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UCC and RosettaNet To Merge

Aug. 12, 2002 – The Uniform Code Council is best known as the industry-backed group that created and now manages the bar code system in North America. But over the past two decades, the UCC, which now has 260,000 members in 23 industries, has taken on a broader mission to develop standards for whatever technologies can drive supply chain efficiencies.

Last week's announcement that RosettaNet would become a wholly owned subsidiary of the UCC was another step in that direction, according to Mike Silvey, a spokesperson for UCC. "We are focused on the overall formation of standards," he says. "That was the major underlying reason for the merger."

The move could have some far-reaching implications for the world of auto-identification. The UCC has set up something called the UCCnet Global Registry, a listing of products that includes more than 60 different descriptions, such as manufacturer, category, part number, and package size. It is used by nearly 100 manufacturers and 10 grocery chains.

RosettaNet has been working for several years on a framework for identifying electronics parts and defining business processes between companies in the electronics industry. RosettaNet has the backing of more than 450 companies worldwide representing more than \$1 trillion in annual revenue.

The combined UCC-RosettaNet could play a major role in jumpstarting the use of low-cost RFID for auto-identification because the UCC supports both the GTag initiative and the Auto-ID Center's electronic product code.

The Auto-ID Center is developing not just low-cost tags and readers for tracking goods using RFID. It also is creating the infrastructure for matching the code to a product description. It has proposed something called the physical markup language, or PML, to describe products in ways computers can understand.

But researchers at the Auto-ID Center admit that developing PML is one of the most difficult and time-consuming tasks they have undertaken. Given that the center hopes every industry will use the same EPC standard, it will be impossible for the center to create a fully developed PML standards from day one.

That's where the work of the UCC and RosettaNet will come in. In the short term, it seems likely that companies already

using the UCCnet Global Registry will match the EPC on a particular product to information in the registry, rather than waiting for PML to be fully developed.

Over the longer term, it is likely that much of the product data gathered by the UCCnet for the registry will be incorporated into companies' PML files for individual products. And the work that RosettaNet has done around business processes can be used to automate routine tasks, such as billing a company for parts that arrive at a factory and are identified using RFID tags.

"RosettaNet has worked with the Auto-ID Center for a year and a half," says Paul Tearnen, RosettaNet's VP of standards management. "We've shared information around best practices. For example, we've discussed PML and done things around ontologies and product descriptions."

There are currently no high-tech companies among the Auto-ID Center's end users, which is strange. Of all industries, the high tech sector has perhaps the most to gain from using RFID. First, many of the parts that go into PCs, routers, and DVD players are more expensive than say, bars of soap.

Second, manufacturing in the high-tech sector is extremely distributed. Some companies never touch the products they sell because they are made by an original equipment manufacturer and shipped direct to the customer. One problem with that is tracking just what went into each product. Low-cost RFID could help the high tech industry track inventory and demand in a way that has never been possible before.

The UCC-RosettaNet merger should help spread the auto-ID gospel to the high-tech industry. "The high-tech industry has not leveraged the physical identification work as well as perhaps it could have," says Tearnen. "[Auto-ID] wasn't the initial goal of RosettaNet. But clearly we see by putting the two together makes us stronger."



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