

Plant Nursery Raises Efficiency With RFID

Color Point is employing EPC Gen 2 passive RFID tags to track the metal carts it uses to deliver plants to Lowe's, Sam's Club and other retailers, as well as to speed up the truck-loading process.

By Claire Swedberg

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Jun 23, 2009—After four years of trial and error with RFID systems, [Color Point](#), a plant grower in Paris, Ky., has completed its busiest season (spring) with an RFID system that provides the company with visibility into where its metal carts are located, as well as when and to which retailer they were shipped, and when they were returned. In addition, the warehouse staff can load the trucks more efficiently by following a display screen integrated into the RFID system that instructs which carts to load, and in what order, according to which stop they are destined for.

Color Point provides ornamental bedding plants to stores in Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia. The greenhouse from which all of its plants originate spans approximately 15 acres, and ships an average of 25 truckloads of plants out of two dock doors daily. That, says Brad Slattery, Color Point's IT manager, makes it one of the fastest loading operations in the nursery business.



Color Point's RFID-enabled dock doors

The company's 6,000 metal carts on which the plants are loaded—basically, display shelves on wheels—are shipped directly to Lowe's or other stores, then are wheeled to the storefront, where the plants are displayed for sale. Once the carts are empty, Color Point's trucks pick them up and return them to the Paris nursery location for reuse. Manually tracking the carts on paper as they were shipped into and out of the nursery was an ineffective solution for Color Point.

In some cases, for instance, carts ended up remaining at the store, loaded with other merchandise, or were simply lost, and it was difficult for the staff to know where and when each of the \$400 to \$500 carts was sent, as well as whether it was returned. What's more, Color Point's drivers would periodically pick up empty carts at retail locations, but it was difficult to know how many carts were ready for pick-up, thus making it harder to schedule a pick-up at the optimum time (when the truck could be loaded with empties, but before there was a backup of excess carts).

To resolve the problem, Slattery says, Color Point had tried to track the carts by means of bar-coding, but found that

scanning bar-coded labels was time-consuming and fraught with problems. So approximately four years ago, the firm began experimenting with systems from several RFID providers using high-frequency (HF) 13.56 passive RFID tags. The company installed interrogators at each of the two loading docks, with antennas embedded in the floor, and tagged the bottoms of carts. However, he notes, the tags did not read reliably, so Color Point pulled the antennas out of the concrete and moved them to a different location at the loading dock. Despite these efforts, it still could not obtain a suitable read range. "If the infrastructure isn't there to give you 100 percent read rates," Slattery states, "then nothing will work."

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