist yet, but it does show visitors to the center what can be achieved for consumers,” says James Pemberton, managing director at MCRL, which is based in St Alban's City, in the U.K.

The kiosk combines an MCRL-developed interactive application running on a kiosk terminal developed by [Wincor Nixdorf](#). So far, MCRL has no plans to release the kiosk as a product.

At the Innovation Center installation, prepackaged meat items, each bearing a smart label, can be presented to the RFID reader in the kiosk. The kiosk's screen can then display a detailed account of that item's history in the supply chain, such as the animal's date of birth and the farm where it was raised, as well as perhaps the kinds of food it was fed, the date and place of its slaughter, and the name of the wholesale butcher. According to the company, there is almost no limit to the amount of and type detail that could be displayed at the kiosk.

“Right now consumers have no way of knowing if a package of meat has been frozen for six years or [came from an animal] slaughtered just two days ago,” says Pemberton.

The system operates in 13.56 MHz, and the only data stored on the tags is the unique tag ID number. For the demonstration model, detailed information on each item is stored in a database running on a PC built into the kiosk. In a real implementation, that database would be stored centrally and the kiosk would be networked to a retailer's data center, says Pemberton.

MCRL says that potentially, the label's RFID transponder could be integrated with a sensor to log the meat's temperature during storage and while being transported to the store. An “eat-by” date—one that takes into account the meat's temperature history, could be associated with the tag's serial number and made available to the consumer. MCRL says it believes the impetus for the item-level RFID tagging of individual meat products is most likely to come from EU legislation rather than from savings that RFID might enable in the supply chain.

MCRL developed the software for the personal shopping assistant (PSA) devices used on shopping carts at

Metro's Extra Future Store supermarket. Equipped with a bar code reader, the PSAs enable customers to scan their store loyalty card to retrieve their previous shopping data stored on the system, as well as scan items as they put them in the basket to enable faster checkout. Store personnel can also use the 802.11 wireless LAN connections on the PSAs to track a shopping cart's location.

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