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Marks & Spencer Leads the Way

Marks & Spencer (M&S), the popular British department store chain, is a pioneer in the use of radio frequency identification technology. In 2000, the company began tracking plastic trays carrying food items via high-frequency tags. In 2003, it launched its first trial to determine the benefits of employing ultrahigh-frequency (UHF) tags to track individual clothing items, and it created a privacy plan that is still a

model for the industry (see U.K. Trial Addresses Privacy Issue).

In 2005, Marks & Spencer decided to roll out a passive UHF system to track 14 types of apparel, each of which came in a wide variety of colors and sizes. In 2012, the company's board of directors approved a plan to track all apparel and general merchandise at all of its 760 stores. So this year, M&S began implementing a program to track bedding and other home goods, as well as kitchenware and beauty products (see Marks & Spencer Rolls Out RFID to All Its Stores).



Last week, Kim Phillips, M&S' head of packaging, spoke at RFID Journal LIVE! Europe. Phillips, who also runs the company's RFID program, said a typical female shopper spends 24 minutes in the women's department, which is not a lot of time to inspire and impress a customer. "RFID is about getting accurate information on the stock position in each store and keeping it accurate," he told the audience. "It's about improving the true availability of sizes and colors. We want to be known as the store in which you can always find your size."

M&S also aims to be an international omnichannel retailer, and RFID will help provide the visibility that will enable this approach (see Omnichannel Retailing and RFID: Omnichannel Superstar). Items are tagged by suppliers in some 200 factories throughout 20 countries. The tags are read only when items arrive at the sales floor. Store associates perform inventory counts every two weeks, using handheld interrogators. The collected data is forwarded to a database

developed in-house, and inventory reports are generated that then trigger replenishment. The result, Phillips reported, is more accurate replenishment from distribution centers and better on-shelf availability, which leads to a “proven increase in sales.”

The company now wants to extend these benefits to all of its product categories. Phillips said M&S has been working with Avery Dennison to develop new RFID tags for items composed of metal, or that contain high water content, both of which are less RF-friendly. “The technology is changing all the time,” he told attendees. “We are working to make metal tags more aesthetically pleasing, not the ones with high sponge backing, and we are finding great advancements.”

As a result, the company expects to be RFID-tracking all cosmetics, pastes, metal products, stacked products and products with foil packaging, which have typically been among the hardest to read, by 2015. “If you had asked me six months ago if we would be able to tag these products by 2015, I would have said I don’t know,” Phillips said. “Six months from now, there will be even more advancements. Six months to a year is a long time in the RFID industry. The technology is improving in leaps and bounds, and [the pace of innovation] is accelerating all the time.”

Phillips talked about the need to conduct training and ensure that store employees follow the new processes. “Good change management and compliance reporting is essential,” he explains. He also stressed that while there are many areas in which RFID can be used and many benefits that can be achieved, “you need to focus on one or two areas that will deliver a return on investment.”

In addition, Phillips showed a slide listing 16 touch points where RFID might be used to collect data and improve processes, though he cautioned that it is important to achieve

a return on investment (ROI) on a single application and then add others. The one application on which M&S is focused is improving inventory accuracy and on-shelf availability. “We are looking at some of these other areas,” he said. “We’d be foolish not to—but you can’t do it all at once.”

According to Phillips, M&S is currently trialing a new footwear application at three of its stores. Shoes are tagged, and a shopper can bring a pair to a shelf containing an interactive display. The shoes’ tag is read, and the screen shows handbags and other accessories that coordinate with that specific pair. M&S considered the same application two years ago, he noted, but did not feel it would deliver an ROI at that time. Since then, however, the technology has evolved to the point at which it now looks like it will provide a return. Upselling in this way, Phillips said, is one of the 16 additional areas in which RFID could deliver added benefits.

Phillips said he got into RFID because he was M&S’ “packaging guy.” He was thus asked to buy the tags, but he became a big believer in the technology’s benefits. “I’m very passionate about RFID,” he stated, “which is strange, because I’m a packaging guy.”

Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below. To read more of Mark’s opinions, visit the RFID Journal Blog, the Editor’s Note archive or RFID Connect.



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