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RFID Is Not a Dirty Word

My recent Editor's Note criticizing the RFID industry for not doing more to promote the technology's benefits in general, instead of relentlessly promoting one type of radio frequency identification over another, prompted a few e-mails (see [Selling RFID Short](#)). One reader agreed with everything I said, but two marketing professionals told me their salespeople don't want them to mention RFID. "They think it's a dirty

word," one wrote.

There are reasons why RFID has a bad reputation among some businesspeople. First, some vendors have oversold their products. Talk to end users, and they'll tell you vendors promise their products will do everything they need it to do—but when push comes to shove, the vendors can't deliver. This isn't unusual with any new technology. It's something that reputable companies have to fight against, by promising only what they can actually deliver, and then delivering what they promise.



Another reason RFID is perceived badly by some is that the technology became associated with the cost of complying with tagging requirements. Wal-Mart, to its credit, has been trying to quantify the benefits to suppliers, in the hope that this will encourage them to tag voluntarily.

I think it's also true that some businesspeople want to believe anything negative about RFID, because they don't want to change the way they do things. This is also common with new technologies. I remember a fellow writer telling me, in the mid-1980s, that he would never use a personal computer to write articles, because he needed to "feel the typewriter keys" to be creative. Needless to say, he hasn't used a typewriter since about 1987. I also remember business executives saying the Internet was a thing for teenagers, and that no one would come home from work and shop online.

Salespeople say they need to discuss traceability and

visibility, rather than RFID. That seems difficult to do. *RFID Journal* focuses heavily on how the technology is used, rather than simply how it works. But you can't talk about benefits without explaining how they can be achieved. Ironically, most vendor presentations I've seen don't focus on the benefits customers can achieve. Rather, they dwell endlessly on how their company's technology offers greater read range or location precision than that of their competitors. I've often thought that these people don't understand their customers. End users don't want the "best" technology—they want the most cost-effective solution that will get the job done.

The fact that some salespeople get pushback when they mention RFID reinforces my point that we, as an industry, have not done an effective job of selling the technology's overall value. Many still believe RFID is expensive, unreliable and unable to deliver much value. Clearly, however, a large portion of the 1 million or so people who have visited the *RFID Journal* site this year know that there are many different kinds of RFID systems; that when you choose the right technology and design the system properly, the technology is reliable; that RFID can be a cost-effective way to collect information; and that the technology can deliver a return on investment.

Here's what I think the industry needs to do, going forward:

Stop overselling the technology: I know companies are eager—and, in some cases, desperate for sales—but the credibility of each company, and of the industry as a whole, is tarnished when a vendor claims its technology can do more than it is capable of doing.

Address the issue of cost: Yes, it's cheaper to put a bar code on an object than an RFID tag, but collecting data with bar codes can be more expensive than using RFID. The industry needs to hammer home this point to the world at large.

Address the issue of reliability: Bar codes are not 100

percent reliable, and RFID doesn't need to be either, in order to deliver value. The industry needs to constantly repeat that RFID is often more reliable than bar codes. In a demonstration we did at this year's RFID in Fashion event, a person scanning items with an RFID interrogator missed only one tag, while an individual scanning bar codes missed six (view the video).

Talk up the technology in general, and don't talk down RFID systems you don't sell: If you sell passive ultrahigh-frequency (UHF) RFID systems, don't dwell on the limits of high-frequency (HF) systems, and vice versa. If you sell a Wi-Fi-based system, don't constantly discuss the limitations of other active RFID systems. Talk about the benefits of real-time location data, and when a customer is convinced he can benefit from such a system, then you can explain why your company's technology is the better choice. (But don't oversell!)

RFID is a powerful technology, and almost all businesses in all industries could benefit from using it in one way or another. It takes time for any technology to mature to the point where it is reliable, cost-effective and easy to deploy. Once it has reached that stage—and I believe RFID is there, or very close to being there—there is a lag between public perception and reality. One salesperson told me he used to avoid talking about RFID, but that it's no longer an issue. "When a customer is clearly negative on RFID," he said, "we now have half a dozen successful case studies we can point to in his industry, to convince him he's wrong."

That's a sign of progress.

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 or click here.



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