

HP Expands Tagging, Plans 'Noisy Lab'

Hewlett-Packard has ramped up the tagging of shipments of its products to Wal-Mart, and will open a new real-world RFID test facility.

By Jonathan Collins

Jan. 17, 2005—Computer products and services giant [Hewlett-Packard](#) has stepped up the tagging of shipments of its products to Wal-Mart, and is preparing a new real-world U.S. RFID test facility.

HP says that since the start of 2005, it has increased the number of product categories it is shipping with EPC labels to Wal-Mart to 40 from three.

Last May, HP became one of the first eight companies to ship RFID-tagged products to Wal-Mart by adding RFID tags to the product packaging and shipping pallets for two HP Photosmart printer models and one HP Scanjet scanner model (see [HP Tags Printers, Scanners](#)). The company has been tagging shipments of another 37 products since January 2005 and maintains that it currently has the capability to tag shipments of all 65 products that the company supplies to the world's largest retailer.

"Currently we are shipping RFID tagged shipments only to Wal-Mart, but we also have facilities in place to meet future requirements from other retailers," says Salil Pradhan, chief technologist for HP's RFID program.

This year, HP expects to tag shipments for 1 million units of its consumer products, an amount equal to less than 2 percent of the 53 million units the company shipped (tagged or untagged) worldwide in 2004.

The new products shipping with EPC labels to Wal-Mart are tagged at pallet and case or item levels. HP's All-in-One printers, Presario desktop PCs, notebook computers, LaserJet and Deskjet printers, and additional Photosmart printer models are being tagged at the item and pallet levels; shipments of HP's iPaq Pocket PCs are being tagged at the pallet and case levels, with several iPaq's in each case.

Although the first three products it began shipping to Wal-Mart with EPC tags have come from the company's Memphis manufacturing and distribution operations, HP said that between six and 11 manufacturing sites worldwide will be used to tag additional product lines.

By the end of next month, HP plans to open its Noisy Lab, a new 2,500-square-foot testing facility to help its RFID customers solve particularly tough RFID problems such as RF interference and product packaging containing metal, which reflects RF signals, and liquid, which absorbs them. Built in an existing HP manufacturing and distribution center in Omaha, Neb., the lab will provide a controlled environment to test RFID equipment, solutions and technology from a range of vendors.

"Having the Noisy Lab as part of the Omaha facility means that we can borrow parts of the working facility to suit our RFID testing requirements and then return them when testing is complete," says Salil Pradhan, chief technologist for HP's RFID program.

HP already has RFID demo centers, which the company uses to show its customers the potential of the technology, in Palo Alto (see [HP Kicks Off U.S. RFID Demo Center](#)) and Taiwan, and will soon open centers in Singapore, Geneva and the U.K. The Noisy Lab, however, will be for developing specific solutions.

"This isn't like a one of our RFID centers," says Pradhan. "This is a real manufacturing environment, and it's not pretty. It's not a show lab."

Instead the facility will enable HP engineers to simulate real-world manufacturing and distribution center conditions to pilot and evaluate RFID technology and products.

"We have customers that have unique requirements and are struggling to get the kinds of performance from RFID with their products that they need," Pradhan says. "They can't slow down their production speed to suit RFID. These are problems that need to be solved and that we can work on in the Noisy Lab.

The new Noisy Lab will include a range of equipment including a high-speed conveyor; moveable RFID print, write and read stations; an RFID portal to read pallet and case tags while a forklift moves through the station; and a wrap station, where loaded pallets are wrapped in cling film on a turntable and the pallet RFID tags can be read. The lab will also use three RFID middleware products so that the features of each can be compared.

Printronic, ADT Sensormatic, Alien Technology, Applied Wireless Identifications (AWID), OATSystems, Shipcom Wireless and other HP partners will supply equipment to the lab.

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