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RFID Power to the People

This fall, Ford Motor Co. began offering Tool Link as an option in its F-Series pickup trucks. The new feature uses RFID technology to keep a real-time inventory of tagged tools stored in the back of the truck. The system also notifies the driver if anything gets left behind. Next year, Ford plans to expand the feature to its E-Series vehicles. Tool Link is not exactly a consumer application—it's designed to help people do

their jobs—but it is a rare example of RFID for individuals rather than businesses.

There is one RFID consumer application—aside from things like passports, where nobody has a choice—that a large number of individuals are choosing to use: electronic toll-collection systems. Roughly 10 million RFID tags are in use in cars around the world, under programs such as E-ZPass in the United States and Liber-T in France. It costs around \$30 or €30 to buy a tag for one of these systems.



Why are so many people willing to pay so much for one RFID tag? Because the benefits are simple and immediate: speed and convenience. While other motorists wait in long lines and fumble for the correct change, RFID-enabled drivers whiz through exclusive lanes that read their RFID tags and automatically deduct tolls from their account balances. In newer systems, they don't even have to slow down. New York's Tappan Zee Bridge, for example, has RFID lanes that work at 40 mph, and Florida's Tampa Crosstown Expressway Bridge collects tolls from cars moving at normal highway speeds.

There are big benefits for the roads' owners, too: In addition to getting revenue from selling the tags, they speed up their toll collection and reduce congestion. While a manual tollbooth can process 400 cars per hour, RFID systems can handle as many as 2,200, without the need for a human toll collector.

What does this tell us about the spread of RFID in the consumer market? First, consumers will pay for an RFID application that delivers value, such as hours of saved time. Second, consumers don't care that it's RFID—whether that means the much-hyped shiny new technology that will take over the world, or the privacy-ending mark-of-the-beast technology foretold in the Book of Revelation. Most people don't own anything shinier or more private than their cars, yet motorists aren't wrapping them in tinfoil when they aren't taking toll roads.

The lesson seems clear: What consumers value is value. If an RFID application delivers real value, issues such as price and privacy won't matter so much. I expect Ford's new venture will produce good results in time. Showing up at a construction site with the wrong tools, spending extra time looking for the right tools, or losing tools altogether sounds every bit as inconvenient as sitting in a long toll line hunting for quarters.

Kevin Ashton was cofounder and executive director of the Auto-ID Center.



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