

Wegmans Eyeing RFID for Prescription Management

The supermarket operator is planning to test whether placing RFID tags on customers' prescription orders will make locating and ringing up the orders faster and more accurate.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

Jan. 10, 2008—Wegmans Food Markets, a \$4 billion supermarket operator based in Rochester, N.Y., thinks RFID can add a dose of organization and speediness to its in-store pharmacies. The retailer is planning to test an RFID-based drug-tracking system, the goal of which will be to determine whether placing RFID tags on customers' prescription orders could make locating and ringing up the orders faster and more accurate. The average in-store pharmacy in the 71-store chain processes about 2,400 drug prescriptions weekly, but some locations process up to 5,000 per week.

While the company isn't ready to share many specific details about the pilot, nor when it is likely to launch, it has set out some specific goals. These include tagging and tracking individual bottles of prescription drugs and then monitoring the bottles' movements throughout the pharmacies, up to the point of purchase. Through the pilot, Wegmans hopes to determine how RFID technology and the EPCglobal network architecture for tracking tagged goods could improve the company's business processes and customer service inside the pharmacy.

Mike Merulla, Wegmans' application development manager for pharmacy systems, and Debbie Parker, the retail chain's director of pharmacy business solutions, say they're also exploring how the usefulness of RFID tags on individual pill bottles or blister packs could be extended beyond the point of purchase. For this application, they're seeking partners interested in developing in-home RFID tag interrogators that consumers could use to organize their drugs and manage when and how much they should take.

The system would present an electronic form of the instructions printed on the drug packaging, but the electronic version could be customized according to patients' specific needs, such as audio recording for the visually impaired. According to Merulla and Parker, such in-home applications won't likely take place during the firm's initial RFID tests within store pharmacies, however. Instead, they would be part of follow-up tests.

At the pharmacies of participating Wegmans stores, EPC Gen 2 RFID tag encoders and interrogators will be installed and used to encode RFID inlays embedded in labels placed on prescriptions as they are filled. A serialized global trade item number (SGTIN) will be encoded to each tag, and also printed on a 2-D bar code on the tag's adhesive label, on which the EPCglobal logo will appear. The SGTIN will serve as a unique identifier for every tagged item (each bottle or blister pack in a prescription) and be associated with the recipient's contact information and important medical information, such as known allergies. No personally identifiable information will be encoded to the tag.

Once an order is complete, a pharmacist will place the medication packet in a drawer, referred to as a will-call area, where orders are filed by each customer's last name. Readers built into the drawers will take periodic

inventory of the tagged orders, and pharmacists will be able to confirm whether an order is in the drawer, as well as its location within the draw, by viewing a computer monitor (rather than by searching through the drawers), thereby saving time.

Customers will be encouraged to keep the RFID inlay embedded in each bottle or pill packet intact, but Wegmans will install a tag kill station at the stores, or set up a protocol to have prescriptions relabeled with a non-RFID label, at the customers' discretion. In addition, the supermarket operator plans to interrogate tags on the empty bottles customers return to the pharmacy for refilling.

Wegmans is still looking for technology partners with whom it can work to get the trial up and running, according to Merulla and Parker. Before initiating the pilot, the retailer also plans to run a comprehensive consumer awareness campaign, designed to educate customers on how and why it is testing RFID.

This won't be Wegmans' first foray into RFID. The company initiated a test of the technology in its meat manufacturing facility in 2005. "We chose our meat manufacturing facility to do our pilot because we wanted to learn [about RFID] at the pallet and case level," says Kristin Andersen, Wegmans' project manager. "We chose a part of [our] supply chain internal to Wegmans, a closed-loop system, but one that is spread among multiple facilities."

Passive EPC Gen 2 tags were attached to totes that carry cuts of meat, and also to the pallets used to transport the totes from the meat processing plant to a Wegmans meat distribution center. The tote and pallet tags were read upon receipt at the DC, and the tags were read again as the totes were shipped from the distribution center to individual stores, enabling the company to track individual cuts of meat from manufacturing to the point of shipment to stores.

RELATED_ARTICLES Wegmans considered the test a proving ground for the effectiveness of EPC Gen 2 tags in an environment containing high moisture levels and a lot of metal machinery, both of which can pose RF interference. The results showed that the totes were successfully read 95 to 98 percent of the time. To carry out the pilot, the retailer partnered with [VeriSign](#), which supplied RFID consulting services, [Zebra Technologies](#), which provided RFID label printer-encoders, and [ThingMagic](#), which furnished RFID interrogators.

Wegmans plans to transfer the knowledge it gained from the meat-tracking pilot to the in-store pharmacy trial. The supermarket operator hopes the pharmacy tests will help it ascertain how RFID technology and an EPC data-sharing infrastructure would impact its processes, systems, employees, customers and suppliers.

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