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Selling RFID Short

I was at an event recently where the CEOs of two companies that offer real-time location systems (RTLS) were speaking. Each CEO spent approximately 35 minutes of a 40-minute presentation explaining why his technology was superior to the other. The result was that the end users in the audience were at a loss as to which system—if either—could deliver business benefits. Watching these two companies beat each other up

crystallized in my mind some things I've been thinking about a lot lately.

The RFID industry hasn't done a good job of promoting itself. It really didn't need to do so in the early days. Wal-Mart said it was going to use the technology, and that got everyone focused on it. The problem is that RFID got associated with tracking cases and pallets in the Wal-Mart supply chain, and when the retailer stopped talking about its progress, the mainstream business media assumed the technology was a bust. The fact that many companies are using RFID to lower costs and achieve other major benefits is not being reported.



We have seen some firms, such as ClearCount and Verayo, get some positive press lately (see RFID Companies Recognized for Technology Innovation). But why is it that a technology that can deliver so much benefit to companies, consumers and society as a whole is receiving so little attention?

The answer, in part, is that the RFID industry is selling itself short. Vendors are not going out and selling people on the merits of using RFID. They're running down one kind of RFID in an effort to promote their own brand, and this is turning off end users. I can't tell you how many people have told me that they don't want to invest in RFID because they don't know which system will work best. "The vendors all tell me their system does everything I want, and the other guy's system does none of what I want," said one hospital executive I met at our recent RFID in Health Care event. "I don't know what to believe."

The reality is that no RFID system will do everything you want it to, and some vendors have oversold the technology. But if you are looking to track assets, a reliable systems integrator can help you choose the proper technology; most active systems will work over longer distances, and passive tags over shorter distances. The technology choices are not that difficult. Heck, call me up and *I'll* help you choose the right technology if you don't trust the vendors.

I think that any vendor who speaks in front of a business audience should extol the virtues of RFID, first and foremost. The industry needs to convince the world that the technology works and delivers real benefits today. Then, once people are convinced, vendors can compete over whose system is better. The industry could also do more to get the word out by placing stories in the mainstream business media, and by finding other creative ways to educate people regarding RFID's potential. Earlier this year, I wrote about promoting the technology at the World Economic Forum in Davos (see *Raising RFID's Profile With Movers and Shakers*). No one even sent me an e-mail saying, "Good idea."

A few weeks ago, I wrote about funding research to build calculators that would allow end users to figure their likely return on investment in an RFID system for different industries (see *Putting Some Science Behind RFID*). I received a couple of e-mails, but no one said they'd put up some funding to help build the calculators in an effort to build the industry.

Andy Kowl, CEO of RFID Switchboard, recently wrote about our acquisition of RFID Update, and made the point that companies spend thousands of dollars a year in search advertising with Google, but send press releases to *RFID Update* (and *RFID Journal*) expecting a free write-up. Publications can't survive without support. Google does nothing to promote the RFID industry, except point people to articles written by *RFID Journal* or *RFID Update*. RFID publications do a lot, but not

every company deems it valuable to support media outlets that are helping to educate their potential clients.

In the eight years I've been publishing *RFID Journal*, we have never published anything negative about competing Web sites or events, even when others wrote negative things about us. My feeling was that our competitors were helping to build the RFID industry, and I hoped that over time, we would win over their readers with higher quality content and better value.

Competition is healthy, but the industry needs first to convince businesses that RFID can solve some of their problems—and it certainly can—and then compete on the technology's relative merits.

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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