TIME TO APPLY GAMIFICATION TO ANTI-COUNTERFEIT PACKAGING?

BY TIM SYKES

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The concept of 'gamification' (that is, the application of aspects of game playing in non-game contexts) has been discussed for several years, mostly in connection with software, customer loyalty programmes and business process management. Some believe it's a game changer, while others contend that gamification is only a minor change - as Jane McGonigal, renowned expert in innovative technologies application, puts it: 'some routine processes simply become more fun'. Having conducted extensive research in this field, Libor Sustr and Petr Hampl of Optaglio explore the potential of gamification in anti-counterfeiting applications.

An authenticity check, including verification of anti-counterfeit packaging protection elements, is a typically routine process. It is annoying, and seamless enforcement is critical. It has been confirmed several times over the past years that even the most resistant protection elements don't help if the inspecting person doesn't look at it properly.

It is therefore critical that security architects don't focus on the protection element alone, but rather on the duality of the protection element and the inspecting person. At Optaglio we apply an even more sophisticated model, consisting of packaging, the inspecting person, training, information support and automation. Nevertheless, it is evident that any system must at the very least consider the basics of protection element and its inspector.

Motivation is the key. Is the inspecting person focused on detection of fakes? It should be but in everyday life, saving time and effort is usually much stronger motivation.

We can expect a thorough check only if the product shows evident and striking suspicious features, or if the inspector carries responsibility for, or pays the costs of, a mistake. This might mean paying a premium price for fake goods, installing a counterfeited component into a machine, etc.

Only under such conditions can we expect a relatively thorough check. Otherwise, it will be neglected, even if it is required by rules. It is a reason why some many fakes stay in circulation, despite massive investment into protection.

What can we do about this?

Offering rewards for detection of counterfeit goods is a possible solution. However, it works only if fakes are relatively frequent, otherwise the interest wanes.

In addition to that, it is important to ensure that the check itself is not too boring. The anti-counterfeit technology vendors should thus focus on protection elements whose features attract the human eye. This is not as easy as it may look. The viewpoint of experts differs from the viewpoint of untrained people. Our research performed in Optaglio Labs in cooperation with independent psychologists revealed significant differences between generations of users. This picture is even more confusing when including people from different cultural backgrounds.

Some researchers try to find an ‘ordinary user’ for testing of protection elements, including holograms with different visual effects. We don't think it is a good strategy because the ‘ordinary user’ will become an expert with specific perception soon. It is better to work with a training manager who knows users well.

In this context, we can consider the idea of gamification of anti-counterfeit protection’ is applied. It is quite possible that expression ‘gamification’ will not be used at the end. However, we firmly believe that the authenticity check must not be boring, so that the users should win small prizes regularly and be able to follow their progress.

Progressing to higher and higher levels is a crucial element in gamification. Protection elements on their own offer only limited opportunities a fulfil this principle. What is more hopeful is connecting strong protection elements (we do not recommend just barcode or QR code) with information systems. During our testing, we worked with the Optaglio OVImage product, based on random distribution of micro-holograms (tiny metallic grains with holograms). The unique position of micro-holograms is recorded, saved in a database and an individual package can be identified by cross-referencing with the database. Other products based on random distribution of fibres or taggants can be used as well.

With these products, a user reads distribution of particles, authenticates and gets information about the product, date of production, previous inspections, etc. From all this comprehensive data, the inspecting person needs just one piece of information: assurance that this individual product is a part of a controlled circulation. Gamification means that the person also finds something personal in the system: a wise quote, joke, etc. We found that gradual counting works well, where the inspector sees a message such as ‘check another three packages to see your personal advice for the day’.

There were some worries about a delay in the process, but our experiments did not confirm them. On the other hand, it is true that authenticity checks do cause some delay. It is a matter of strategy – is speed of stockpiling or protection against fakes more important? Our view is that regular checks make sense only if the organisation works with many different products from different sources and the potential impact of accepting a fake is high.

Reading a QR code inside a hologram seems even more interesting. An inspecting person uses red light on seemingly ordinary hologram, the QR code emerges from the background, the inspector reads it using a smartphone and enters a gamified environment.

Gamification of anti-counterfeit protection is still in its experimental phase. However, the basic concept is already clear. If we want to be sure of the consistency and thoroughness of authenticity checks, the inspector's motivation for checking must be stronger than his/her motivation for time saving. Strict rules help but with implementing any rule a race starts how to bypass it. And human creativity should work to toward an organisation's goals, not against them.

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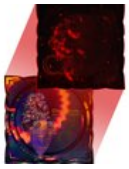

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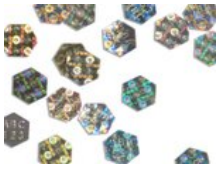

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