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## The China Syndrome

At the Frontline Solutions trade show in Chicago last week, many sessions were sparsely attended. But when Edward Zeng spoke, there were nearly 100 people in the room. Zeng is CEO and founder of Sparkice, a Beijing-based Internet and e-commerce company. He is also a member of the Chinese National Auto-ID Standards Working Group, a body charged with helping decide which RFID technology standards China will adopt.

The issue of China's role in the development of RFID standards has been bubbling beneath the surface for several months. EPCglobal has been eager to get China to embrace EPC, but it was getting signals that China planned to create its own RFID standards. The issue is out in the open now.



Zeng said that China will be an important consumer and producer of RFID technology, and that there can be no global standard unless China is given an active role in developing that standard (see [China Urges Role in EPC Standards](#)). I had breakfast with Zeng before the event began. He pointed out that China, South Korea and Japan recently agreed to harmonize their standards for RFID, and that that gives Asian nations, which produce a lot of the goods that enter the global supply chain, a lot of clout.

Zeng believes there will likely be three major RFID standards—International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Electronic Product Code and an Asian standard, perhaps based on the Ubiquitous ID developed by Japan's Tron Project, which is led by Ken Sakamura (see [Japanese Promote Ubiquitous RFID](#)). Given that ISO's UHF standard has two flavors—18000-6A and 18000-6B—and EPCglobal's Class 1, Class 0 and proposed Gen 2 standard are not compatible, companies will need to deal with as many as six distinct UHF protocols.

It's not uncommon for technologies to have several "standards" during the early stages of adoption. The question is: How do we get to one, global standard for UHF RFID systems? There are essentially two ways to go. EPCglobal could take the lead and try to bring representatives from ISO and from Asian standards bodies to the table to try to work out one UHF standard. That would inevitably delay approval of EPCglobal's Gen 2 standard and the ISO 18000-6 standards. The other option is for ISO, EPC and Asian standards bodies to go ahead and publish all the standards and then work together to create a migration path toward a single standard.

I would like to see the industry adopt the latter approach. It could take a year or more to get everyone to agree on a single standard, and there's no guarantee that they ever will. By publishing the standards now, companies can move ahead with adoption and purchase multiprotocol readers to deal with the various protocols in use around the world. Moreover, the market itself might determine which standard is best.

China is a major manufacturing center (Zeng puts output at \$850 billion a year). Many of the goods it produces will be tagged within China, before entering the global supply chain. Since Beijing can mandate what protocols are used within China, it can inhibit the adoption of EPC and ISO standards.

EPCglobal, ISO and Asian standards bodies should continue their own work. At the same time, representatives of EPCglobal and ISO should invite their Asian counterparts to work together to create a parallel development track that charts a course toward a single global standard. In the end, that's what companies need if they are ever going to achieve the efficiencies RFID promises to deliver.

*Mark Roberti is the founder and editor of RFID Journal. If you would like to comment on this article, click on the link below.*

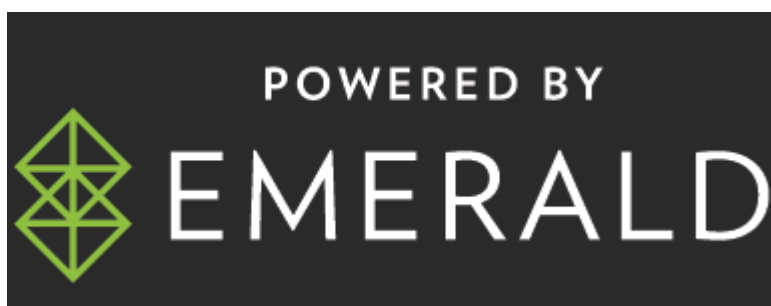
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