

# HOW TO CHOOSE AN RFID PROVIDER

BY WILLIAM D. TOWNSEND

If you use a key fob to lock and unlock your car, you're using the same kind of technology Wal-Mart uses to keep track of thousands of pallets of merchandise.

Wal-Mart, the U.S. Department of Defense, and other large companies and organizations have found that one of the most effective ways to track a large number of products from the point of origin until delivery to the end user is RFID: radio frequency identification.

RFID's key component is a programmable silicon chip on a tag that features markings that resemble bar-code tags. If a company is tracking a pallet of its products, RFID tags are placed on the pallet. An RFID reader sends radio waves through an antenna into open space, looking for a match on a tag. Once the waves detect the tag, the waves are processed to read data stored on the tag. That data can include all vital information about the goods on the pallet, and it is sent to the company's information system for storage.

Selecting the right RFID provider requires asking a lot of questions about a highly technical subject that can be intimidating.

One of the most important questions companies should ask potential RFID providers is how much experience they

have in developing complete RFID systems, according to Tim McIntyre, vice president of sales and marketing for Primary Marking Systems, a software maker for data collection labeling and RFID



Tim McIntyre suggests asking RFID providers how much experience they have in developing RFID systems.

systems, in St. Louis.

"You've got to select somebody who's done it before because there are all kinds of tiny pitfalls you don't realize will come up until you've done it," McIntyre said. "Make sure this is not somebody's first rodeo because you're going to get bucked off for sure if it is."

McIntyre also recommends making sure the company is certified through programs set up by RFID suppliers.

"Most all suppliers have a certification program for you to go through," he said. "If you don't go through it, you can still sell the product, but you won't get the additional support. You can't call them if your customer has a problem."

You should also visit the offices of potential providers to see whether they have RFID labs where testing can be done on any systems they develop for your firm before they are put in place.

In addition, McIntyre suggests asking whom else an RFID supplier has done business with. Although the company may not feel comfortable providing specific details about projects because of nondisclosure agreements, you can contact its client companies to get an overall feel for their experiences with the supplier.

## Quick tips

Questions to ask when selecting an RFID provider:

- Is the company an experienced RFID system developer and provider?
- Does the company have the staffing to properly support my application after installation?
- Is the company certified with RFID suppliers?
- Can the company provide testing of an RFID system before delivering it to my firm?

McIntyre said there is no central association or organization that provides companies with a list of firms that develop and install RFID systems, but you can find most providers by searching online.

"RFID is a tool that makes sense for some businesses," said Bill Anderson, a partner at Genesta in Rockwall, Texas. Like Primary Marking, Genesta is a data collection integrator that helps businesses solve problems. "Automotive manufacturers needed RFID to help track chassis and engines because the bar codes they had been using quickly became unreadable because the oil from the equipment made them dirty. RFID waves read right through the dirt."

William D. Townsend is a St. Louis freelance writer.

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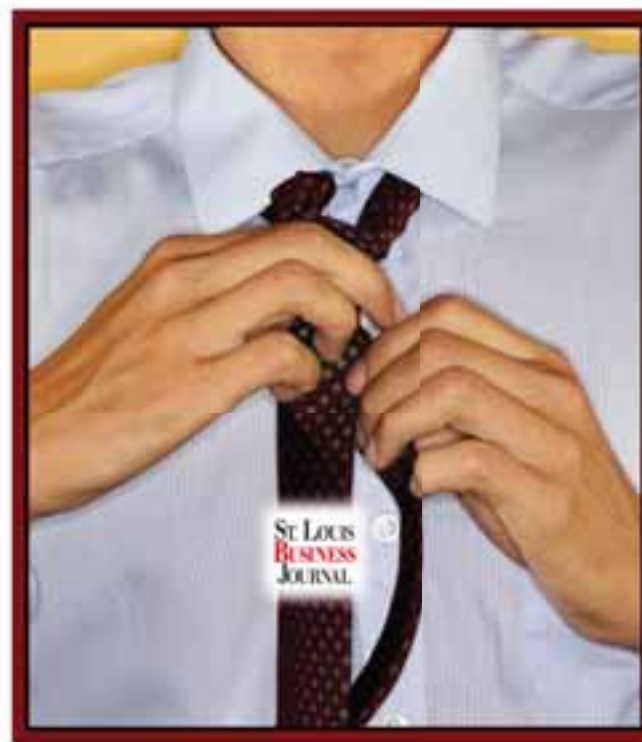
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