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Getting to know RFID label converters

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RFID Street predicts more than 75 percent of companies that will be selling RFID in 2010 are not currently offering RFID as part of their business. That probably means some of you reading this are thinking about label conversion for the first time.

As VARs and system integrators wade into RFID, they will find themselves awash in options, right down to the dizzying array of RFID labels and tags. Moreover, there are thousands of label converters out there today. Most are not producing RFID labels yet. Among those who are, their services vary widely.

There are the two main considerations that anybody involved in the process of selecting RFID label converters need to know about to ensure a good match to their needs.

First, you must understand an RFID label converter's capabilities.

Fundamentally, most RFID label converters provide a select range of products, rather than covering the entire universe of options. In fact, when first looking at label conversion there are times it would be understandable to wonder why the word label was being used at all. RFID labels and tags range in form from 'slap and ship' paper labels to hardened, mechanically fastened tags that can withstand extremely harsh environments.

Remember this when learning RFID jargon: all labels are tags; but not all tags are labels.

Add to this potential confusion the fact RFID technology can be 'active' or 'passive' and there is a wide range of frequencies designed to meet the reading requirements of your RFID solution. Note also that some RFID label converters focus on specific applications or environments – asset tracking, supply chain, retail, healthcare, etc.

You will want to know the supplier's customization capabilities, as no two RFID projects are alike. In the event that your customer needs some tailored approach to RFID tagging, you need to understand how flexible a converter can be in delivering a tag or label product that fits the requirements.

Clear expectations achieve clear results

The second consideration when choosing the right supplier is that you need to understand your RFID label converter's expectations.

In short, a quality RFID label converter is going to expect collaboration to ensure good results for the end users. In return, you can expect a lot of added value as your project is delivered. This is also your best line of defense between delivering a commodity versus delivering expert services your clients will come to rely upon.

For many projects, ordering RFID labels is unlike picking products off a shelf; getting the labels

you need is a process that requires information exchange.

A good RFID label converter is going to start with a process for assessing your product needs. They'll require data from you on the label requirements of your project. Expect to be asked questions about critical issues such as operating environment, mounting surface and read range. If you are not asked such questions, take that as a warning sign you may not be getting the back-up you will need.

Often, your needs will require customization of their label products – changing inlays, adding printed information, etc. Sometimes, your needs may require a completely custom solution.

Custom RFID labels and tags can involve significant engineering – prototyping, testing, refining, etc. So, be prepared to invest the time and money required. While RFID label converters continually develop new products that reduce the need for custom RFID labels, it's nice to know where to turn when those projects arise.

In summary, VARs and integrators are well-served to find RFID label converters now that can serve their needs in the future. Getting to know the capabilities and expectations of these important partners today, means you're in a stronger position to respond the dynamic needs of your customers in the future.

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