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The Tragedy of the Commons

The “tragedy of the commons” is one of the oldest conundrums in economics. A medieval village sets aside some common land where all herders can let their livestock graze. It’s efficient, and everyone benefits—that is, until a few people allow their animals to eat more grass than is their fair share. These “free riders” spoil the pasture for everybody, and soon there’s no more grass and no more commons. And, in a

conclusion with equal parts justice and irony, the free riders lose—there is nowhere for their animals to graze, either. The moral? Everyone can benefit from communal resources, as long as all participants do their part and play fair.

Modern business has many equivalents of the medieval commons. Professional organizations, standards bodies, trade publications and conferences all foster shared, community activities essential to the development of a healthy competitive market. Without them, there is no place to build consensus, pool information or gather to attract customers. This fact is embedded right in the word “market”—literally, a single location where competing vendors come together to sell their goods to consumers. No community, no market.



The RFID industry was founded on these principles. The Auto-ID Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was conceived as a “campfire” around which innovative end users and technology vendors could gather to create something new and better. It deliberately connected to other similar campfire communities, especially trade associations. And it actively encouraged the creation of conferences and trade publications, including *RFID Journal*.

Unfortunately, these vital community resources are in peril today. Every time an RFID company pushes for publicity instead of buying an ad, or tries to slip its message in through the back door of a trade show without paying the price of admission, or doesn't pay its dues to an important trade

association or standards body, it's taking a free ride. Yes, there's an obvious short-term benefit: a few dollars saved. But, in the long run, it's a strategic mistake. If those campfires die, the market dies, too.

I don't get paid for this column. I write it because I believe RFID is important, and that a dynamic, rigorous trade press is vital to the health and growth of the technology. Yes, it's nice to have a soapbox to stand on and to see my name in print, but I have nothing else to lose if this publication fails. That's not true for *RFID Journal's* readers—end users would lose a source of education, and technology providers would lose a connection to potential buyers of their products.

Similarly, it's important for end users and technology vendors alike to support organizations working to create RFID standards for their industry, whether it's EPCglobal, the Financial Services Technology Consortium, the RFID in Construction Consortium or the Oil & Gas RFID Solution Group.

If you make a living selling RFID or your company plans to use it to increase efficiency, you have a lot to gain by making sure the industry's commons stays healthy. It's not enough to work and invest to protect your position in the market. You also have to protect the market itself.

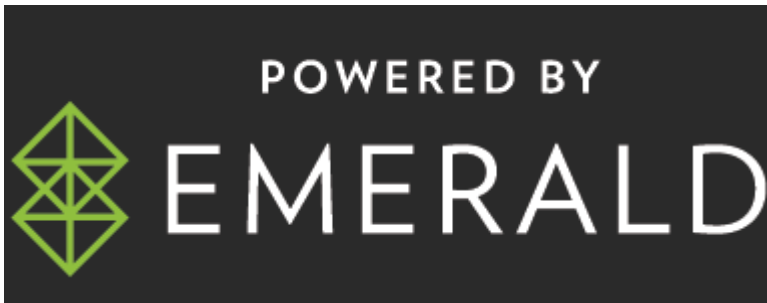
Kevin Ashton was cofounder and executive director of the Auto-ID Center.



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