

SkyeTek Offers Web-based RFID Software Platform

The company's MetaFi suite of hosted applications allows manufacturers to track high-value products in retail establishments and perform business analytics from remote locations.

By Claire Swedberg

Aug. 22, 2008—[SkyeTek](#) is offering a Web-based software platform that allows manufacturers to track their goods in stores, hospitals and restaurants, saving mobile sales reps time counting inventory and reducing out-of-stocks. The new service, dubbed MetaFi, is being announced next week and is commercially available.

SkyeTek, which provides RFID interrogator modules for manufacturers of medical, consumer and industrial goods, has developed the software solution at the request of many of those customers, according to SkyeTek's chairman and CEO, Rob Balgley. A SkyeTek interrogator module is similar to standalone RFID interrogators but smaller than most—about half the size of a business card, says Balgley, and amounts to a circuit board without any plastic encasing. This module is then embedded in shelving, cabinets or other devices (such as vending machines) in use by the customer. Customers used SkyeTek's RFID interrogators to track items such as stents or medical implants in smart cabinets at hospitals, or to track high-value consumer goods in stores. Typically once customers had the SkyeTek interrogators operating, they began looking for software to perform business analytics based on the data they were gaining through RFID reads.

"This [the MetaFi service] is something that began in late 2006 and early 2007," says Balgley, "with customers requesting ways to utilize the data." Previously SkyeTek customers had been using the company's readers and going to a third-party for software for business-rules applications. "The question was, how do you take a physical event and turn it into a logical event?" Balgley says. "If, for example, a medical device is out of a cabinet for a specific amount of time, what do you do with that data?"

With MetaFi, customers already using SkyeTek RFID readers in field locations can add the software services for a monthly fee. Typically, readers are located at stores or other retail locations and capture ID numbers on the EPC UHF Gen 2 tags as items are removed from shelves. Users of these readers can now add the MetaFi package, which includes the server, console software which displays data in a dashboard format, and MetaFi Agent software, which allows the user to access the server when an Internet connection is not available (such as in a store that doesn't allow a wireless connection for security reasons).

Typically, when an RFID tag is read, that data is sent wirelessly to the MetaFi Web-based server, which interprets the information and displays the requested analytics on MetaFi console software running on a PC, with a dashboard that, for example, shows where items will need replenishment, sends alerts when there is an out-of-stock, and allows the search for particular items based on EPC numbers or SKUs. When a number is inputted into the system, the item's description and location are listed on the dashboard. Operations managers, product managers and IT managers can create a combination of criteria and variables specific for that company's needs.

Company sales reps can also use the MetaFi Agent, which interprets tag data read by fixed and handheld interrogators wherever a Wi-Fi or Ethernet Internet connection for accessing to the MetaFi server may not exist. With handheld interrogators, data can be accessed and inputted through a mobile phone connected to the reader via a Bluetooth connection.

In the past six to 12 months SkyeTek has provided the MetaFi solution to several companies, including a medical device manufacturer, a provider of consumer electronics and a large beer company.

The medical device manufacturer, which was already using SkyeTek interrogators, uses the system to track its implantable products in the health-care facilities where they are used. The sales representatives, says Martin Payne, SkyeTek's senior vice president of marketing and strategy, are highly skilled and highly compensated professionals with medical training and who often go into the operating room to guide surgeons as they implant the company's devices. Before installing the RFID system MetaFi, Payne says, sales representatives could spend many hours each week simply going through the shelves and ensuring that products are in stock.

"Sales reps end up spending more time counting inventory when they should be selling products," Payne says. This can lead to billing inaccuracies, as well as inventory shortages, he says. After tagging and tracking their products, however, the company still needed a software system to analyze data from RFID reads. With MetaFi, the sales reps—who use handheld readers, tethered to cell phones with a Bluetooth connection, to scan a shelf and collect data about inventory stock—have access to business analytics including alerts if, for example, items are reaching their expiration date, or instructions to restock a specific location.

A consumer electronics manufacturer is using MetaFi to track its products in stores with an RFID smart display that provides it with hourly updates as to which items are on the shelf and which have been removed, again allowing the company to receive alerts when specific items are removed and need to be restocked. This is a new application for the electronics manufacturer, says Payne, and the company purchased SkyeTek interrogators and tags along with the MetaFi service.

The beer manufacturer, like the medical device manufacturer, had already been using SkyeTek readers. The RFID modules were integrated with flow monitors, known as "smart dispensers," to track beer pours. The MetaFi service enables the company to determine when it needs to deliver more product based on read events, thereby reducing unnecessary deliveries, as well as out-of-stocks.

RELATED_ARTICLES The MetaFi service costs about \$150 to \$200 per month, says Balgley, in addition to interrogators and tags. The company expects its existing customers to adopt the MetaFi service, while other new customers can purchase the SkyeTek readers or use third-party readers with the system. For most users, Payne says, the system can be fully operational within weeks. He predicts that most customers who invest in new interrogators and tags along with the MetaFi service will gain an ROI in less than six months.

On Aug. 27, SkyeTek will hold a webinar on field-based inventory-tracking systems such as this. To sign up for webinar, titled "Real-time Visibility of Mobile Inventory, Assets and Field-based Employees Using RFID," [please click here](#).

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