

French Mayo Maker Finds RFID a Crucial Ingredient

Benedicta is using EPC Gen 2 tags, EPCIS and ONS to track pallet movements, fill customer orders, create advance shipping notices and share supply-chain data.

By Beth Bacheldor

Oct. 2, 2006—French food manufacturer Benedicta Group is running a trial comparing the ability of RFID and bar-coding to track pallets of products as they move between the company's own facility and those of two of its packaging and logistics suppliers. Benedicta makes mayonnaises and other sauces.

The pilot got underway about three months ago, built on what Benedicta calls an event-driven architecture. According to Philippe Gautier, Benedicta's chief information officer, the pilot leverages EPCglobal Gen 2-compliant passive RFID tags and bar-code labels compliant with the EAN-128 bar-code standard of GS1, the international bar-code standards body. Event-driven architectures rely on events (information related to a transaction or incident) to trigger steps along a supply chain or other operation.

During the pilot, Benedicta is encoding each RFID tag and bar-code label with a unique ID number. Employees affix the RFID tags and bar-code labels to pallets of goods as Benedicta's factory produces them. The company expects to use about 3,000 RFID tags in the pilot. RFID interrogators and bar-code scanners document when pallets leave the site and when they arrive at either EGTN, a packaging company, or FM Logistic, a global logistics provider.

Benedicta uses logistics software called Trackway4 from Stockway, based in Helsinki, Finland. Trackway4 helps Benedicta manage its advance shipping notices (ASNs) and other logistics information, which will be correlated with the data collected from RFID interrogators and bar-code scanners. The RFID tags and bar-code labels will aid in the picking processes, particularly at EGTN, as products are pulled from pallets and readied for shipment. "There will be, as well, in the near future, some additional reads inside Benedict and at FM Logistic's place, in order to trace different internal pallets' status," Gautier says.

As part of the pilot, Benedicta uses IBM's EPCIS data repository. It also plans to simulate another partner, such as a retailer. IBM's EPCIS data repository is a prototype for testing the proposed standard for EPCglobal's Electronic Product Code Information Services (EPCIS). Currently a working draft standard, EPCIS serves as a communication mechanism between applications and data repositories so companies can effectively exchange and query data from within their own RFID processes, and with partners (see Unilever Launches Trial Using EPCIS Protocol).

In addition to testing EPCIS, Benedicta is using the Object Name Service (ONS), a standard system currently managed by VeriSign for looking up unique Electronic Product Codes (EPCs) and pointing computers to information about the item associated with each specific EPC. The manufacturer will also continue to use its own root naming service to maintain "numeric and economic independency," Gautier says. "The use of two different ONS roots is not really a problem since we can make them coexist in the global networking

environment."

Benedicta's pilot, which the company expects to finish within the next three months, has already provided Benedicta with valuable lessons, including the importance of standards and common data definitions that make it easier for supply-chain partners' information systems to exchange information. "We've learned the importance of master-data management in the implementation of an event-driven architecture and, more generally, in a service-oriented architecture, since our pilot is all about this" Gautier says. "We had to first check and create compliance with the standards along the whole supply chain and at the different stages to be sure that all the objects we are dealing with—pallets, SKUs, items—have the same definition in every information system."

Because the pilot is still underway, Gautier says there are few metrics to share at this time. Still, he expects the pilot to help Benedicta optimize supply-chain processes—not only internally, but externally as well. "We are definitely not trying to make another RFID pilot for self-benefit, but to create a full EPCglobal networking environment that will leverage the existing processes with our partners and address the whole supply chain."

Eventually, Benedicta believes RFID technology could reduce the time it takes to recall a food item, which Gautier says is a very important and competitive advantage for food manufacturers.

Once the pilot is complete, Benedicta will evaluate the return on investment of using RFID tags compared with using bar-coded labels to track pallets moving through the supply chain, and whether to expand RFID's use. Gautier believes Benedicta will likely use RFID at the item level to track individual bottles of sauces. "However," he says, "since our products are made with water and packaged with some metal pieces, some technical issues have to be solved first."

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