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In The Name of RFID

I've noticed more than a few vendors trying to avoid the term "RFID" in the past couple of months. Instead of labeling their products RFID, they talk about their "traceability solutions," "wireless sensor technology" and "mesh networks," even though what they are selling is some form of radio frequency identification.

I don't know why. Maybe they want to be different—like a teenager who announces he hates his given name and demands to be called by some arbitrary new moniker. Perhaps RFID has become so well established that the name itself seems dated. Or do these companies expect to sell more products if they pretend their technology is something else?



Whatever the reason, changing the name of RFID is a very bad idea. Calling something by its commonly understood term is useful. A name, after all, is just a random set of sounds and symbols we attach to something so we can talk and think about it. It's true RFID isn't a terribly descriptive name—it could mean a way to identify radio frequencies, for example—but it's the one we've got, and the one everyone knows. If a device consists of a single chip and an antenna, with the principal purpose of identifying objects remotely using radio waves, it is RFID. Add a battery, and it's still RFID. Even attaching a sensor to, say, monitor temperature, won't change its name. Calling an RFID solution anything else is misleading and evasive, and serves no useful purpose. And, to be sure, people won't be fooled for long.

I'm guessing the real reason vendors don't want to call RFID by its name is that the technology didn't always work as promised. But if the thing itself has a problem—say, a spotty reputation—the solution is to change the thing, not the name.

Pretending an RFID system is not an RFID system doesn't solve any perceived problems with the technology—in fact, it may

draw attention to them, like a bad toupee draws attention to a man's bald patch. And like wearing a toupee, selling RFID as something else betrays a lack of confidence. That, coupled with it being misleading, is unlikely to help sales. Customers aren't stupid. They aren't buying a technology because of what it's called; they are buying it because it delivers value by solving a problem. Instead of coming up with new names for RFID, vendors must devote time and creativity to developing solid products. The solution is either useful or it isn't—no matter what it's called.

Shakespeare said it best: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." What matters is what something is, not what it is called. RFID by any other name is still RFID. Any attempts to sell RFID under a different name should be nipped in the bud.

Kevin Ashton was cofounder and executive director of the Auto-ID Center.



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