

## RFID: The Upside Is 'Incredible'

Tamara Harris

*Tom Grant has served as Chairman and CEO of ThingMagic since 2001. Prior to joining ThingMagic full-time as CEO in 2004, he was an early stage venture investor and business advisor to Boston's high technology companies. He is founder and managing partner of Protos, and general partner for Applied Technology, both early stage venture investment funds. He was previously with Softbridge MicroSystems, a PC software development company, and Data Resources, Inc., where he was group vice president. Tom has served on the Board of Directors of several early stage companies. He is a Trustee of Northeast Health Systems, a \$300M community health system north of Boston, and founder and Director of Heads Up!, a non-profit devoted to linking community service activity and student-athletes.*



**RFID.net: You are, or have been, involved in a number of startup companies — such as Protos, Applied Technology, Softbridge, Data Resources and Ambient Devices — either as a founder, executive, or by serving on the Board of Directors. What prompted you to become involved in so many companies? And where do you find the time to be actively involved in them all?**

TG: The extensive list speaks more to how long I have been around than time sharing among so many at any one time! That said, I enjoy serving on a couple of

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boards even as I serve as CEO of ThingMagic. It provides perspective and stimulates ideas that I can bring back to my work here. For example, I have the pleasure of being a Trustee for a \$300M Healthcare Organization; figuring out the future of healthcare and the role that technology will play is truly exciting. As we all know healthcare offers great promise for RFID and Sensors (RFIDS); being able to assess its use within the context of the greater healthcare organization is very valuable.

### **RFID.net: Where and when did your passion for electronics and interest in becoming part of start-up companies develop?**

TG: My first job was with Data Resources, at the time a technology-based information service start-up. Within 4 years we went public and in another 4 years we were acquired by McGraw Hill. That 8 year 'ride' was very exciting. I was never able to settle into the large corporate culture; I recognized I enjoyed the challenge and the thrill of building and investing in companies. Since that time, I have been involved as a venture investor, board member or CEO of early stage companies.

### **RFID.net: What other interests/hobbies do you have?**

TG: I have been blessed with a great family; we have always found ways to get together locally or venture to places like Europe and Africa. I enjoy coaching basketball — have done so for nearly 20 years and continue to do so in my local community. These days I am working on my golf game — not yet a pretty sight!

### **RFID.net: Given your involvement with numerous startups, why did you first consider being on the Board of Directors for ThingMagic (at the time a small startup) and what led you to the decision to take over the position of CEO in 2004?**

TG: In 2001, I was introduced to ThingMagic's founders as a source of investment capital. We mutually decided against use of outside capital to fund the business. I was thoroughly impressed with the founders — they are brilliant scientists, dedicated entrepreneurs and importantly good people. As a result I became an advisor to assist them in how best to self fund their organization. In 2004, we decided that we would pursue outside capital to support ThingMagic's decision to bring reader hardware to the market directly. That decision led to my joining full-time as CEO, a role I have thoroughly enjoyed in light of the challenges associated with navigating the uneven adoption of UHF RFID technology.

### **RFID.net: ThingMagic has experienced a growing success with the products in a number of markets, such as the supply chain, vehicle & tool tracking, just to name a couple. What do you think has contributed the most toward ThingMagic's success?**

TG: There are three key reasons for our success. First and foremost is the dedication of the ThingMagic founders, management and employees. As any of us who have spent time in this industry know, the adoption of UHF RFID has been uneven and subject to marketing hype and a series of false starts. Despite that, we have maintained a dedicated team that has allowed us to be a trusted, stable

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provider of enabling technology around the world. We are extremely proud of our customer base and their trust in us. The second key reason for our success is due to a fundamental strategy shift we made in early 2007 based on our vision that UHF RFID was destined to be an enabling technology used to enhance products and services across a broad set of industrial, commercial and consumer markets. The realization of that vision was dependent on the availability of a family of embeddable RFID radios; devices that could be incorporated into handhelds, printers, trucks, manufacturing lines, etc. as seamlessly as possible. Our product roadmap and development effort has been consistent to that vision ever since, allowing us to provide our customers with high quality reader modules and/or finished readers, freeing them to be creative in how they incorporate RFIDS into their product lines. Thirdly, in late 2007 we established the Advanced Development Group (ADG) led by founder Ravi Pappu. Ravi and his team work with customers to solve complex design issues, helping them deliver unique solutions to their market.

**RFID.net: ThingMagic's embedded reader modules are now in a numerous vendor products and it appears that this market is continuing to grow for ThingMagic. You also market some of your own reader devices. Have you considered narrowing your marketing and research focus to just the embedded technologies and their further development? Why or why not?**

TG: Today we offer finished readers in four distinct form factors: 4-Port, Integrated, Ruggedized and Desktop; they are or soon will be based entirely on our reader modules. For many of our customers these form factors provide a cost effective way to initiate their solution development. We sometimes see these same customers move from our finished devices to their own design but maintain consistency by using the same module and software. Our finished readers continue to serve as a reference design for our customers and importantly allow us to test our module designs in finished products. We expect this trend to continue as we expand our family of reader modules and our customers realize the demand that justifies them building their own form factors.

**RFID.net: What is your strategic focus for ThingMagic during the next 24 months?**

TG: We need to stay on top of expanding use and integration of UHF RFID and make sure the hardware and software we develop allows our customers to incorporate those extensions into their products and services. This year we released the initial product in our M6e family of products. Via a software upgrade, our customers can decide to extend the capability of this module to support additional protocols, legacy protocols like ISO 18000-6b, IPX, or proprietary protocols. We also anticipate the incorporation of sensor technology into tags. Hence the use of "RFIDS" to refer to our technology platform. Our work in the transportation market has taught us the potential of multi-scale radios and the need to link RFIDS with GPS, WiFi and Bluetooth radios. We are excited about the future and recognize the responsibility we have to our customers to continue to innovate in order to support their efforts.

**RFID.net: What would you like the RFID community to know about**

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### **ThingMagic?**

TG: First, I believe that we are at the very beginning of the adoption cycle of RFID in general and UHF RFID, in particular. The upside is incredible and spans all markets with the enormous upside in consumer markets in the coming years. Second, that success will require most of us to revise our business models over time in light of the inevitable and exciting improvement in form and function of the technology. And finally, knowing how hard many have toiled over the past 10 years, I believe we need to look for areas of cooperation and partnership as such an approach will accelerate our mutual growth.

*The RFID Network is a an authoritative resource for in-depth articles, videos, product reviews, and benchmarks on wireless RF sensor technology (Radio Frequency Identification / RFID, Real Time Location Systems / RTLS, ZigBee), including RFID tag chip circuits, RFID tags, RFID system design, RFID tracking, RFID security, RFID standards & regulations. For more information, check out [www.RFID.net](http://www.RFID.net) [1].*

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