

Symbol Has Designs on RFID Market

The world's largest provider of portable data terminals and bar code scanners plans to develop a complete line of RFID products.

Feb. 3, 2004—Amid all the noise about RFID technology, one potentially important player has been noticeably quiet: Symbol Technologies, the world largest provider of portable data terminals and bar code scanners. Alan Melling, senior director of automatic-identification technologies for Symbol, says despite its low profile, the company has been working with customers to develop a full line of RFID products.

"We're starting to be a little more public about our plans and what our level of commitment to the RFID space is," Melling says. "Our positioning is straightforward: We view RFID as a core technology that will be integrated with other technologies."

RFID is often talked about as a standalone system, but Symbol believes that RFID readers will be integrated with other data capture technologies, both wired and wireless, including bar code scanners and portable data terminals. Symbol intends to provide solutions that integrate all of these products, including hardware and software, and it will not limit itself to the role of reseller, as some analysts have suggested.

"We are going to be primary technology innovators in this space," Melling says. "We're going to provide the same level of technology innovation that we have in bar codes."

Until now, Symbol hasn't been trumpeting its RFID strategy publicly because it hasn't produced a commercial product yet, according to Melling. But the Holtsville, N.Y.-based company has a research and development team working on RFID products. And it recently hired Philip Lazo, a former Tyco/Sensormatic executive, to head up the RFID division of its global products group.

Symbol believes that most companies will be piloting RFID systems in 2004 and not rolling out actual deployments. Therefore, Symbol might not launch any RFID products until 2005. But in the meantime, the company will be "active with customers," Melling says. "We will be building the high-performance solutions that you would expect from Symbol."

At the recent National Retail Federation Conference & Expo in New York, Symbol showed off a prototype handheld computer with an integrated Electronic Product Code (EPC) reader. The ruggedized device has a large screen and keypad, 802.11b (WiFi) wireless LAN capability, an integrated bar code scanner and a built-in RFID reader.

The final form factor could change before the unit is released commercially, but Melling says the device embodies the approach Symbol will take towards the RFID market. "Our strategy is to provide everything you need today for supply chain applications, plus RFID," he says.

The RFID reader in the handheld operates at 915 MHz and is based on EPCglobal's Class 1 EPC specification. Symbol is focusing on EPC technology and specifically UHF for now because most of its customers want to deploy UHF systems in their supply chains. "That's what's going to work in retail supply chains," Melling

says.

In addition making handheld readers, Symbol plans to offer fixed readers because fixed readers will dominate the market. The company is looking at the possibility of creating readers in PCMCIA or compact flash cards, which could be used to upgrade existing Symbol devices, but it is concerned by the many compromises that this approach could require. "An upgradable field device is attractive for pilots," he says, "but if it increases the weight of the unit and reduces the drop spec, people in the field may not want to use it after a full-scale rollout."

Melling believes that Symbol, whose customers include Wal-Mart, Home Depot and many other large retailers, is well placed to be a major player in the market for RFID technology in the retail supply chain. "We have experience building wireless infrastructure with a thousand or more nodes," he says. "We have the experience required to create a total solution to capture the data, move it and integrate it with other sources, such as bar code scanners and wireless data capture."

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