

Marks & Spencer to Tag Items at 120 Stores

By spring 2007, the U.K. retailer says personnel at 78 additional stores will use handheld RFID interrogators to track inventory and make sure certain departments are well stocked.

By Claire Swedberg

Nov. 16, 2006—U.K. retailer Marks & Spencer (M&S) is expanding the RFID-tagging of "complex-sizing" items—such as men's suits that come in a large range of sizes—to 120 of its stores by spring 2007. Currently, the clothing and specialty-food retailer has been tagging items sold in six of its clothing departments at 42 of its 450 U.K. stores.

Employees at those RFID-enabled stores have been equipped with handheld RFID readers to take stock of inventory in six specified departments where having a variety of clothing sizes on the floor is most important. In each store, it takes the six departments about eight hours to count inventory manually, says M&S spokesperson Olivia Burns. Using the RFID system, however, the same process—done every few days per store—takes about one hour.

"The technology has helped Marks & Spencer increase both efficiency and customer service," Burns says. Thanks to RFID, she explains, the inventory-taking process has become faster and more efficient, and store employees now know when an item is running low in inventory or out of stock, necessitating a reorder.

M&S began the RFID-tag pilot with men's clothing in its High Wycombe store in 2003, then expanded the tagging process to about six more stores in the London area shortly thereafter. In February 2005, the company announced plans to expand its RFID implementation, beginning in the spring of 2006 (see Marks & Spencer to Extend Trial to 53 Stores)

By fall 2007, M&S says it hopes to continue its RFID expansion by tagging items beyond the six current departments. Presently, M&S sells tagged items in its men's suit, jacket and formal-trousers departments, as well as all items in its women's lingerie, suit-and-jacket and formal-trousers-and-skirt departments.

Paxar is providing RFID labels for the pilot, embedded with EM Microelectronic passive 869 MHz RFID tags. The labels measure 5 inches in length. Clothing manufacturer Dewhirst attaches the labels to garments before they leave the factory, though they remain unread until reaching the store's sales floor.

At that time, M&S employees use Intelligent handheld RFID interrogators, with a read range of 70 cm, to capture the unique identifying number of every tag. The M&S database matches each ID number with the color, style and size of the tagged item. Data management and wireless transmission is managed by BT Group. In the event of a shortage of a specific size, style or color on the floor, Burns says, the system alerts employees so they can reorder the item in question. BT also provides the wireless function that enables the integration of the reader data with M&S' central database.

RELATED_ARTICLES Marks & Spencer claims it informs customers about the RFID labels before they purchase any items. "We've been very clear with our customers from the very start," Burns states, "that we are

using the system for improved customer service and efficiency." Information about the tag is printed on the label, she adds, and leaflets are also available in the store. Most customers, she points out, don't notice the tags. "What they do notice is the store is well stocked [with a variety of sizes and styles]."

According to Burns, Marks and Spencer has tagged about 35 million items to date.

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