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Informed Debate

My editorial last week on the privacy issue (see [Fear of Big Brother](#)) sparked another wave of e-mail. But this one was different. Okay, there were a few missives that said things like: "They will track us, count us, watch us and penalize us." But for the most part, the e-mail I received last week from people on both sides of the debate contained some interesting insights, and I'd like to share them with you.

(I'm not going to use any names because I don't want to invade anyone's privacy.)

One reader, a former Gillette employee in Germany, pointed out that one day last week we had a story about people opposed to the tracking of consumer items and another article about Michelin testing RFID tags that could one day be put in every tire on every car. The tags in the tires could store the vehicle identification number, which means the owner of the vehicle could be traced.

"Nice coincidence," the gentleman writes. "Here we have those people who are expressing their privacy concerns about RFID tags on short-lived consumer goods which rarely leave the house once bought. And then we have a company that proudly reports a breakthrough in RFID registration through tires that could eventually be used to track all car movements throughout the country – e.g. at every major traffic light installation."

A Canadian woman wrote that she had been researching RFID for work and was growing increasingly uneasy about it. "While 99.99 percent of companies that will use this technology will do so for management and tracking [of inventory], it will be that .01 percent that invade my right to privacy (and that includes government agencies) that have no right to do so. It is neither paranoia nor far-fetched imaginings that perceive the invasion of privacy as a slippery slope to Big Brother."

Another reader was concerned about the transparency of any RFID system. "As a consumer, I want to know what's happening: what data is being collected, who's collecting it, where it's going, and so forth." He also said he wants some control over whether to divulge information and when, and he wants a sense of security about the system. He points out that a "kill switch" that disables the tag "might sound secure . . . but a novice technology user would need a way to verify [the tag's] non-response." Good points all.

And there was a note from one brave gentleman who wrote directly to CASPIAN about factual errors in the piece I mentioned in my op-ed last week. He identified himself as “one who has a commercial interest in the success and utilization of RFID.” Then, he went on to say: “I also happen to agree that there are serious issues to be addressed in the regulation and use of the data that MAY be collected through the use of RFID.”

Of the 334 people who voted in our online poll on privacy between Jan. 18 and Jan. 25, nearly two thirds felt government regulation was the answer. Twenty-percent favored self-regulation and 17 percent said the government should adopt a laissez-faire approach. The poll isn't scientific, so there is no way to know whether those in favor of government regulation include people selling RFID systems or marketers who could use data from RFID systems.

But overall, I'm encouraged that those who stand to gain from the widespread adoption of RFID recognize that there are legitimate privacy concerns. And I'm encouraged that many privacy advocates recognize that the solution is not banning RFID tags on consumer goods, but finding appropriate ways of ensuring consumer rights are protected.

In the interests of encouraging an open and informed debate, we've created a privacy bulletin board. It is meant to be a forum for a constructive debate. It will be monitored, so any messages that are rude or threatening won't be posted. I hope over time it will serve as a gathering place where people can express ideas and learn.

I've stated my views on this topic, mainly to provide a reference point for readers. Now, I would encourage you to state your views on the bulletin board. The most important thing right now is not finding the perfect formula, which probably doesn't exist. It's raising the issues and educating the public. The less people know about RFID, the more they

will fear it.

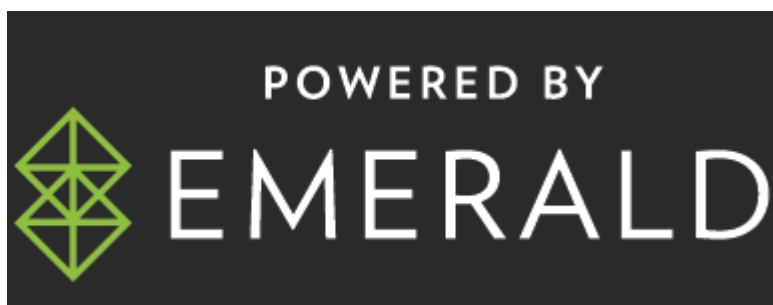
The bottom line for me is very simple: I believe RFID offers huge potential benefits for companies and for consumers. It would be a shame if neither got those benefits because a small group whips up fear by spreading untruths about the technology, or because a very small percentage of companies abuse RFID's potential.



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