

EU RFID Survey Shows Privacy Protection a Prime Concern

Viviane Reding, commissioner of the EU Information Society, says the preliminary results indicate Europe needs rules and technologies for the safe and secure implementation of RFID.

By Rhea Wessel

Oct. 19, 2006—Members of the RFID community in Europe reacted positively after the [European Union](#) (EU) released preliminary results of a six-month consultation process earlier this week. According to these results, privacy concerns top the list of worries about the emerging technology.

The online consultation process was announced seven months ago at the [CeBIT](#) trade fair in Hanover, Germany (see [EC Takes RFID Survey, Schedules Final Conference](#)), and ended on Sept. 30 with a record number of responses: 2,190. Germany had the most respondents, accounting for 43 percent of the total, with France making up 24 percent. All EU member states were represented in the survey of citizens, manufacturers, systems integrators, academic and scientific institutions and public bodies.

Speaking to members of the European Parliament and guests—including Robert Cresanti, the [U.S. Department of Commerce](#) undersecretary for technology—at a conference in Brussels on Monday, Viviane Reding, commissioner of the [EU Information Society](#), said the consultation process shows clearly that a large majority of people "are willing to be convinced that RFID can bring benefits, but they want to be reassured that it will not compromise their privacy."

Preliminary results indicate that nearly half of all respondents believe privacy-enhancing technologies should be mandatory in RFID applications, while 61 percent feel an RFID tag attached to products sold in retail stores should be automatically de-activated at the point of sale.

Peter Gabriel, a spokesperson for the Germany-based [Coordinating European Efforts for Promoting the European RFID Value Chain](#) (CE RFID) industry group, says he was surprised at the high number of respondents. Gabriel expects the final results of the survey to be a long time in coming, given the high response rate. CE RFID was formed in May and held its inaugural gathering in September ([CE RFID Holds Its First Meeting](#)). The organization urged members to participate in the consultation.

Gabriel says the EU is asking the right questions—what should we do about data protection, and do we need frequency and data standards? Sixty-four percent of those who responded to questions on frequency spectrum said current regulations are sufficient for the initial deployment of UHF RFID, but not once the technology becomes ubiquitous.

Reding's comments indicated she is, indeed, clearly focused on answering questions and easing fears about data privacy so the process of creating an EU strategy and framework for the technology can move forward. The European Commission may draft a law on the subject some time in 2007.

"I take this message from the consultation very seriously," Reding said, "because I want to see the benefits of RFID in terms of better services and productivity gains. But, there has to be a clear win-win, with the citizens on board." Most people want to control their personal information, she notes, adding: "Clear labeling of tags—or the option to disable or destroy them electronically—will be an important part of our protective armor."

Personal-data privacy is highly prized in Germany, and Gabriel says the country's data-privacy activists may have organized to weigh in on the subject, thus boosting response rates for the country.

Joerg Pretzel, CEO of GSI Germany, which represents EPCglobal in that nation, also welcomed the preliminary results from the consultation process. Pretzel says he expects the EUEU's RFID policy development to continue smoothly. The number of respondents, he adds, was indeed remarkable given that the whole process was managed in English and commentary was expected in English, as well.

Reding summed up the preliminary results of the consultation by saying Europe needs the right set of rules for the safe and secure implementation of RFID technology, and that Europe should fund more development of so-called privacy-enhancing technologies. She also stressed that standards need to be set on a global basis.

Copyright ©2005 RFID Journal, Inc. All Rights Reserved