

Ridge Says RFID Can Protect the U.S.

At *RFID Journal's* conference in Chicago, the former secretary of homeland security says that through innovation, RFID can strengthen both the nation's security and its economy.

By Elizabeth Wasserman

Apr. 11, 2005—Former U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge had some business advice for attendees at the third annual RFID Journal LIVE! conference in Chicago. Ridge, who left public service in January, said that while government leaders may be driven to invest in RFID technology because of security and safety concerns, the private sector will need to be convinced of the gains—namely economic and efficiency gains—before taking the plunge.

During Ridge's leadership as the first cabinet-level official to oversee Homeland Security, a department created after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States deployed radio frequency identification at the nation's borders with Canada and Mexico to expedite border crossings by low-risk travelers. The department also piloted RFID in the supply chain, tracking cargo containers at the border, and it will soon begin tracking the comings and goings of all visitors at crossings in Arizona, New York and Washington State.

Ridge told the sell-out crowd at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers during his keynote address that government alone will not be able to secure the country's borders. Business must take the initiative to secure its own supply chains, but private enterprises may need a bigger carrot at the end of the stick before investing in RFID technology to tag goods and equip warehouses and distribution centers with readers and antennas.

"The return on investment most businesses want is a little bit different than the return on investment you might find in the public sector," Ridge said. "In the public sector, if you can assure Congress—or if you can assure state and local governments—that this will significantly enhance their security, you've got a sale. I think if you go into the private sector, you have to do more than say this will offer you the security."

Ridge suggested that companies use a different pitch: "This will improve efficiency. This will improve accountability. This will improve the bottom line. And, oh, by the way, as a direct consequence, this will also enhance security."

RFID Journal Editor Mark Roberti said Ridge was invited because he has long been a proponent of using technology in innovative ways, starting when he was governor of Pennsylvania, from 1995 to 2001. During Ridge's term as governor, the state enabled citizens to file their state taxes and renew driver's licenses online. In addition to deploying RFID technology, the Homeland Security department has deployed biometric systems to collect data and monitor the entry and exit of foreign visitors and has created a special division that invests "seed money" in promising new technologies.

The Department of Homeland Security was created by combining 22 units of government, accounting for 180,000 workers. From time to time, more people may be added to the staff, but Ridge insisted that it will be

the integration of people and technology that will ultimately secure the United States. "There aren't enough people to secure America the way we want it to be secured," he said. "But I believe that there is technology that is developing and will be developed that will rapidly enhance our ability to protect ourselves and secure our liberties."

Ridge said he had three basic principles to pass on to RFID pioneers and other technologists. First, he said that homeland security is not about eliminating all risk but about risk management. He added that the government will need to be assisted by the business community in order to minimize risk. "The government does not have infinite resources," he said. "We're going to have to rely on the private sector to help us secure the country as well, without necessarily any government incentive but with the incentive hopefully of not only doing good but doing well at the same time."

Second, Ridge said that business leaders must work with Homeland Security officials to limit the negative impact of government policies on the economic future of the United States. In the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, the federal government failed to achieve a balance and instead ramped up security at the nation's borders to such a degree that commerce ground to a halt. "We must never forget that security and commerce are linked together," said Ridge, "and advances in technology propel both."

Ridge's third point was that technology must be viewed as an enabling power that can be used for good or ill. The globalization of commerce, education and communication has made the United States stronger but also more vulnerable, because terrorists have the opportunity to use many of the same tools. "In this country we must be smarter, more adaptable. We must be one step ahead, he said. "I don't think the first war of the 21st century will be won by arms alone. It will be won by ideas, interactions, information and—perhaps most importantly—it will be won by innovation."

Ridge confessed to conference attendees that, now that he is no longer in the public sector, he has had to put up with some inconveniences of government security measures. While traveling Sunday from his home in Erie, Pa., to the conference, Ridge said he was pulled aside by Transportation Security Administration workers at the airport and was subject to secondary screening. His bags were X-rayed. He had to stand with his palms up while guards used a wand to check for metals. "I guess," said Ridge, "that's proof it's a nondiscriminatory policy."

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