

Full Disclosure

The privacy issue just won't go away. One group is proposing legislation requiring products with tags to be clearly labeled.

By Mark Roberti

June 23, 2003 - The whole privacy issue is starting to become tiresome. Since the vast majority of consumer products won't have RFID tags on them for several years (at the least), discussing privacy feels a bit like arguing whether a boy is good enough for your daughter after he's taken her out on the first date. Nevertheless, the privacy issue is not going away. We will have tests of RFID tags on clothes this year, and I would expect that by next year, some companies will be ready to begin deploying the technology to track garments and shoes through the supply chain. One of those companies that might be ready is the Benetton Group, which has been looking at RFID for four years.

This week, our featured story is an exclusive interview with Mauro Benetton, director of marketing for the popular Italian clothing retailer (see [Benetton Talks About RFID Plans](#)). Mauro is also the founder of Bologna, Italy-based [Lab ID](#). He spoke openly about the controversy over RFID and privacy (see [Benetton Explains RFID Privacy Flap](#)). His belief is that consumers will want the benefits of having RFID transponders in their clothes because it will save time when doing the laundry. I agree with him.

Obviously, there are those who don't. Earlier this month, [Caspian](#) (Consumers Against Supermarket Privacy Invasion and Numbering) unveiled legislation aimed at requiring companies to provide full disclosure when RFID tags are used on consumer items. The proposed legislation would also prevent companies from tying unique product codes to the individuals who purchased the product. While the legislation is a long way from becoming law, we did a story on it because we feel that our readers should be aware of what these groups think, so that companies can formulate sound privacy policies (see [Group Proposes RFID Privacy Law](#)).

RFID Journal supports full disclosure. This is not just for ethical reasons. It's also because this is the right way to do business. We also believe that companies should not match a unique product number with the person that purchased the related product, unless there is a good business reason for doing so, such as providing after-sales support.

But enacting legislation now seems a bit like taking the aspirin before you get the headache (to steal a line from JFK). RFID is so new that it's virtually impossible to tell what the best policy should be. Regular readers of *RFID Journal* know that I'm not a big fan of self-regulation. I think we need to do more than ask companies to play nice. At the same time, I'm not foolish enough to believe that legislation is going to prevent anyone from abusing RFID technology or any other technology. If that were the case, no one would be selling child pornography online.

In the end, this issue is going to come down to market forces. That is the one issue Katherine Albrecht, founder of Caspian, and I do agree on. I don't believe companies can shove this technology down people's throats if they don't want it. I also don't believe that privacy advocates can scare people into rejecting products with RFID transponders. People are smarter than that.

We're going through a process of education. Privacy groups have a role to play, as does the RFID industry, end users of the technology and even *RFID Journal*. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that when consumers are fully educated about the potential benefits and the potential risks of this technology, they will be perfectly content to buy products with RFID transponders in them. Albrecht is equally sure that they won't. Time will tell who is right.

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