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Gillette, P&G Put On Live EPC Demo

In the first live demonstration of EPCglobal Network technology and services, Gillette and Procter & Gamble took to the stage at the EPCglobal US Conference to show how the EPCglobal architecture can help trace shipments, combat the introduction of counterfeit products and prevent retailer out-

of-stocks.

"We are deeply committed to the EPCglobal Network and have been since 1999," said Leo Burstein, Gillette's EPC system architect. "Before we talked about the future. Now the EPCglobal Network is real, and retailers and manufacturers are putting it into action."

One demonstration linked Gillette's RFID network, which connected RFID readers deployed at its Devons, Mass., and Romeoville, Ill., distribution centers to a reader on stage at Baltimore Convention Center, where the EPCglobal US Conference was held last week.

In a scenario where a tagged case of Gillette Venus razor blades that had become separated from the shipment it was part of, Gillette showed how the EPCglobal Network could be used to identify and manage a misplaced case and ensure that it gets to its intended destination.

Using what the company calls a discovery station (an RFID reader connected to the corporate network and a display screen), which could be placed in a distribution center to identify misplaced cases, Gillette read the tag on the case and then used an Internet connection to query enterprise applications running at the company's Boston headquarters. That query, initiated by placing the tagged case within reading range of the RFID reader, was processed by the Gillette's EPC repository, the part of the company's warehouse management system (WMS) where EPC data is stored.

In response to the query, the discovery station's screen displayed information about the case, including the unique EPC of the tagged pallet associated with that case, as well as the case's purchase order number and other shipping details.

A Gillette warehouse employee could use the information to immediately reconcile the order and direct the case to the correct Gillette dock door for shipping, ensuring that a

potential out-of-stock situation is avoided, according to Burstein.

Because responses to queries might contain sensitive information, Gillette demonstrated the authentication process built into the EPCglobal Network. This process verifies that any company initiating a query has been authorized to do so, and it also verifies that the data returned in response to the query is from a trusted source. By establishing identity of the requester, the EPCglobal Network can ensure the appropriateness of the response, which might be different depending on who is asking the question. To locate the appropriate product authentication service supported by the EPCglobal Network, Gillette's discovery station used the EPCglobal Network Object Name Service (ONS) services offered by VeriSign, an authorized provider of a range of EPCglobal Network services (see VeriSign to Run EPC Directory).

Prior to the demonstration, Gillette had deployed enhancements to its Provia Enterprise Data Warehouse WMS application. Provided by Provia, these enhancements added support for EPCglobal Network.

In a second demonstration, also held on stage at the Baltimore Convention Center, P&G showed how the EPCglobal Network could be used to battle counterfeiting, as well as check the status of its products in Wal-Mart's stores and distribution centers. During the demonstration, P&G also used the EPCglobal Network Object Name Service (ONS) provided by VeriSign.

Tracking a new type of Pantene shampoo, P&G showed how the EPCglobal Network could enable manufacturers to see product quantities in the retail supply chain. Also, using RFID middleware from two rival vendors, the company attested how open standards in the EPCglobal Network design meant a range of vendor systems can be used.

In the demonstration, P&G selected a number of parameters such

as retailer, store or distribution location, and products. Having selected Wal-Mart locations in north Texas and its new Pantene product, P&G sent a query to the Object Name Service (ONS), which pointed P&G to an IP address where the data related to its query was stored. (The presentation used real inventory data taken from Wal-Mart's north Texas distribution center and stores several weeks prior to the demonstration.) This then initiated an exchange of data between P&G and Wal-Mart by means of the EPC Information Service (EPC IS)—which enables users to exchange EPC-related data with trading partners through the EPCglobal Network—to show how stock levels of a certain product were in selected stores.

By authenticating who is sending the inquiry and who is returning that data, as well as by providing visibility into where individual cartons and shipments are in the supply chain, the process ensures that the products in the supply chain are genuine, not counterfeit.

In addition, if the manufacture judges the inventory levels are too low, a feature of the software can e-mail an alert to Wal-Mart advising the retailer of the situation. It can also verify that P&G is ready to send additional shipments of the product.

As part of P&G's presentation, IBM and Tibco each demonstrated how their RFID middleware would enable the sharing of data. IBM showed how its planned RFID WebSphere product, set for release by the end of this year, could enable manufacturers like P&G to use the EPCglobal Network to see their customers' inventory. Tibco did likewise, using its BusinessWorks business integration software, which had been adapted to support EPC data for the demonstration.

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