

# Lantech to Sell RFID Stretch-Wrappers

The material-handling equipment maker is working with RFID interrogator manufacturers to integrate readers into its Q-300 stretch-wrapper.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Feb. 14, 2006—[Lantech](#), a Louisville, Ky., manufacturer of materials-handling equipment, has developed a means of integrating an RFID interrogator (reader) into its Q-300 stretch-wrap machine. The company says it plans to sell RFID-enabled stretch-wrappers, potentially making it the first company to do so.

Many users of RFID in the supply chain have found that an RFID interrogator mounted onto a stretch-wrap machine, used to secure cases of products onto a pallet, provides a higher read rate than interrogators mounted elsewhere, such as around doorways. Installed on a stretch-wrapper, the reader's antenna has a number of opportunities to read each case tag as the pallet spins during the application of the wrap. Until now, however, users have had to find their own way of mounting the interrogator and antenna onto the machine. This entails determining how to best place the reader and antenna, connect the antenna cables and link the interrogator to the user's network.

William Caudill, Lantech's marketing manager for automatic products, says the Q-300's design makes it easy to integrate an interrogator. The Q-300 has a center mast that houses the machine's motor and electronics. "We were able to mount the reader right into the electrical panel," Caudill explains. "There were no special modifications needed. It was just a matter of adding mounts and a power supply for the reader." The mast's interior also accommodates the cables needed to link the reader with its antenna, eliminating any loose wiring that could otherwise interfere with the stretch-wrapper's operation.

A roll of stretch film is mounted on the side of the machine. The arm holding the stretch-film roll moves up and down the machine's mast as the pallet spins, and serves as a support for the reader's antenna. This enables the interrogator to take multiple reads of the case tags as the arm moves vertically and the pallet spins.

Lantech hopes to begin selling the integrated machine to its customers soon, but it has not yet set a launch date or a price. Thus far, the company has worked with RFID interrogator manufacturers [Alien Technology](#) and [Symbol Technologies](#), building sample Q-300 units with Alien's ALR-9640 reader and Symbol's XR400 interrogator.

The readers use a Wi-Fi wireless bridge, provided by Lantech, that can send the tag reads to the user's middleware or back-end systems wirelessly. This feature is important, he says, because often orders are readied for shipment in different parts of a distribution center, requiring that the stretch-wrap machines be moved around the facility. The wireless connectivity means the users don't need to find a means of hard-wiring the reader to the network at each location.

The interrogator begins scanning for tags only after the stretch-wrapper is turned on and the pallet is spinning. This limits the number of unintentional reads the interrogator might otherwise capture—if, for example, a pallet of tagged goods were placed nearby when the stretch-wrapper was inactive.

Caudill says Lantech is still conferring with Alien and Symbol to "work out the bugs on who will do what" with respect to bringing the integrated stretch-wrap/interrogators to market. In order to provide an interrogator retrofitting service to customers already using the Q-300 stretch-wrap machines—the firm claims there are 25,000 to 30,000 in the field)—Caudill would like to be able to send Lantech's field service representatives out to install the hardware, while the reader manufacturer would be responsible for providing the software, integration and training services to the end user. Just how this will play out, though, is as yet unknown.

Alien is featuring the Q-300 with one of its interrogators at its RFID Solutions Center Dayton in Ohio, which opened last week (see Alien Opens Dayton RFID Lab). The U.K.-based third-party logistics firm Exel, which worked with Lantech to design the integrated devices, is using the Q-300 with the Symbol interrogator at its RFID Center of Excellence in Harrisburg, Pa., where it provides RFID tagging services for its customers. Exel is also working with Symbol and RedPrairie to pull the RFID read data generated by the interrogator into the RedPrairie warehouse management system Exel uses to direct its shipping and receiving operations.

"The more we can integrate our RFID systems with our existing systems, the more we can get a return on our [RFID] investment," says Tony Hollis, Exel's manager for RFID strategy and execution.

According to Caudill, Lantech will be demonstrating the Q-300 machines, with a number of different interrogators, at the Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute (PMMI) trade show this October in Chicago.

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