

RFID Gives Sports Memorabilia Stamp of Authenticity

Prova Group offered its RFID-enabled authentication service to thousands of collectors at a recent sports collectibles convention, providing electronic guarantees that autographs were genuine.

By Claire Swedberg

Dec. 21, 2007—More than 3,000 collectors used RFID to authenticate signatures at The Football Spectacular Show, a four-day sports collectibles convention in Dallas, held Nov. 29 to Dec. 2. Produced by [Triumph Sports](#), which does similar shows all over the United States, the event leveraged technology provided by [Prova Group](#).

Prova's RFID system authenticated about 4,000 autographs from athletes signing at the event. The collectors obtained RFID tags printed at the show, then affixed them to the items so they have physical and electronic records proving the autographs are genuine.

The collectibles industry has always been vulnerable to fraud. Autograph verifiers—people who visually analyze submitted signatures and compare them with bona fide autographs—can be used to verify an inscription's authenticity, but they can make mistakes. Holograms, commonly used to guarantee an autograph is genuine, can be counterfeited. And paper certifications of authenticity (COAs), issued at the time an autograph is signed, can't guarantee the collectible named in the certificate is the same item being sold. Prova's RFID solution attempts to provide the best proof possible that an autograph is authentic.

At the Dallas show, collectors wanting to use the service visited a registration area where Prova employees inputted each collector's name and address into a database, as well as the label's unique RFID identifying number and a description of the item to which it would be attached. The RFID tag was then affixed to the item to be signed.

For larger items, such as footballs or shirts, Prova issued high-frequency (HF) 13.56 MHz passive tags complying with ISO standard 15693, that measured about 1 inch by 1 inch. The company issued EPC Gen 2 tags, measuring about 1 inch by ¼ inch, for smaller items such as trading cards or baseballs. Both types of tags are made by [X-ident Technology](#), contain RFID chips from [Texas Instruments](#) and are designed so that if a tag were removed from an item, its antenna would be broken, rendering the tag inoperable.

Once the tags were affixed to the items, the collectors visited the athletes, including former NFL stars Emmitt Smith, Troy Aikman, Michael Irvin, Joe Montana, Jerry Rice, Gayle Sayers, Earl Campbell and Thurman Thomas. After having an item autographed, each collector moved along to another Prova employee stationed nearby, who witnessed the signings. That employee used a handheld RFID interrogator from [Sirit](#) to read each tag, documenting its unique ID number, then wrote the date and time on the tag's chip and locked it so its data could not be changed.

At the end of the day, Prova downloaded all data from the handheld devices into its database, then posted the

authentication information (such as the date of the autograph and the name of the signer) on its Web site. Collectors can access the information by entering their name and a password.

The Web site provides the collector with electronic proof that the autograph on an item in their possession was obtained legitimately, says Daniel Werner, Prova's marketing and business VP. "Prova decided early on to create a system that works at the moment of the signing," Werner says, "that would put authentication in a database and lock that information onto an RFID tag."

RELATED_ARTICLES Prova's RFID-enabled autograph-certification system was available to collectors at previous Football Spectacular Shows in New Jersey, but this year's Dallas event was the largest Prova has been involved with, Werner says. The company is now in discussion to participate in similar events in other parts of the country in 2008.

The Dallas event provided Prova with an opportunity to improve its service, Werner says. "We want to find ways to do an even easier registration," he states. "We want to make the process seamless for the sports fan." For instance, the company is researching ways to capture a collector's name, address and other information without having to manually enter it into the system.

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