

Motives for Promoting RFID

Some people believe *RFID Journal* downplays the possibility that retailers will use RFID to infringe on the privacy of their customers for financial reasons. Here's why that makes no sense.

By Mark Roberti

Sept. 25, 2006—I've received some angry e-mails from people who are unhappy about a column I wrote questioning whether Katherine Albrecht, founder of CASPIAN, has been hyping privacy concerns to discourage the use of radio frequency identification because of her religious belief that RFID is the so-called "Mark of the Beast" and will precipitate the apocalypse (see [Be Wary of Religious Opposition to RFID](#)). The common theme of these e-mails is that I'm a sleazebag selling out consumers to make money, and that I am attacking Albrecht for protecting the interests of consumers.

I don't mind the e-mail messages in which people attack me and defend Albrecht. But I do feel a need to respond when my personal motivations regarding the privacy issue are questioned by journalists—and even my friends—who assume I'm rationalizing when I say that worries about RFID leading to Big Brother-like monitoring of consumers are overblown.

First, let me say that I think it was entirely legitimate for me to raise the question of whether Albrecht is knowingly hyping the privacy issue for reasons other than protecting consumer privacy. If she has a hidden agenda, consumers have a right to know about it. Albrecht rarely acknowledges the potential benefits RFID could bring consumers, which seems strange to me if she really has consumers' interests at heart. It's less strange if she's opposing RFID for religious reasons.

I also think it's legitimate for people to question my motivations behind what I write about RFID and privacy. On the other hand, I don't see how any objective person who has read my columns for the past four years—or followed the coverage of the privacy issue in *RFID Journal's* news and features—could say I have downplayed the potential privacy abuses.

For those who are still skeptical, however, let's look at the question of whether *RFID Journal* as a company—and I as its founder—would benefit from playing down privacy concerns. Obviously, the company stands to prosper if RFID is widely adopted. One could make the argument that if I help reduce consumer opposition to RFID, the technology will be more widely used and I will benefit financially. But that would be an awful superficial reading of the situation.

The one thing that would hurt the RFID industry most, and thus my company and me, would be if a major retailer—just one—were ever found to be routinely infringing on its customers' privacy by using RFID. That would be a major blow, one that could turn many consumers off and lead to legislation preventing the use of RFID to track individual consumer items. That is why I see it as being in everyone's interest in the RFID industry—end users, vendors and, yes, publishers—to promote the responsible use of the technology.

So when people ask, "Why should we trust what you have to say on the privacy issue when you stand to benefit personally from the use of RFID?" my answer is this: "Because I have a lot to lose if the technology is

abused."

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