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Service Bureaus for Smart Labels

As manufacturers and logistics companies prepare to start applying RFID labels to their shipments to meet mandates from retailers and the U.S. Department of Defense, two companies have announced services that will prepare and deliver EPC-compliant labels to order.



Mischa Reis

Both Avery Dennison Retail Information Services (RIS) and Paxar have added RFID capabilities to their label service bureaus.

Avery Dennison RIS's existing Ticket Express service bureaus produce, manage and deliver preprinted carton labels to product manufacturers worldwide. Customers of the new RFID Ticket Express service will also be able to order RFID EPC Class 1 UHF smart labels. The service bureau will program each label's embedded tag with an Electronic Product Code, verify that the data was written to the tag properly, and deliver the labels to a customer's manufacturing and distribution centers anywhere in the world within 48 to 72 hours, according to Avery Dennison RIS.

The company's existing Ticket Express facilities consist of 35 printing centers in more than 30 countries and a global order management system that manages the ordering, production and delivery of the labels. The new RFID Ticket Express offering will share the same order management system that the other facilities use.

"RFID Ticket Express is built on our existing service bureau network that already produces hundreds of millions carton labels and billions of price tickets and tags every year," says Mischa Reis, director of marketing for Avery Dennison RIS, which is based in Framingham, Mass.

The key difference with Avery Dennison RIS's new service,

besides using RFID labels instead of regular carton labels without embedded tags, is that customers need to supply the service bureau with one additional data field that contains the EPC numbers for the labels. Then an RFID printer-encoder, rather than a regular label printer, produces the finished label and verifies that the data on the chip is accurate. "All other business processes in our worldwide service bureaus remain the same," says Reis.

The company says it will roll out RFID capabilities gradually to its 35 service locations at a rate that will be based on market development and customer needs. Avery Dennison RIS printer centers in Asia, Europe and North America are now equipped to provide RFID Ticket Express services, and soon so will facilities in Latin America. Equipping those centers requires the deployment of RFID printer-encoders that can program tags, verify the tags' EPC data, and print text and bar codes on the labels.

In addition to supporting EPC Class 1 tags, Avery Dennison RIS offers read verification of factory-programmed EPCs (and the printing of bar codes and human-readable information) for EPC Class 0 tags. It will also support EPC Generation 2 when tags based on that standard become available.

According to the company, its customers are likely to be suppliers looking to meet retail and Department of Defense mandates to attach RFID tags to their product shipments. The service is available immediately but the labels are available in limited quantities geared to supporting the current requirements of companies as they gear up to apply RFID tags to of their shipments. According to Avery Dennison RIS, companies will be buying tags in the thousands for testing at this stage, but the quantity will ramp up significantly later this year and in early 2005.

By outsourcing the printing and encoding of labels, companies can avoid the expense of investing in the RFID equipment,

systems integration, operation and training associated with in-house printing operations. Outsourcing also prevents pushing that responsibility and investment to manufacturing operations.

“Based on conversations we already had with a number of customers, outsourcing particularly appeals to companies that have a worldwide contract manufacturing base which changes frequently,” says Reis, who stresses that customers can use RFID Ticket Express to support or complement in-house RFID printing operations.

According to Avery Dennison RIS, pricing for the service will vary according to the total number of labels ordered and number of locations to which the labels are shipped.

Paxar, which is based in White Plains, N.Y., has long offered its Monarch Q-Service, which that provides its retail supply chain customers with labels printed with bar codes and human-readable text. Paxar’s Monarch Q-Service for RFID, launched last April as a trial and now in full production, provides the same service for smart labels.

As with Avery Dennison RIS’s offering, the Monarch Q-Service for RFID will print and program RFID labels to order and will deliver tested working labels anywhere in the world. So far Paxar is producing all its finished labels from its Dayton, Ohio, plant, but the company says that as demand increases, it will extend RFID-labeling capabilities across its operations in 75 countries.

The company says that presently, it supports only smart labels with EPC Class 1 tags. In as little as 48 hours after an order is placed, Paxar can program the tags with EPC codes and print the labels with bar codes and human-readable text. According to the company, it has already successfully fulfilled trial orders in the second quarter with some customers, with order sizes ranging from the hundreds to the thousands.

“Some customers are viewing this service as a temporary step while they are in the early stages of RFID deployment, but for others, using Monarch Q-Service for RFID will be a permanent solution,” says Bob Glavin, director of marketing at Paxar.

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