

Auto-ID market set for strong growth as operators focus on efficiency



Ged Cairns, Head of Auto-ID at Brother UK, outlines the market opportunity for specialist resellers as sales of auto-ID solutions are set to rise sharply in 2021.

Covid-19 has accelerated the shift to ecommerce and the entire retail sector is now being pushed through a significant period of transformation.

Online-only businesses have flourished and those with primarily bricks and mortar models have been pushed to focus on their digital offering. In September, the KPMG-BRC consortium revealed that online retail sales had risen again for the fourth successive month, with digital channels set to drive 20 per cent of all purchases by 2022.

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This will not be a temporary shift. KPMG’s 2020 UK Customer Experience research found that 58 per cent of consumers across every demographic group have changed how they interact with retailers and become multimodal during the pandemic. From choosing home delivery options for groceries to buying furniture online, 80 per cent intend to stay with the new digital channels they have become familiar with.

Meeting the shift in customer demands

For those operating across the supply chain in transport, warehousing and logistics, this will mean increasing capacity to ship greater product volumes at faster fulfilment speeds.

But it will also mean a sharper focus on experience, which is becoming an increasingly vital differentiator. Consumers are demanding greater visibility from their chosen retailers on the product journey, from warehouse to doorstep, and those that experience errors in delivery and returns will be more likely to consider a competitor. Half of customers say they would switch after just one bad experience, according to Zendesk’s latest Trends Report.



Research from VDC, a market intelligence and consulting firm, shows that operators are looking to focus on improving speed and accuracy, while ramping up traceability and serialisation across a wider range of products from groceries to pharmaceutical goods. Almost half (48 per cent) of warehousing and logistics providers say that boosting worker productivity and picking efficiency are the top priorities for investment, with 25 per cent focusing on speeding up fulfilment, according to the findings.

Boosting productivity

This opens up a significant opportunity for resellers specialising in the Auto-ID space. Print solutions that can address these challenges, from large industrial label printers to handheld thermal devices, will be a key part of investment plans. Sales of label printers are expected to rise by nine per cent year-on-year in 2021, with purchasing of industrial scanners and RFID products forecasted to increase by nine per cent and 23 per cent respectively.

Much of the demand for labelling devices will focus on portable, wireless solutions that offer operators the potential to generate the significant new efficiencies they seek. Devices such as Brother’s portable RJ-4 enable warehouse pickers to print labels, including barcodes and QR codes, on the move rather than returning to a central machine, saving employees up to four hours of time per week – the equivalent of almost 30 days per year.

Reliability will also be a key consideration for users to eliminate downtime. Firms across the supply chain will need mobile solutions that are certified to the IP54 industry certification, built with moulded rubber housing and have a sizeable drop protection, which can create labels that withstand temperature extremes, ultraviolet exposure and sterilisation. Larger devices will need tough, rugged casing that can handle dust, moisture and debris in harsh working environments.



Together with efficiency, these businesses will also need portable solutions to improve accuracy across their inventory systems. They provide a mechanism for warehouse employees to perform cycle counts while they are in the aisles, improving real-time inventory accuracy – an issue which will only become more challenging as product volumes increase.

Connectivity is central to ensuring these benefits can be realised. From large industrial printers – such as Brother’s TJ series – to handheld machines, operators will need devices that can process various printer command languages and connect via WiFi and Bluetooth to receive print jobs, label formats, variable data and other information from host systems. This functionality means they can be easily integrated into existing systems, saving operation managers time to spend on their critical day-to-day tasks.

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Moving forward, demand for Auto-ID solutions is set to rise significantly as businesses working across the retail supply chain invest in transforming their operations.

Resellers offering the complete range of mobile and industrial print solutions with full warranties, a strong local support structure and on-hand technical helplines from the manufacturer, will be well placed to capitalise on the opportunity.