

I've been thinking...



The caregiver ID technology race
February 2008

I've been thinking about the plethora of viable candidates in the 2008 presidential race and the herd of caregiver ID technologies vying for the lead position in our hospitals.

I'm writing on the heels of Super Tuesday, considered the homestretch of the Republican and Democratic primaries when the derby typically narrows to two. However, today is looking more like the opening turn at Beaumont with four or five hopefuls still in the running, including candidates aiming to be the first woman, African American, POW, or Mormon to have a desk in the Oval Office.

Likewise, the healthcare user-ID technology race has fielded a large number of viable and variegated candidates—for a long time.

Mainliners with knowledge-based paradigms that require users to retain code names and passwords in their heads are running neck-and-neck with possession-based systems that require users to carry auto-ID cards on their persons.

Included in the pack we find a menagerie of biometric hopefuls that identify users by something intrinsic to their bodies or behaviors. These include fingerprint and handprint readers, as well as retina, iris, ear, and face scanners, along with voice, gait, and keystroke-recognition systems. Then there are the long-shot RFID implants and DNA identifiers collecting about as many bets as Ron Paul won delegates.

>> You think this presidential campaign has been drawn out? User-recognition candidates have been competing for decades even though most have gained what marketplace acceptance they enjoy at a pace near evolution.

For example, the first bar-code patent was issued while Eisenhower was running for office in 1952. The initial retinal-scan patent was issued shortly after Carter was elected in 1978—forty-three years after two physicians published their idea in the *New York State Journal of Medicine*. Yet, after all these years, bar-code and RFID applications are barely a length out front in our hospitals, while retina scans seem more like a twinkle in a stallion's eye.

The government has been flirting with retinal and hand scans at airports since September 11, but seven years later we are still handing over our drivers' licenses for naked-eye inspections at security lines.

Four decades ago, we believed it wouldn't be long before doorways would sense our permissions and open before us as they did for Maxwell Smart on Get Smart (which, incidentally, aired its final episode on September 11, 1970). I don't believe the serial's writers revealed what triggered the doors. Was it Smart's face, voice, gait, or those narrow George Bush look-alike eyes? Nevertheless, most of today's auto-unlocking doors require entrants to punch in pass codes or wave RFID cards.

Like political candidates, each recognition platform has its advantages and disadvantages. So, which user-ID technology will be escorted into the caregiver-ID winner circle?

I think it's time to admit that our near-term viable contenders are down to a handful, which I believe will continue to compete for quite a while, namely bar codes and RFID chips coupled with passwords in users' minds.

Konica-Minolta might be touting their fingerprint-activated copy machines on prime-time television, and Nokia may be promising that any day now their cellular users will sign on by looking their phones in the eye, but neither approach is a frontrunner, and both have their issues. For example, surgical gloves and sweaty hands render fingerprint readers useless, while retinal scanners are viewed as more threatening than user-friendly.

Incidentally, while it is more difficult to steal someone's identity from retina and fingerprint recognition systems than with cards and codes, it is not impossible. Then what? When RFID chips, bar-code tags, user names, and passwords are stolen, unlike eyes and fingers, they can be changed or reissued.

One good thing about presidential campaigns is that we have a Tuesday in November when the debating ends and we move ahead with new administrations. However, when selecting technology, decision-making can take longer than counting ballots in Florida. The indecision can be paralyzing.

With caregiver-recognition systems, I think it's time to move ahead with what is proven and affordable. I know the FBI just received a billion dollars on the hope that "someday" facial scans may be added to fingerprints in citizens' files. I say, let the geeks continue their biometric tweaks with the latest and greatest, while we put today's money on implementing systems that get the job done, even if they aren't as cool. If and when a dark horse takes the lead, we can jump saddles to the better system. Meanwhile, let's get on with getting on.

What do you think?

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Neuenschwander', written in a cursive style.

Mark Neuenschwander
mark@hospitalrx.com

PS. By the way, for years our Washington State voter ID cards have included bar codes. I wonder how long before volunteers at the polls will be required to scan them before issuing ballots to voters? I'm not holding my breath. I'm still waiting for the smart cards promised by Hillary Clinton's husband four elections ago.

Copyright 2008 The Neuenschwander Company