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Precise Biometrics CTO says Tactivo product extends iOS security

By Rawlson King

August 27, 2012 - Tactivo, a smart card and fingerprint reader designed for the iPhone, represents a unique milestone for Precise Biometrics.

The firm has repeatedly, through extensive innovation, worked to identify commercial opportunities where its core technology and skills could be successfully applied outside of its traditional customer base.

Early indications from customers in both the public and private sectors suggest that the company is on the right track and may have found a significant new growth opportunity.

Designed as a sleek, singular "smart case", Tactivo offers a strong multi-factor authentication option for the iOS platform. The product works with smart card and fingerprint recognition implemented separately, or combined. With the new Tactivo smart case, iPhone apps can leverage unprecedented authentication options, from simple password replacement to combining authentication with other phone features such as GPS location.

Using Tactivo, organizations can provide employees in the field with enhanced biometric applications through their mobile Apple device. Tactivo also allows for passwords, data and other sensitive information to be securely stored onto any iPhone through its interface.

The case features not only a built-in smart card and fingerprint reader, but also a clear smart card cover to display government or other photo-embossed access credentials.

Tactivo maintains access to the iPhone's buttons and connectors, including the ability to charge and synchronize the phone without removing the case. The product can be connected directly via the 30-pin dock connector found in all iOS devices and consists of a two-piece interlocking sled similar to many cases on the market.

"What drove the development of this product was the need for strong end-point authentication in a mobile context," said Michael Harris, CTO for Precise Biometrics, in an exclusive interview with BiometricUpdate.com. "The product expands data and the network beyond the premise of an enterprise or an office, but what is technologically specific to the product is the miniaturization of both smart card and biometric sensor technology. This product pushes the envelope from flatbed biometric sensors to low-power and low-weight swipe sensors that can be used in a mobile environment."

According to Harris, the product works in conjunction with a software development toolkit that enables developers to include self-contained "smart card services and biometric-strong authentication" to a virtually unlimited number of iOS applications.

"The system leverages PKI or certificates and hardware tokens like a smart card, using the cryptology on the smart card to access certificates utilizing the fingerprint sensor to authenticate the individual and to gain access to the keys to sign and decrypt for picture browsing sessions, for digital encrypting e-mail, VPN, SSL sessions, and the like."

Tactivo supports major U.S. government credentials and includes support for PIV, PIV-I, CAC and TWIC cards. "The smart case is designed to work with mostly government-focused smart card platforms in the United States, but it through our toolkit the case can access a multitude of other platforms," stated Harris.

The device also complies with Apple's MFi Certification as well as FCC, CE Marking, and GSA FIPS-201 approved product listings.

"The initial market for this device is aimed toward government to allow them to meet the demand of Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12, a directive stating that all federal government workers and contractors must utilize a personal identity verification card for logical and physical access, along with DOD which uses a common access card for access," stated Harris. "On mobile platforms there previously was no way for the U.S. government to utilize the hardware token on an iOS product."

Tactivo now provides the U.S. government with a unique way to enhance the security features available in iPhone and iPad devices and harden them to an acceptable security-grade. As a result, U.S. government agencies have begun to express substantial interest in the product.

Recently, BiometricUpdate.com, reported that Precise Biometrics had signed its first U.S. government related purchase orders for Tactivo and is set to implement pilot projects across the federal government's military and civilian agencies.

This is not surprising, considering the popularity and ubiquity of Apple's products and the decline in interest in secure Blackberry products, developed by Research in Motion.

Harris acknowledged that his company is at leading edge, since it is the first to develop biometric authentication hardware and a software toolkit for the iPhone.

Only recently did Apple propose purchasing AuthenTec, in a bid to integrate biometric security into its device. While Apple's purchase creates the promise of biometrics being natively built into the device, that reality will only occur with the next generation of the device.

Listen to Harris's perspective of how the industry will evolve here:

michael-harris-interview-clip

The Tactivo product, in contrast, is currently available for the iPhone 4 and iPhone 4S and Precise Biometrics plans to release new versions to support new iPhone versions and the iPad. Further, the firm expects to extend the Tactivo to more smartphone brands. The device can be purchased in limited quantities directly from the firm's Web site at manufacturer's suggested retail price of US$249 per unit.

Precise Biometrics' own app, BioSecrets, is now available in Apple's App Store. Together with Tactivo, this app enables passwords and other sensitive information to be safely stored in iPhone 4S and iPhone 4.

New applications developed both in-house and by partners, will be launched at regular intervals in the near future, which will expand the product line.

ABOUT RAWLSON KING

Rawlson O'Neil King is a contributing editor at BiometricUpdate.com and is an experienced communications professional, management consultant, trade journalist and author who recently published a book about control and electronic networks and who has written numerous articles in trade publications and academic journals about smart home and building technologies. Follow him @rawlsonking2.

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