

RFID Keeps the "Fresh" in Fresh Express

New analytics service helps packaged-salads division make sense of tag data as products move through the supply chain.

By Claire Swedberg

Oct. 21, 2006—Fresh Express, the packaged-salad division of Chiquita Brands International, is gaining better insight into the data generated by its RFID system. The company has been working for the last three months with TR3 Solutions' On-Demand RPM service, which processes and analyzes data read from Fresh Express's RFID tags at retailers and distribution centers. Its analysis, delivered through a hosted Web site, includes information on how long products take to move through the supply chain, and where bottlenecks may be keeping goods from reaching store shelves before their expiration dates. Fresh Express also can use data provided by the service to expedite recalls.

TR3 "is helping us analyze data in such a way we couldn't have done on our own," says Dan Wasser, vice president of business information and analysis for Fresh Express.

Previously, the company stored its RFID-generated data in an Excel file. With about 10 tag reads per SKU, and thousands of SKUs shipped daily, extrapolating useful data was almost impossible. Currently, Fresh Express uses a slap-and-ship method, applying RFID Gen 2 UHF tags to its cartons of salad mix and pallets destined for Wal-Mart. The produce supplier wants to be prepared for other retailers, however, as they begin to require RFID-tagged shipments. Without TR3's ability to sort through and analyze the RFID data across an expanded customer base, Wasser explains "you're looking at trying to drink through a fire hose."

Each carton's unique EPC number links it to data, including the type of product, destination, shipping date and expiration date. The tags are first read as they leave the Fresh Express plant through the loading dock onto trucks. After that, they are read again as they enter and leave distribution centers, at the back rooms of the retailers and on the way to store shelves.

"If you imagine that every case has a unique identifier, and every tagged case has individual read points (which can amount to 10 or more reads), that amount of data can be overwhelming," says John Broom, director of project management implementation at Fresh Express.

TR3's Perishables Module monitors the expiration dates of products, and also provides an alert service. Whenever a product in the supply chain nears its expiration date, the service notifies the appropriate sales representative by e-mail. At that point, the sales representative can contact the retail destination about the problem.

"RFID data, on its own, doesn't tell you much you can act on," says Tom Rauh, president of TR3 Solutions. When TR3 links unique RFID numbers with order information, however, companies can easily access that data. This includes which shipments are arriving on time, and how much product is in an individual store.

"In every facility, there's a perfect path," says Rauh, which defines how long a product should travel from

manufacturing to the store shelf. "For each location, we determine what is that perfect path. By knowing that perfect path, we can interpret what's really going on when the data comes together."

TR3 solutions range in monthly cost from several thousand dollars to \$20,000, Rauh says, depending on a customer's needs. Presently, the company is working with 15 manufacturing customers.

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