

Hertz Trial Uses RFID Cards Instead of Keys

A rental facility in Nice, France, is testing how the technology might make renting a car faster and easier.

By Jonathan Collins

Aug. 9, 2006—Sixty specially selected [Hertz](#) customers are using RFID-enabled frequent-user cards to speed up their car rentals at [Nice Côte d'Azur Airport](#) in France. The service is part of a trial to test how RFID might make the process of renting a car faster and more convenient.

“The impetus behind the trial is to provide a more seamless travel experience for Hertz and [Air France](#) customers,” says David Trimm, vice president of business systems at [Hertz Europe](#).

The trial involves 10 specially equipped [Renault Mégane](#) cars. It will run for six months and is due to end in October.

Hertz has long offered its Gold Club members a special fast-track service for picking up rental cars. This service includes a display board indicating where the car is parked, as well as a dedicated counter where members can obtain keys and finalize the rental process. The new RFID system, however, does not require any counter stops. Instead, renters can go straight through the office to their car, where they can accept the rental and drive away without having to call on any Hertz staff members.

Instead of stopping at a counter, a customer looks at the display board to learn the location of the rental car, then goes straight to the car and places an RFID-enabled Hertz Accessplus Next Generation membership card within a few inches of the windscreen's RFID interrogator antenna. The interrogator reads the unique ID number stored on the card's embedded [Philips Semiconductors](#) Mifare RFID chip, which operates at 13.56 MHz and conforms to the [ISO](#) standard 14443 for contactless smart cards.

Upon verifying that the customer is picking up the correct car, an onboard computer unlocks the vehicle's doors. Before the customer can drive the car away, a computer display screen, attached to the rear view mirror, asks if the driver has a valid license. If the answer is yes, a vehicle immobilizer allows the car to start with the push of the ignition button.

For the duration of the rental, the RFID-enabled membership card functions as a car key. The customer uses the card to lock and unlock the car by placing it within a few inches of the windscreen's RFID antenna. Should the customer turn off the engine for more than a few minutes, the engine immobilizes and will not restart until the customer places the card near the windscreen reader once more.

"At no point does the car lock itself without the customer actually closing the doors and presenting the card to the windscreen reader," Trimm says. "This is done to avoid a situation where a customer forgets his or her card in the car and would then be locked out for good."

Customers taking part in the trial also have the option of accessing a kiosk in the Hertz rental office. Equipped with a printer and an RFID reader, the kiosk can print rental information directly on the back of a customer's membership card. Using erasable thermal ink, the kiosk prints such information as the car's rental and return dates, license plate number and parking lot location.

Participants selected by Hertz are provided details about the trial and how the system works. They can then use a special Web site to book their Hertz rental cars in Nice.

The system utilizes RFID-enabled cards and readers from Geneva-based smart card specialist Icomsat.

Hertz says it has already received anecdotal praise from customers who have tried the new service, but that it plans to review the results of the proof-of-concept trial later this year. That could be followed by the extension of the trial to other airport locations throughout Europe.

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