

EPC Tracking App Wins VeriSign Contest

Allumis, a Toronto-based startup, took top honors with a Web-based program that alerts trading partners about snags in the flow of goods.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Sept 26, 2005—In April, VeriSign put out a call to developers to create innovative software applications that would use EPC data generated through RFID reads to solve a business problem. The Mountain View, Calif., company, which provides several Internet-based services supporting the EPCglobal Network, initiated the contest, called the Electronic Product Code (EPC) Application Developer's Contest. With this contest, the firm had hoped to spur development of applications using the EPCglobal Network.

Allumis, a Toronto-based software company that provides logistics, tracking applications and information solutions aimed at improving supply chain processes, claimed victory with its epcTrackAlert application. The startup received a \$10,000 cash prize, and VeriSign also arranged for Allumis executives to meet with partners at venture capital firms Bessemer Venture Partners and Kleiner Perkins so the company could share with them information about epcTrackAlert and a demonstration of the application.

Allumis developed epcTrackAlert to help manufacturers, retailers and third-party logistics providers track shipments more efficiently. "People spend a lot of time tracking shipments needlessly," says Shirley Arsenault, the company's CEO. Instead of monitoring all shipments sent, received or in transit, epcTrackAlert focuses on shipments that are, for any number of reasons, off schedule.

Allumis was formed in recent months, Arsenault says, in part to submit an entry into the VeriSign contest. The company's Web site, in fact, is still under construction. Arsenault has a background in third-party logistics services. She co-owns Roadhawk Express a logistics brokerage that services a range of industries and deals mostly in trucking.

According to Arsenault, epcTrackAlert is Web-based and uses both SOAP (simple object access protocol) and http (hyper text transfer protocol) to gather EPC data by interfacing with the VeriSign-managed Object Naming System (ONS) and Discovery Services, with an end user's EPC Information Service (EPC IS). An EPC IS is a database that stores and distributes information describing tagged items in the supply chain. The ONS is authoritative directory that indicates which EPC IS holds information on a specific EPC. The ONS is a directory for looking up EPC numbers on the Internet. The Discovery Service provides chain-of-custody data as the movement of tagged items is recorded across multiple EPC Information Services. The epcTrackAlert application pulls this data into a database that tracks the location of products, based on the whereabouts of the readers that most recently sensed the presence of the products' tags. The program can be configured to send alerts to various trading partners for different reasons. For example, it can send an alert to a shipper that the load it is supposed to pick up won't be ready on time—and to the retailer's DC that it also might not receive the goods on time.

Arsenault says Allumis is collaborating with a provider of a real-time location system that is tracking tags in transit through mobile RFID readers, GPS and a cellular link. She says the two companies are working to

convert this location data into a format the epcTrackAlert can read. Once they establish this data-translation capability, epcTrackAlert will display the location data on a map. Users of epcTrackAlert will then be able to track goods in transit through a Web-based map that shows the location of items based on their EPCs.

VeriSign received a total of 18 entries from companies and individual developers. "The volume of submissions and the types of people who submitted—independent developers and small companies—matched our expectations," says Ben Desjardins. "We saw a lot of interesting application ideas, which was really the point of the contest. We wanted to go beyond the eight to 10 use cases that you see in a lot of industry research."

IntellaReturn, a firm based in New York City, earned runner-up status. The company submitted a solution using the EPCglobal Network architecture to register and manage product warranties for electronics and other consumer products, Desjardins says, and to process returned merchandise.

"Other interesting ideas we saw included a solution to tie EPC data to traditional advance shipping notices; a solution for analyzing the distribution of marketing CDs, such as AOL CDs, with embedded tags; and cold chain applications," says Desjardins.

The panel of four contest judges consisted of Lori Bigler, manager of business technology standards for The J.M. Smucker Co.; Byron Deeter, principal at Bessemer Venture Partners; Ann Grackin, chief executive officer for ChainLink Research; and Bernie Hogan, chief technology officer at GS1 US.

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