

Fear of Big Brother

As more people learn about the potential for using RFID to track purchases, privacy concerns are growing.

Jan 20, 2003 - A couple of months back, after seeing the hit movie "Minority Report," I wrote an op-ed piece suggesting that privacy is going to be a big obstacle to item-level tracking using radio frequency identification (see [The Privacy Nightmare](#)).

My thought then was that there would be tremendous opposition to putting tracking chips in every item made and that the best thing would be for companies to move quickly to show people that they are serious about protecting consumers' rights. My concern was that it would be hard to tell when opposition would start to build, so it was better to act fast to educate the public to inoculate people against the spread of fear.

Well, it may be too late. Since Nov. 15, when *RFID Journal* broke the news that Gillette planned to buy 500 million RFID tags, opposition to RFID tracking has been growing. There are already opponents to the technology who are spreading fear (see [Opposition to RFID-Tracking Grows](#)). This week's feature provides an in-depth look at smart shelf technology Gillette is testing with Wal-Mart and Tesco (see [Is This the Future of Retailing?](#)). News that this kind of technology now exists will, no doubt, raise even more concerns.

I've been receiving angry e-mails because *RFID Journal* is a proponent of the technology. That's understandable, I guess. But the truth is, I think the concerns about invasion of privacy are justified. History has shown us that self-regulation rarely works, that there are always companies that will act unscrupulously. The Internet industry said it wouldn't track people without permission, and a few Web sites continued to gather information from children until the government started getting tough with them.

My views on this are very simple and clear. I'll restate the three points I made back in August:

1. The retail industry should devise an opt-in strategy, where only consumers who agree to allow their purchases to be tracked are tracked.
2. There should be some industry mechanism for penalizing those who do not adhere strictly to the guidelines established.
3. There should be an aggressive campaign to educate people about the policy and about the consumer benefits of RFID.

And I'll add one more: National governments should pass guidelines about how law enforcement bodies can use RFID for investigative purposes.

I'm sure my views will be thoroughly ignored by companies that want to use RFID for marketing purposes. It's too bad, because in the end, if consumers refuse to buy products with RFID tags in them, companies will not only get no marketing benefits -- they won't get the supply chain benefits of the technology either.

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