

RFID for Tracking Tools of the Trade

Start-up TOTtrak has devised a mobile asset management system for fire trucks and other equipment-laden vehicles.

By Jonathan Collins

Jan. 9, 2004—While RFID deployment is increasingly focused on supply chain applications, some new companies see significant new niche applications for the technology. Tampa, Fla., start-up TOTtrak believes it has found a profitable niche: providing mobile asset management systems for companies and organizations operating trucks and other vehicles loaded with a range of essential “tools of the trade” (TOT).

“Every morning fire trucks have to be unloaded and reloaded with tools and equipment to ensure that everything that might be needed is onboard,” says Tony Hines, president of TOTtrak.

TOTtrak’s application will see RFID systems deployed on mobile TV news trucks, fire trucks and other vehicles that store specific assets needed perform certain tasks. The company says it will sell and license its TOTtrak RFID Asset Tracking System to a variety of industries. This system fits onboard assets and tools with active RFID tags and the trucks that carry them with an RFID reader that passes on readings to an onboard computer or PDA. The onboard computer keeps track of the presence or absence of the items. That information is then available locally through the computer’s or PDA’s user interface, as well as a through a central database connected to the truck using cellular wireless communication. The system can also incorporate GPS to include the location of the vehicle being monitored.

That same RFID system can also be used as a security system. The TOTtrak’s Tag Security System creates alerts when tags are removed. When a protected tag is removed, the tag’s identifying characteristics are altered. The system recognizes the change and immediately transmits date/time-stamped alerts to staff who serve as asset custodians.

TOTtrak says it will act as the systems integrator for these systems and says it will use whatever active RFID tag technology best suits each deployment. The company says it already has deals with RFID Inc.—an RFID systems designer and manufacturer based in Aurora, Colo.—to be its primary equipment supplier.

Among TOTtrak’s first target customers will be the television and motion picture production industries. The company’s value-added resellers will use the same architecture to target other mobile asset markets such as emergency fire and rescue vehicles, law enforcement and railway and airline carriers.

Hines believes the opportunity for RFID in the TV and film production trucks is significant. According to Hines, a truck and onboard equipment used for broadcasting major sporting events can be valued at up to \$14 million, yet much of the equipment is reloaded onto the truck using only manual checking and lists.

Even on a local news vehicle, a TV camera can be worth as much as \$40,000, with a camera lens priced at as much as \$150,000, but the price of missing items can be far higher than their replacement costs. “A news-gathering vehicle can have \$200,000 worth of equipment, but it’s not just the replacement cost of these items that have to be considered. If a \$400 microphone is missing, then the broadcast can’t be made at all and

the loss is immeasurable,” says Hines.

TOTtrak says its systems will cost anything from \$8,000 per truck for a small deployment that connects to an existing onboard computer to as much as \$50,000 per vehicle.

At present the company says it is in the process of raising a required \$10 million to fund the launch and marketing of its proposed products. The first products are expected to ship Mar. 1, and the company says it is already in talks with mobile broadcast companies.

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