

At the RFID Journal—AAFA Apparel & Footwear Summit, industry executives extolled RFID's benefits across all segments of the sector.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Aug. 23, 2007—Apparel and footwear companies are using RFID for a multitude of applications, everything from managing raw material quality to improving the shopping experience, according to speakers at the [RFID Journal—AAFA Apparel & Footwear Summit](#) held this week in New York City. Speakers described benefits across every aspect of apparel and footwear industry.

The young, hip customers at Industry Standard, a newly open clothing boutique in Columbus, Ohio, are taking advantage of the RFID-powered features found throughout the store, which carries high-end T-shirts, hoodies, jeans and athletic shoes that embody the "street couture L.A. skateboard culture," the store's cofounder Dominic Petrozzi told the event's attendees. Rather, they're embracing the technology because it helps them access and share product information with their buddies.

Industry Standard's regular customers carry RFID-tagged loyalty cards, enabling store staff to know who walks in the door so they can shout out a welcome. Interrogators mounted near dressing rooms read tag data on garments, and computer monitors inside the let customers access information about the designers who make the clothes they're trying on. Often, the clothing lines sold in the store are linked to famous hip-hop artists or skateboarders, of whom customers are big fans, so promoting the back-story—showing the artists or athletes wearing the same clothes customers are trying on, for instance—is a valuable sales tool.

A number retail innovators—including Dick Lockard, whose firm [thebigspace](#) is pioneering the use of RFID to enhance customer experiences using information displays embedded into mirrors (see [Magicmirror Could Assist Retail Customers](#))—indicated that RFID is becoming an effective tool in building strong relationships between retailers and customers.

"Retailers are starting to approach RFID from a consumer-facing perspective because it's easy to see the benefits it provides," said Neco Can, the Industry Standard's other cofounder. "And then they can look at using RFID in their supply chain."

Lockard told attendees that a magicmirror display—which uses [Avery Dennison](#) RFID interrogators and software developed by thebigspace—can be deployed for \$20,000 to \$50,000, which does not cover the costs of tagging the products that the mirror's integrated interrogator reads to determine what information to display. To populate a magicmirror's display, the retailer can repurpose much of the product information—such as the source of the materials used, suggested accessory pairings and available colors—that it has already available on its Web site.

Lockard, Can and Petrozzi are making RFID a tool for what they call socialized retailing. This is a marked change from earlier applications of RFID within the apparel and footwear industry, which

focused on supply chain applications, such as tracking cases and pallets of goods using RFID tags and comparing their efficacy to that of older auto-ID technologies, specifically bar codes.

The emergence of RFID in consumer-facing applications seem to coincide with a perception, shared by many attendees and speakers at the summit, that consumer concerns over potential invasions of privacy around the use of RFID at the item level have become less severe over the past year, as consumers become more comfortable with the technology and begin to see some benefits through quick access to product information and specialized service.

Nick Tentis, a clothing designer and tailor who operates the [Nick Tentis](#) men's couture suit shop in London, is tagging each piece of clothing sold and uses the RFID technology and the magicmirror as a customer-relationship management tool. In fact, explained Lockard, readers mounted near the front of the store identify the tags embedded in Tentis' suits and when customers walk by, a display broadcasts a greeting to that customer. "His customers feel special," Lockard said. "They bring their friends with them to the store and say, 'Look, they know me.'"

While some consumers, as well as privacy advocates, have railed against using RFID for item-level tagging for that very same reason, Tentis' approach shows that the technology, when deployed well and to an interested customer base, can actually garner customer affinity and loyalty.

Mark Roberti, editor and founder of RFID Journal, gave attendees his insights on how they should approach consumer privacy issues as they begin to deploy RFID technology at the item level. He advised attendees to never use RFID to track the movements of their customers without the customer's knowledge and consent. "No one has ever been able to show me what kind of business benefit a company can gain from doing that," he said.

Other RFID applications in the apparel industry discussed during the two-day event included improving the manufacturing and product visibility of apparel and the use of RFID readers to expedite point-of-sale transactions.

Bridget Chan, CIO of Hong Kong-based clothing manufacturer [Esquel](#), gave attendees an overview of how her company is using high-frequency RFID technology for work-in-progress material tracking and EPC UHF technology for tracking the movement of manufactured products between Hong Kong and China while leveraging EPCglobal's EPC Information System for transfers data between the facilities (see [EPCglobal Hong Kong Wraps Two-Year, Multi-Company RFID Project](#)).

[Tagsys](#), an RFID solutions provider that offers both HF and UHF systems, announced that 40 [Levi Strauss & Co.](#) franchise retail outlets in Mexico are installing Tagsys UHF readers to expedite point-of-sale transactions inside the stores. The readers use antennas built into a platform designed to sit on countertops. Tagged products are placed on top of the platform and the reader picks up the ID encoded to only those tags, to ensure that the system rings up only items the customer wishes to buy, rather than nearby items that may be tagged but which the customer does not intend to purchase.