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RFID Helps Quarantine Products to Ensure Shopper Safety

As apparel retailers reopen their brick-and-mortar businesses, one unexpected challenge they face centers around fitting rooms. Customer discomfort with using fitting rooms during the

COVID-19 pandemic is expected to cause an increase in returns as garments are purchased without being tried on for size.

Checkpoint Systems has released a solution that leverages RFID technology to help retailers manage the quarantining of garments and other goods after they have been tried on or returned, thereby helping to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 as stores reopen. The solution, known as Inventory Quarantine (IQ), helps stores ensure that goods are properly removed from the sales floor for preset intervals after they have been tried on or received back from a customer, or after they have arrived from another store. The cloud-based software-as-a-service solution automates the capturing of data indicating when an item was put into quarantine. It is designed to alert sales personnel once that quarantine period has ended, as well as help them locate items that are ready to return to the sales floor.



Checkpoint
Systems'
Philip
Fisher

The benefit of the solution, says Philip Fisher, Checkpoint Systems' HALO global product manager, is multifold. It helps stores return to business operations safely, he explains, by reducing the potential for contact-based disease transmission, both for customers and employees. Additionally, Fisher says, by helping a store identify when a product's quarantine period has completed, the system enables companies to return items to

the sales stream quickly, whether a product is in a store or at a distribution center.

Checkpoint is currently in conversations with approximately two dozen companies regarding how to launch a quarantine solution as they resume normal business. These businesses, comprising large and small retailers and fulfillment centers, are located throughout North America, Europe and Australia.

Fitting rooms and return processes have emerged among the many challenges facing stores as they reopen their doors to customers. In fact, many that have already reopened have not yet opened their fitting rooms. A CNBC survey found that 65 percent of women shoppers do not feel safe trying on clothing in fitting rooms, while 54 percent of men feel the same way, because the virus may be transmittable for hours or days on surfaces through touch contact. Due to this concern, shoppers may be more likely to purchase an item without trying it on, which means the rate of returned goods increases.

Considering this new trend, Checkpoint examined its own solutions and built the IQ system as part of its HALO software suite. "We have our own research and development for hardware and software," Fisher says, adding, "We were able to move rapidly on this [challenge]" to create a solution. Those planning to deploy the technology are split between companies already using RFID technology and those that are not. Checkpoint's solution, he says, is intended for use by either category.

As purchased goods are received back from a customer as returned items, any passive RFID tags on garments can be read using a handheld reader that forwards the collected data to the IQ software. If the retailer is not already utilizing RFID technology, it would simply need to apply a passive UHF RFID tag from Checkpoint to each returned garment and then use the handheld reader to encode that tag. The items could be placed in a designated quarantine area that would keep them out of

reach of both customers and sales personnel for a predetermined period, such as 48 or 72 hours. The IQ software, in the meantime, would store the unique ID numbers linked to those products, which managers could access on a dashboard.

Once the quarantine period has ended, the software can issue an alert to authorize parties via Checkpoint's Task Management functionality. Conversely, users can simply utilize the dashboard to view which items are scheduled to be removed from quarantine, then use the handheld reader to locate those items for release. For instance, the handheld's software could list any items due for release, and as the reader was brought within range of the tags, those goods could be highlighted on the list to alert the user.

The sales associate could take the garments out of quarantine and read their RFID tags to indicate that action was taking place. The items would then be removed from the quarantine list in the software. If a customer wishes to try on a garment in the fitting room, the technology can track that event and ensure that any garment not purchased is moved directly into quarantine before another customer can handle it. Retailers can determine the process for this task, Fisher says, though typically he envisions RFID tags being applied to garments after a customer has tried them on.

Shoppers on their way into a fitting room would be instructed to leave behind any garments they do not plan to purchase, or to place those garments in a specific area or bin. Sales personnel would apply the tags to the products and read those tags in order to input their data into the IQ software. The garments would then remain in quarantine for the predetermined interval.

According to the company, several retailers are interested in using the technology to identify goods as they are received from another store, and to similarly place those items in

quarantine as well. For DCs or fulfillment centers, the technology could be used at a warehouse to identify items returned or received back from a store or customer, so that they do not end up in the hands of sales representatives or customers until the quarantine period has passed.

The solution is designed for fast and low-cost implementation, Fisher says. Checkpoint Provides its own UHF RFID tags and handheld readers via partner manufacturers, along with the hosted IQ software solution. Users could employ the solution on a subscription basis, and retailers could inform customers that the garments they are trying on or purchasing are protected by a quarantining system. That should boost consumer confidence, Fisher predicts, while helping to protect the safety of customers and employees alike. "It's reassuring retailers that they've got an automated solution that works flawlessly," he states, "and it's in store associates' hands."

First and foremost, Fisher says, the technology is designed with safety in mind. Secondary benefits include ensuring that items in quarantine, which are basically frozen from sales inventory, are released in a timely manner. Additionally, he says, locating those items with the handheld reader will reduce labor time that the sales staff would otherwise have to spend manually looking through products. Furthermore, as the high rate of returns continues to challenge stores—and Fisher says the retail industry may expect that trend to continue—the technology ensures that the IQ process makes that faster and more efficient.

For those that already use RFID for inventory management, Fisher adds, the IQ function can provide an added feature to their existing system. Others that are new to RFID may expand to using the tags on goods for other purposes as well, such as inventory management. "They can start using RFID to solve a problem and then leverage it elsewhere," he states.



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