

Consumer Distorts

A recent article in "Consumer Reports" about the possible use of RFID to invade people's privacy does a disservice to consumers.

By Mark Roberti

May 15, 2006—Last month, I finally broke down and made the decision to replace my 14-year-old television. I did what I always do when I need to invest a significant sum in a new product: I logged on to the *Consumer Reports* Web site and did a search for reviews of the best TVs on the market. The top-rated flat-screen TV was a Panasonic, so that's the model I bought. Unfortunately, my faith in *Consumer Reports*, long a boon to consumers, was shaken when I received the current print issue in the mail. It features an article entitled "The End of Privacy," which does a grave disservice to consumers.

The article starts out proclaiming, "Oh, for the good old days when Big Brother merely watched you. Soon, he'll be coming home with you in what you buy, wear, drive and read." Clearly, objectivity was *not* what the writer was after.

CR's article trots out many of the stories told by Katherine Albrecht, founder of *Consumers Against Supermarket Invasion and Numbering* (CASPIAN), the most vocal opponent of RFID. There are references to tracking patents filed in 2001—before privacy became an issue for the industry—and a 2002 consumer opinion study from the Auto-ID Center showing that 78 percent out of 317 people surveyed "reacted negatively" to the privacy issue. More recent consumer surveys, showing a far more favorable view of RFID, are conveniently ignored.

Of course, the story doesn't mention that consumers have overwhelmingly embraced RFID for toll collection, electronic payments and other applications, nor does it mention that tens of millions of consumers around the world use radio frequency identification technologies every single day. The author also does not bother to point out that in all that time, not a single incident of privacy invasion has ever been reported (at least, not that I'm aware of).

In addition, some of the information in the story is factually inaccurate. The writer says *all* tags in clothes, shoes and so on would be "capable of broadcasting to a database that can be linked to your credit card." As a result, the article claims, "the potential for corporate and government snooping rises to a new level." Sounds pretty scary, but don't believe the hype—passive tags don't broadcast information, and there is no big database in the sky with everyone's information in it. Furthermore, it's just not true that "a high-tech thief [could] break into the tags and cull your banking and medical information." (Such sensitive data is rarely ever stored on RFID tags.)

The author accepts the CASPIAN worldview, that all businesspeople are evil and the only reason anyone would want to adopt this technology is to spy on customers. I'm quoted in the article making the point that it's not in a company's financial interests to invade their customers' privacy, but that quote is thrown in merely as a token viewpoint. Like Albrecht, the author doesn't present a single example of a company ever having used RFID to invade privacy. Rather, the article merely discusses what could be possible, then leaves the consumer

with the impression that it will definitely happen.

The most shameless part of the piece is how the author uses a blunder by Alien Technology's public relations firm. Linda Prosser, Alien's VP of corporate marketing, was contacted by the author for an interview. Prosser sent a message to her outside PR firm, saying she was concerned that it might be a privacy story and didn't want to commit to an interview by Alien executives until she had a better feel for it. She gave the PR firm an excuse to use to get out of committing to an interview. The PR person mistakenly forwarded the e-mail string to the reporter, who quotes Prosser's e-mail: "We can use the 'everybody's busy at the big trade show' excuse."

Anyone who has been in the industry for more than five minutes knows that Prosser was not trying to hide anything—she was obviously just trying to avoid a situation in which her company would be presented in a bad light by a journalist with no interest in fairness or the facts. And ultimately, the author proved Linda had good reason to be wary.

The result? Misinformed readers.

It bothers me that journalists assume the worst about everyone in business and in our industry. There are good businesspeople and bad, just as we see there are good journalists and bad. It's easy to be self-righteous when you wield the pen.

The bigger issue here, though, is how this story—from a well-respected publication designed to help consumers—instead hurts them. People who could receive a lot of benefits from RFID—fresher food, less expensive consumer electronics, safer drugs, and on and on and on—are not being informed about the consumer benefits of the technology, or about the work being done to ensure the protection of consumer privacy.

The industry is being put in a position where it is difficult to respond (if you do, you're accused of being defensive)—and yet, you can't avoid the issue (evasiveness is equated with having something to hide). Dan Mullen, president of AIM Global, the trade association for automatic identification technology providers, has written a good article, "RFID: For the Common Good," which puts RFID in perspective and offers the industry's point of view. Cynical journalists might say he's trying to convince consumers to accept something that could be bad for them. Cynical journalists would be wrong.

But what else is new?

Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below.

Copyright ©2005 RFID Journal, Inc. All Rights Reserved