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Reflections on RFID Journal LIVE! 2015

Each year, particularly since the financial collapse of 2008, I have looked at RFID Journal LIVE! as a leading indicator of trends for radio frequency identification products, services and adoption. The Great Recession had a chilling effect on investment in new technologies, including RFID. Companies that

had serious business issues that only RFID could solve still attended the event, but most other firms put their RFID projects on hold.

Attendance at LIVE! 2009 fell to 2,400, from a peak of 3,000 in 2008. For the next three years, attendance remained at around 2,500. Things began to change in 2013. That year, attendance rose by approximately 3 percent, and it increased by roughly 5 percent last year. This year, attendance rose by 8 percent, and we topped 3,000 people for the first time since 2008. If we don't have another recession or some other external issue, I believe RFID adoption will continue to accelerate, and growth in attendance at LIVE! along with it.



A growing number of companies now understand RFID and what it can do. No one I spoke to prior to or at the event questioned the price of the technology or whether it would work. They came to find a solution.

The feedback I received from exhibitors was overwhelmingly positive. Two solution providers told me that traffic at their booths was double last year's. Most exhibitors said booth traffic was up from 2014, and that the quality of the conversations was better. The typical comment went something like this: "Mark, outstanding event. Congratulations. The traffic to our booth is good. We are talking to more end users and the conversations we are having are fantastic. Great show."

More attendees purchased higher-level registration passes this year. The number of All-Access Passes (the highest level), for example, rose by 25 percent from last year. This reflects

improving economic conditions, but also suggests companies are getting more serious about learning about RFID.

During the RFID Strategic Workshop that I delivered on the last afternoon of the conference, one gentleman came up to me and said: "It's interesting to see how other companies in our industry are using the technology, but it's even more interesting to see how people in other industries are using it. We can borrow ideas from them and really innovate."

If you're familiar with Gartner's Hype Cycle, you know that technologies are hyped up, and that when they fail to deliver, they fall into the "trough of disillusionment." Over time, solutions improve, the technology matures and people figure out how it can deliver value.

RFID has clearly emerged from the trough of disillusionment phase of the Gartner Hype Cycle and is now well up the Slope of Enlightenment, meaning more people are figuring out how to use it. I think we will see momentum accelerate until we reach the tipping point and adoption explodes. That's still a few years away. (Meanwhile, the Internet of Things is nearing the Peak of Inflated Expectations.)

There were some noticeable trends, too, in the types of attendees. There were more bar-code systems integrators and resellers than in past years. I talked to a few, who said their customers are asking about RFID more frequently now. They were coming to learn how to deploy RFID solutions, and to meet the vendors offering the tags and readers their customers will need. That's good news for RFID vendors, because it means the sales channel is expanding, which will further fuel growth.

There were folks from some new industries this year, particularly entertainment. I met a number of people from companies that print tickets for concerts, amusement parks and sporting events. They said their customers are interested in

using RFID to reduce counterfeiting, which is a growing problem, and to develop interactive experiences for their attendees. This is good news as well, because it will drive up the volume of chips and inlays produced, which should reduce costs for everyone else.

Another positive sign was the increase in retailers at the event. Representatives from all major U.S. department stores, as well as a several specialty retailers, attended the event. There were quite a few European retailers in attendance as well. The numbers are still small compared to the total number of retailers globally. But clearly, more retailers believe they can benefit from RFID. I'm sure we'll see the number of retailers at the event grow next year.

There has been a lot of consolidation in the RFID industry during the past few years, as companies ran low on cash and could not generate sufficient cash flow to stay independent, or as investors grew impatient and forced a sale to get their money out. There is still more consolidation on the horizon, I believe, but companies with good RFID products and a little marketing should see their incomes rise, so the trend should begin to slow.

The RFID industry still has more work to do to get the technology to the tipping point. So in a few weeks, RFID Journal will host a webinar in which I will discuss what RFID companies need to do individually and collaboratively to move the industry forward. We'll know when we've reached the tipping point when I write, after a LIVE! event, that we had 10,000 attendees. I don't think we're many years away from that achievement.

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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