

Aspen Signs With Skidata, RTP for Integrated RFID/POS System

The operator of four Colorado ski resorts will install RFID-enabled chairlift access gates linked to a new point-of-sale system in time for its 2008-09 ski season.

By Michelle V. Rafter

June 4, 2008—Aspen Skiing Co. has purchased an integrated RFID-enabled gate and point-of-sale (POS) resort management package from a new partnership between Skidata, a provider of access gates for ski lifts, parking, amusement parks and other venues, and RTP LLC, a Colorado resort software vendor, according to representatives at the companies.

Skidata, a Salzburg, Austria, subsidiary of Swiss-based Kudelski Group, and RTP, located in Avon, Colorado, report that they have teamed up to make it easier for operators of U.S. ski hills such as Aspen, and other resorts, to tie RFID-based gates to POS systems in establishments' ticket booths, restaurants and equipment rental shops. Aspen Skiing eventually plans to install Skidata's hands-free RFID access gates at approximately 12 lifts on its four mountain resorts: Aspen, Aspen Mountain, Buttermilk and Snowmass. The company expects the first batch of the new gates to be operating at Aspen Mountain and Snowmass when the 2008-09 ski season begins next Thanksgiving, says Jeff Hanle, an Aspen Skiing Co. spokesman.

To prepare, Hanle says, Aspen intends to install RTP's point-of-sale resort management software in time for the resorts to open for limited summer activities on June 13. With Aspen's RFID system linked with its POS system, he notes, visitors will not only be able to move through lift lines faster, but eventually use a lift ticket or season pass to buy food, rent lockers or make other purchases throughout one of Aspen's resorts.

Previously, says Michael McDermott, RTP's senior VP of sales and marketing, U.S. ski resort owners had to buy gate equipment and resort management software separately, then integrate them through middleware they either purchased from a third party or developed themselves. Under the terms of the partnership, RTP will resell Skidata equipment in the United States. The partners have not yet disclosed other terms of the agreement.

By making it a one-stop proposition, the partners hope to entice more U.S. ski resorts to adopt RFID technology. Although RFID gate systems are common in Europe, they're still the exception in North America, where about 12 of the continent's 600 ski areas have installed them to date, according to Skidata and RTP officials, as well as other industry sources. Skidata is also playing catch-up with Axess North America, a subsidiary of Salzburg-based Axess AG, a rival access gate manufacturer that has signed a number of U.S. resorts over the past several years. Both Skidata and Axess make lift gates using high-frequency (HF) 13.56 MHz passive RFID tags complying with the ISO 15693 standard.

The access gate manufacturers are courting resort owners eyeing RFID systems to replace older equipment, combat an ongoing ski industry labor shortage and provide customers with a better bang for their buck, sources say. Using RFID tags embedded in lift tickets or season passes allows an access gate to automatically

confirm a ticket's authenticity and swing open to admit an authorized skier—or, in some cases, eliminates the need for a gate arm altogether.

What's more, by automatically verifying tickets, newer systems can reduce or eliminate the resort workers previously stationed at lift lines to scan bar-coded tickets or visually check if tickets were valid. According to resort officials, anything that saves on manpower is a positive at a time when stricter U.S. immigration standards and a shortage of affordable mountain-area housing are making it difficult to attract seasonal workers. And the less time customers wait in line for lifts, food and rentals, the more time they have for fun.

Oregon's Mt. Bachelor resort installed Axess' RFID-enabled gates and RTP's POS system in 2004, though 2006-07 was the first season Mt. Bachelor's gate and POS systems were entirely integrated, according to John McLeod, the resort's director of finance. Alta (see Alta Opts for RFID Lift Tickets), Solitude and Park City in Utah, Copper Mountain in Colorado and Tamarack in Idaho are also employing Axess systems.

In Colorado, Vail began testing a passive UHF EPC Gen 2 RFID system from SkyeTek in its five resorts last year (see Vail Resorts Sees RFID in the Forecast). In addition, Steamboat resort has utilized a dual-frequency (134.2 kHz and 303.8 MHz) passive and active tag-location tracking system from SafeTzone since 2005 (see U.S. Ski Area Completes First Season Using RFID).

Aspen Skiing officials are still deciding which Skidata hands-free RFID gates and RFID-tagged lift tickets to use. Skidata's Freemotion gates come with two or four long-range antennas, both of which can detect tags from up to 80 centimeters (31.5 inches) away. The company also sells disposable or reusable RFID-tagged lift tickets, priced, respectively, at 80 cents or \$2 to \$3.50 apiece, says Skidata's senior VP, Urs Grimm.

According to Hanle, Aspen plans to wait until the 2009-2010 season to introduce a lift ticket or season pass that customers can load from their charge cards via the resort's Web site to make purchases in restaurants and retail shops. He declines, however, to discuss the amount the company expects to spend in total.

Previously, Aspen operated three or four RFID-enabled gates for VIP customers to get through lift lines faster, with handheld bar-code scanners for the remainder of its lift lines. After several of Aspen's managers skied in Europe last year and noted how effectively RFID-based gates moved crowds, they were sold on the concept, Hanle says, adding, "We decided to move ahead full speed."

RELATED_ARTICLES Stevens Pass, a 10-lift ski resort in the Cascade Mountains, 78 miles east of Seattle, is also installing an RFID-based ticketing and gate system for the 2008-09 season. The company has purchased RTP's resort management system, but is still choosing between gates from Skidata or Axess.

Either way, Stevens Pass' general manager, John Gifford, says he expects to spend "hundreds of thousands" of dollars on the upgrade, which will replace the resort's current practice of having attendants visually scan customers' tickets. It's a big investment, Gifford says—one that will take skiers time to get used to—but it's worth it. "Once they see the faster lift line access and understand what the technology offers," he states, they'll realize it can make their trip easier.

Copyright ©2005 RFID Journal, Inc. All Rights Reserved