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ONS: Leveraging E-Commerce

By Ross Stapleton-Gray

The Electronic Product Code improves on the previous generation of product codes by making it possible for all items to carry a unique identifier. That and another fundamental change—the creation of the Object Name Service to sit at the center of things and direct inquiries about product

codes—will mean as much for the growth of Internet commerce as it will for RFID.

In retrospect, as powerful a lever as the bar code has turned out to be, the bar code's creators delivered it without a critical feature: a proper fulcrum on which to rest. The Uniform Code Council defined the UPC more than 30 years ago, but it was left to companies such as QRS and GXS to create industry-level clearinghouses for product data. They simplified fetching information about products by product code: A major retailer no longer had to query a thousand manufacturers for information, but simply requested (or required) that manufacturers provide that information to a clearinghouse.



EPCglobal has provided a different solution to that problem—the ONS. The ONS will be a fairly simple “traffic cop,” directing inquiries about product codes to the appropriate authorities: the products’ manufacturers.

Finding authoritative product information today—to create a retail Web site or comparison-shopping service, for example—is a challenge; there are few standards for expressing information, and no guaranteed way to identify the authoritative sources. But because the ONS will use a product code to ensure that a product’s source can be identified, there will be powerful incentives for this information to be

made far more regular and organized.

This will fuel e-commerce, not just RFID deployment. Consumers will begin to find product information more readily accessible—first from the manufacturers that would like to push information into the marketplace to expedite sales, and then from third parties, who will more readily reach an audience as people become accustomed to asking for information by product codes.

As product codes become useful “handles” for finding and fetching information, we’re likely to see online commerce shift from today’s model, where a consumer visits retail Web sites and drills down to find products of interest. Instead, when the consumer sees something she’d like to buy—on a comparison-shopping site or through a variety of imaginable services for advertising goods—she’ll tell the network, “OK, find this item for me.” The service can quickly query retailers, which need only publish the most basic information on what they carry (product codes and associated prices) to be found.

The ONS could enable this kind of online commerce if it is promoted to manufacturers, retailers and other e-commerce implementers as something more than a means to keep track of RFID tags. It requires a broader vision of what impact unique identification numbers could have on commerce, particularly electronic commerce, where the goods are more often referenced than

actually handled.

Ross Stapleton-Gray is the founder and principal analyst of Stapleton-Gray & Associates, an information technology and policy consulting services company in Berkeley, Calif. This essay is based on his white paper “Leveraging Product Codes for Internet Commerce.” To comment on this article, click on

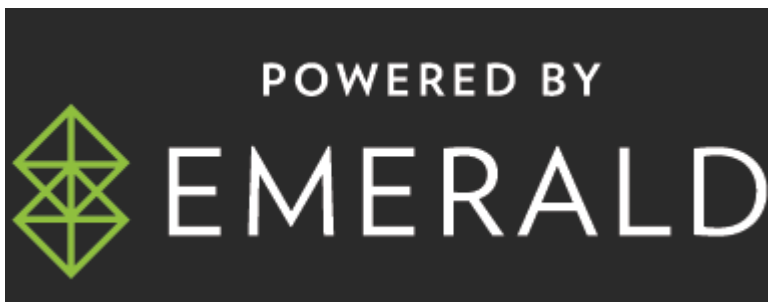
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