

# The EPC Network Gets Real

VeriSign, a company best known for handling secure transactions on the Web, is offering businesses a way to leverage the Auto-ID Center's EPC Network.

Sept. 5, 2003 - Most of the focus on Electronic Product Code technology has been related to low-cost tags and readers. But the hardware and the numbering system aren't worth much if there's no way to look up what the serial number on the tag means. The Auto-ID Center developed the EPC Network to link serial numbers to product information stored in a database, but no companies had stepped up to build out the network. Until now.

VeriSign, a Mountain View, Calif.-based company that provides digital security and network infrastructure services, is introducing three new services aimed at enabling companies to use the EPC Network to share data with their trading partners. The company will demonstrate how the system works at the Auto-ID Center's EPC Symposium, which is being held in Chicago from September 15 to September 17. "We want people to know the EPC Network is here because it's built on the existing Internet infrastructure," says Brian Matthews, VeriSign's VP of naming and directory service. "We don't have to build a whole new infrastructure. This is something we can have deployed in a month or two."

The EPC Network is essentially a layer on top of the Internet. When you type in a URL in your Web browser, your computer goes to a Domain Name Service registry and looks up the IP address for that Web site. Similarly, the Auto-ID Center has developed an Object Name Service (ONS). When you scan an EPC tag, the serial number is sent to a computer that goes out to the ONS and finds where information associated with that serial number is stored on the Web.

The Auto-ID Center has been testing its network infrastructure during its field trials. But up to now, there has been no way for companies to leverage it. Now companies that have been assigned EPCs for their products by AutoID Inc., a joint venture set up by the Uniform Code Council and EAN International to commercialize the technology, can register their company code and product identifiers (numbers associated with particular SKUs) with VeriSign. VeriSign turns the company code and SKU number into an IP address that is replicated through the ONS. That way, when a tag is scanned, ONS can point computers to where the information is stored.

VeriSign will also host product information for companies. Under the Auto-ID Center's scheme, product information will be stored in Product Markup Language, a variant of the Web's Extensible Markup Language (XML). PML files will be stored on servers, which the Auto-ID Center now calls EPC Information Services (they were called PML servers).

VeriSign will host PML files on secure servers, authenticate users and provide access to information based on classes defined by customers. A large manufacturer, for instance, might want to make some product information available to logistics partners but not to suppliers.

The company will also offer an EPC Service Registry, which is a directory of EPC Information Services on the Web. Say, for instance, a manufacturer has PML files hosted on servers around the world. The EPC

Service Registry will allow the manufacturer to give its partners one place to look up where particular product information is stored.

"Data sharing can be done at a fraction of the cost of what is required with point-to-point solutions today," says Jon Brendsel, VeriSign's director of product management. "And [the EPC Network] is broadly applicable to a variety of supply chains, not just consumer packaged goods."

VeriSign will charge fees for these services. The fees have not yet been set, but Matthews says they will be cost-effective for companies. "We would expect that you'd be paying value-based pricing," he says. "Certainly it would be less than it would cost for a company to set up these services individually. And you'll be tapping into a scalable infrastructure that would cost you significantly more to create on your own."

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