

Game change

The Big Interview

A new tag design is set to rock the world of EAS believes Tim Edwards, Group Loss Control Director at JD Sports Fashion plc

"25 years ago tagging was the answer. It saw incredible reductions in loss. I saw the dramatic effect of the arrival of tagging", remembers Tim Edwards, Group Loss Control Director, JD Sports Fashion plc.

"Electronic Article Surveillance has been a basic requirement for all retailers for over a decade", Tim continues. "We've had the same tagging solutions for over ten years. The design has changed - but nothing dynamic. Shoplifters know the two types and how to remove them. Thieves are now much more professional. They come armed with detachers which are readily available from transactional websites. ▶



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“In JD Sports’ more premium fascias, prevalence of tag removal is increasing year on year, or metal bags are being used to steal garments. Metal Detection systems are a blunt instrument: there are so many false alarms, and in my view you require a dedicated team to monitor the systems or otherwise staff just stop taking notice of them.

“Offenders have become tech savvy and the industry needs to move on. We all know the weaknesses of the EAS systems and it hasn’t helped that we’ve had TV programmes highlighting the methods shoplifters use!”

Yet EAS systems are expensive for retailers to install, Tim points out, as well as the cost of tagging every garment. You require tagging systems because most other retailers install them, but their benefits are diminishing.

Like many retailers, Tim was disenchanted with the state of EAS tagging, yet not sure where to turn.

“Suddenly we came across this innovation”. We’d been working with Igloo in supplying EAS tagging for 8 years. Igloo had put their weight behind a new system, being developed by Swiss manufacturer Agon, and following a merger with Agon were looking to trial the new ‘Concept’ tag in a hostile retail environment. I was very excited when I heard about this”.

Where better to test out the new system than at one of JD Sports’ flagship stores with 80,000 weekly visitors?

In trialling the system, JD Sports have helped Agon to evolve the tag. The Concept’s

mechanism, which works entirely differently from existing tags, has been improved further. “With Agon we identified an area for improvement in the mechanism and they have since refined it - it now requires 50 kg of force to break it open. A further enhancement is the addition of ink which, in the unlikely event of the tag being removed, would render the garment virtually worthless to the thief. This is the first RF tag to not be removed by a magnet!

“We’re excited about this tag. Detachers are not easily available. You may get the item out in a bag, but once you get it home it is impossible to get the tag off without damaging the goods in some way”, Tim explains.

“This is about me protecting my business to ensure we are not a target. During the trialling we have seen fewer incidents. Since this store has been protected we have also noticed that theft has moved over to our nearby store – displacement of the crime.

“It’s more expensive than existing tags, but we should see less replenishment costs”.

It’s thought that up to 30% of losses are down to thieves coming into the store with releasers. So clearly the exclusivity of the detacher is critical to the efficacy of any system. “It’s all about the credibility of the supplier and distributor to make this safe long term”, Tim points out.

Throughout the trials, Tim has worked closely with Sean Welch, CEO of Agon Systems. Sean explains: “The releaser is manufactured ►



Even if a shoplifter manages to get the item out in a bag, once they get it home it is impossible to get the tag off without damaging the goods in some way.

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in Switzerland. It's the high spec and exclusivity of the releaser that is the key to success. Manufactured in Denmark and Switzerland, rather than China, the IP is protected."

Tim continues: "I have absolute confidence in Agon's integrity. When they say they will control it, they will. I see this as having the potential to return us to the benefits tagging provided us with over 15 years ago."

So what are the timescales for implementation? "The store manager was very excited about the impact of the Concept Tag system," says Tim. However persuaded Tim is of the virtues of the system though, he of course needs to crunch the numbers first before going to the Board to convince them of the ROI.

Tim is confident that the numbers will stack up. "I can't see it failing," he says. "I think a fair time will be to wait until after Christmas. We will do a year on year analysis and then put the system in our larger stores." RR

TIM EDWARDS ON EAS

Tim Edwards has a track record of innovation to protect his business. "We were among the first retailers to have our own control system, through which we could remotely access 800 stores. We have a bespoke incident management platform across all our fascias, which include Blacks, Scotts, Chausport, Size?, Millets and Sprinter. We view the data collectively, and are able to see trends, times and days of incidents.

"We are able to see how thefts have been committed in a pie chart format. For example over a six month period at one of our fashion chains we have seen foil bag aided theft increase from 28% to 33%, Tag removals from 7% to 10% and hiding stock on the person from 5% to 17%.

"It's also about the staff working with the technology. We have a very enthusiastic workforce and our staff are vigilant. We regularly demonstrate the latest techniques to staff and their vigilance has seen a reduction in changing room offences.

Tim's 'top three' considerations around EAS are:

- 'A tag isn't a tag'** I'm constantly being approached with tag 'bargains'. Be careful what you buy.
- Visibility** You need full visibility of the problems on your estate
- Business buy-in** The benefits to the business must be quantified, you need a good reporting system.

Tim Edwards (left) has worked closely with Sean Welch, CEO of Agon Systems (second left), to develop the new tagging system.

