

Merloni Unveils RFID Appliances

The Italian appliance maker today will show a new line of appliances that communicate with objects.

April 4, 2003 - There's been a lot of talk about smart appliances and a few have even been introduced. But Merloni Elettrodomestici, an Italian appliance maker with revenue of 2.5 billion euros (US\$2.68 billion), is the first manufacturer to bet big on RFID. At a press conference in Venice, Italy, today, the company will unveil a new line of Ariston appliances that have RFID readers that enable the machines to communicate with objects.

The line includes a refrigerator, oven and washing machine. Antennas will transmit signals to products with embedded RFID transponders and retrieve important information about the product. The smart appliances will go into commercial production next year. And while very few products today have embedded RFID tags, Merloni clearly believes many products soon will, and it wants to be a leader in the field.

"With the application of smart technology, we put emphasis on our innovativeness," Vittorio Merloni said in a statement. "In 1999, we were the first to make our products talk with each other and to connect them online. Today, we are the first to make them talk with the objects."

The washing machine will read intelligent labels in clothes and retrieve information about the size, color and type of fabric as well as washing instructions. It will warn the homeowner if he or she has placed items that shouldn't be washed together into the machine. A color screen can display messages, like: "This is the first washing [for this pair of jeans]. It is advisable to wash them separately."

The refrigerator is designed to track each item's expiry date and display information about its nutritional value. It can even provide recipes for dishes that can be prepared with the ingredients in the fridge. And the oven will automatically set cooking and baking times and temperatures based on instructions from tags.

Lab ID of Bologna, Italy, worked with Merloni for five months on the project. It developed special low-power (200 milli-watts) readers and small antennas for the appliances. The readers operate at 13.56 MHz and are compliant with ISO 15693 and ISO 14443A and B. Lab ID says the readers can read from and write to 600 different transponders in 10 seconds.

Marco Astorri, executive VP of Lab ID, says RFID will not increase the cost of the appliances dramatically. He says the antennas cost only about 10 euros (US\$10.73) each to manufacture and the readers are about 40 euros (US\$42.94). "This technology is absolutely affordable today," he said.

Lab ID also worked with Benetton to develop the RFID labels it will use in its Sisley brand.

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