

# Texting authenticity

Consumers who are about to light up a premium cigar can tap the number of a special code on the cigar into their mobile phones and receive a text message verifying the product's authenticity.

**G**lobal statistics are hard to come by but according to US government statistics from 2006, Americans smoked approximately 5.3 billion large cigars in 2006, spending roughly US\$ 3.2 billion for them. Counterfeiting is estimated to range in the millions of dollars annually. In one 2006 Miami sting, more than US\$ 20 million in fake cigars, labels and packaging was confiscated by law enforcement officials. The brands most counterfeited are Cohiba, Romeo y Julieta, Montecristo and Trinidad.

"Counterfeit cigars erode the prestige, profitability, and reputation of the hand-made, premium cigar industry," stated Norman F. Sharp, president of the Cigar Association of America. "Recent efforts to crackdown on the problem have indicated that it is much more widespread than industry insiders had estimated. It is an alarmingly profitable business for counterfeiters." However, Sharp added that in the US there appears to have been a significant decline due to the successes of General Cigar and Altadis USA in courts of law.

London-based Total Brand Security (TBS) thinks it might be able to help on a global level. The UK company has just launched a new "track and trace" security tag to protect the integrity of high-end cigars. The system relies on a special code which is placed on cigar boxes before they are sealed as well as on the paper ring around a cigar before it is wrapped in cellophane.

A cigar smoker simply taps the code on the ring into his mobile phone and a text comes back verifying authenticity. There are three potential messages which a consumer can receive: it is authentic, it is counterfeit or it has al-



The code on the cigar's paper ring helps authenticate the product.

ready been authenticated once before. What makes the TBS solution stand out among the rest?

"We have come up with a system which utilises five layers of security; two of which can be authenticated by the consumer. Typically, if the consumer can authenticate something, it usually means it is easy for the counterfeiter to copy those layers. However, we think we have found a way around this," commented Adrian Simmons, the company's managing director. He said that the more layers of security a product has, the more difficult it will be for a counterfeiter to replicate.

## In essence

- ▶ Five security layers involved in authentication process
- ▶ System developed by TBS is based on a nine-digit, alphanumeric code
- ▶ New technology is a cheaper and less bulky alternative to current RFID solutions

He explained that the system developed by his company is based on a nine-digit, alphanumeric code. But the algorithms can also be based on a data matrix which would then require a special reader device.

TBS has elected to launch trials with its new security solution in the luxury, Havana cigar market because, according to Simmons: "Top company executives who run businesses which need our products in a variety of industries smoke expensive cigars. It is a great way to create a buzz and introduce us to new customers."

Simmons claims his company's new product provides a viable alternative to radio frequency identification also known as RFID. "When it comes to RFID solutions, they have a lot of limitations particularly at the item level: they are bulky and can be removed or altered and they are difficult to verify by the consumer. When it comes to cost, we are 4,000 times cheaper than the cheapest RFID technology," he explained.

Simmons won't say which Havana cigar brand distributors have adopted the new system as the trials have just begun but he does admit that they are concentrating on the Havana market as these are the most counterfeited. He says that the Cuban cigar industry as a whole is looking to further bolster its reputation for high-quality cigars in the global marketplace.

Why would a consumer who is about to sit back and enjoy his cigar take the time to verify its authenticity? Simmons believes that cigar smokers are motivated to do so for a number of reasons including health aspects and their desire to enjoy "true" premium products.

Once a consumer has concluded that they have a fake product, they should return to the point-of-sale and file a complaint. In addition, the text message can provide a toll-free number to call back and officially lodge a complaint with the brand owner explaining where the suspect cigar was purchased. Finally, Simmons said that there is also a website which provides options for what to do next.

Rosemarie Overstreet