

Senate Staffers Get Up to Speed on RFID

The first meeting of the Senate RFID Caucus covered a wide variety of business and public-policy issues.

By Mark Roberti

July 17, 2006—The recently announced Senate RFID Caucus (see [U.S. Senators Initiate RFID Caucus](#)) held its first meeting in the [Hart Senate Building](#) on July 13. The program included an introduction by Senator Byron Dorgan (Dem—North Dakota) and Senator John Cornyn (Rep—Texas), who launched the caucus, followed by a panel discussion on business and public policy issues related to radio frequency identification. From what people told me after the event, it seemed to be a success.

The goal of the caucus, which now includes Senators Bob Bennett of Utah and George Allen of Virginia, is to help educate senators—which means their aides—on RFID and public-policy issues surrounding the use of the technology in government, commercial and consumer applications. (The [U.S. House of Representatives](#) is covering RFID in its [Internet Caucus](#).)

This first meeting was to start the education process by raising some of the key issues. Dorgan opened the proceedings saying, “RFID is an emerging technology with policy implications...RFID promises dramatic benefits in areas as diverse as national security, food and drug safety, and supply chain management, and the United States needs to be at the forefront of its development and implementation.”

The panel I hosted included Paul Chang, an associate partner at [IBM Business Consulting Services](#); Brian Cute, vice president of government relations at [VeriSign](#); Daniel W. Engels, director of the Texas Radio Frequency Innovation and Technology Center at the [University of Texas at Arlington](#); Mike Liard, an RFID market researcher at [ABI Research](#); Kathy Smith, special assistant in the Office of Supply Chain Integration at the [U.S. Department of Defense](#); and Patrick Sweeney, CEO of [ODIN Technologies](#).

The panel touched on many issues, including the benefits the DOD has been seeing from RFID; the existing and expected future benefits for consumers; the ability to use RFID to enhance homeland security; how the competitiveness of the United States, vis-à-vis Asia and Europe, could be affected by RFID; ongoing research in the United States; and current efforts to regulate and/or promote RFID at the state and federal levels.

More than two years ago, I suggested to Dorgan that the United States create a national RFID policy, similar to the [National Nanotechnology Policy](#). He was reluctant. His concern was that once you start educating legislators about something, they will want to legislate it. Fair enough. But with some already considering legislation, Dorgan is right that the time is now ripe to bring people in Washington up to speed on the technology.

The Senate Caucus is important because it will help legislators begin to understand the technology and how it is likely to be used. Legislators need to understand the business benefits and potential consumer benefits of RFID—and they need to understand the limits of the technology, as well as how it could be abused.

While I strongly support education, I share Senator Dorgan's view that it shouldn't reflexively lead to legislation. Legislation is not needed today, in my view. Some editorialists have taken the stance that the RFID industry is opposing any regulation in an effort to prevent anything from interfering with what the editorialist see as the greedy pursuit of profits. There may be some who take that view. Personally, I think the situation is more nuanced than that.

Dan Engels said it best, in a prepared statement. What we are striving to do, he wrote, is to define the boundaries of what are acceptable and unacceptable uses of RFID. The industry has already defined the use of tracking people without their knowledge as unacceptable, but legislating that could become problematic. There might, for instance, be important exceptions, such as tracking known terrorists. It's far more sensible to see how the technology is used in the real world and address problems as they arise.

The best thing that legislators could do right now is to get the facts about RFID. Understand the technologies potential and limits. Understand the huge benefits this will bring to businesses *and consumers*. I commended Senators Cornyn and Dorgan at the event for setting up the caucus. Now I hope they and their colleagues in Washington will take the next best steps: avoid jumping to conclusions, watch the technology evolve, monitor how it's used and be prepared to enact legislation only if it's necessary to enable companies and consumers to get the benefits of RFID while reducing abuses.

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

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