

Baggage-Tagging Projects Gaining Altitude

Hong Kong and Las Vegas airports are upgrading and ramping up their RFID bag-tagging efforts.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

April 18, 2008—In January, [Hong Kong International Airport](#) announced that it had retrofitted all baggage-tag printers at its check-in counters to accommodate RFID-enabled tags, and also installed RFID interrogators in all of its baggage-handling equipment. The airport has now contracted [George Schmitt & Co.](#) to be its provider of RFID-enabled baggage labels.

Mary Ann Allen, George Schmitt's director of business development, says that while she can not reveal the size of the contract, the label converter will employ [Alien Technology's](#) EPC Gen 2 Squiggle inlay, using Alien's Higgs 2 integrated circuit in the baggage tag, exclusively. The contract is for one year, according to Mark Turner, assistant general manager of Hong Kong International Airport's terminal business office.

According to Allen, George Schmitt & Co. continually tests inlays from various tag manufacturers and is tag agnostic—it converts [Motorola](#) inlays into baggage labels used by Las Vegas' McCarran Airport, for instance. She adds, however, that based on her experience with the Alien Squiggle tag, she considered it the best candidate to satisfy the Hong Kong airport's requirement for performance and price. The airport, having performed its own tests of submitted Gen 2 labels, agreed.

Hong Kong International Airport, like many others, has been testing RFID baggage tracking for a number of years, using baggage labels containing RFID inlays made by Motorola, but Allen says it is the first airport to deploy an EPC Gen 2 system rollout beyond the pilot stage. The airport began using Gen 2 labels produced exclusively by George Schmitt roughly two weeks ago.

"Our read rates before were good," Turner says, "and have been improved by an average of 3 percent with the George Schmitt & Co. labels."

Early this year, the Hong Kong airport reported that 50 airlines using the facility apply RFID baggage tags to a total of 40,000 bags—90 percent of all bags departing from the airport—each day. Turner says the number of airlines using the RFID labels has jumped to 65, though he declines to provide an updated number of bags handled. Still, this means George Schmitt will need to supply more than 1.2 million tags monthly.

McCarran Airport, Allen says, has been using RFID for baggage tracking for five years (see [Las Vegas Airport Bets on RFID](#)) and is now ready to begin transitioning from the RFID baggage tags it currently employs—which contain EPC Gen 1 Class 0 UHF passive inlays, made only by Motorola—to labels containing standardized EPC Gen 2 Class 1 inlays. She notes that the airport will soon begin testing Gen 2 RFID labels, and hopes to select a vendor of baggage labels with EPC Gen 2 inlays by August 2009.

Currently, McCarran places RFID-enabled labels on 70,000 bags each day. The airport spends a little over 21 cents per label, a cost justified by the high cost of locating lost bags—\$150 per bag.

RELATED_ARTICLES SITA, a provider of integrated IT business and communication services for the air-transport industry, issued a report this week indicating that the industry lost \$3.8 billion in 2007 due to growing pressures on baggage management linked to passenger volumes, tight aircraft turnaround times and heightened security measures. Figures from WorldTracer, SITA's automated system for tracing lost and mishandled passenger baggage used by 400 airlines and ground handling companies, show 42.4 million bags to have mishandled or delayed last year.

The air transport industry handles 2.25 billion pieces of checked baggage every year. According to Giovanni Bisignani, IATA's director general and CEO, RFID could save the industry as much as \$700 million annually if the technology were fully implemented across the industry.

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