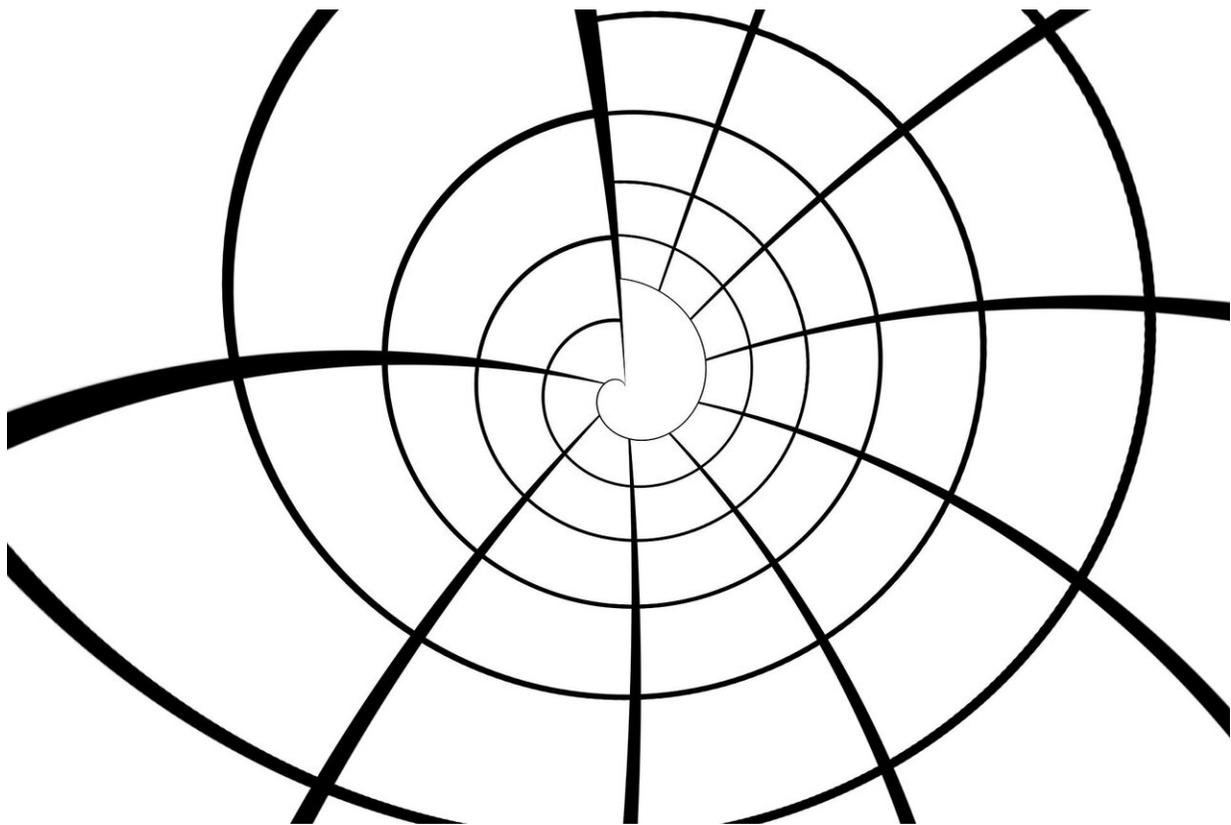


Bluetooth stickers on your clothing? Startup Wiliot gets \$20M for tracking tech

February 20 2020, by Brittany Meiling



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Giants in technology and consumer products are funneling more cash into a small tech startup in San Diego that's developing tiny bluetooth stickers that can transform everyday items—like clothing, wallets, or

Amazon packages—to trackable "connected" devices.

The startup, called Wiliot, just raised \$20 million from PepsiCo and Verizon's venture capital arm, among several other investors. Last year, the [company](#) attracted the attention of tech giants Amazon and Samsung, which have also backed Wiliot.

With the new cash, the startup's executives say they're ramping up to mass-produce their tiny bluetooth stickers, and they have customers lining up at the door. The company already has orders for hundreds of thousands of units.

Co-headquartered in San Diego and Israel, Wiliot was founded by three former top executives at Wilocity, a chipmaker that was acquired by Qualcomm for \$300 million in 2014. That industry connection transferred to the new startup, with Qualcomm Ventures jumping on board as an early investor of Wiliot.

Since its inception in 2017, the startup has been designing a bluetooth chip that would be small enough to stick on anything—and cheap enough to treat as a disposable product. Their chip is the size of a postage stamp. It has no batteries, powered instead by leftover radio signals cascading through the air.

"If you analyze the airwaves around you, we're surrounded by [radio waves](#)," said Steve Statler, Wiliot's senior vice president of marketing and [business development](#), in an interview last year. "We're recycling the radio signals wasted from Wi-Fi, bluetooth and cellular signals."

The Wiliot chip can measure temperature, location and air pressure, then transmit that data back to the cloud. Today, Wiliot has its product working in 20 pilot programs with "world-leading brands," although they declined to disclose who is testing them out.

In theory, there are tons of applications for a cheap, disposable bluetooth sticker. Companies could tag anything that's not an electronic device, expanding the universe of what's "connected." This is especially interesting to companies thinking about logistics and inventory. For example, a restaurant bar could stick the sensors on bottles of liquor, automatically sensing when a whiskey bottle is running low and needs to be re-ordered. Drugmakers could do the same for pill bottles.

Stickers could be embedded with brand information, authenticating that products aren't knock-offs.

"We have come a long way in the last year" said Tal Tamir, CEO of Wiliot. "Twelve months ago, conditions had to be perfect for the very first tags to work. Now we demonstrate Wiliot tags on bottles of wine, boxes of pizza and on envelopes."

Statler said Wiliot is bringing on an additional 10 pilot programs with clients, bringing the total up to 30. The startup is working with large, high-end fashion companies, parcel delivery companies, and telecommunications companies, among other clients.

A more creative application is being considered by Wiliot's fashion client, which can imagine these tags embedded into articles of clothing. If the consumer opts-in to data collection, the fashion company could determine which items are a hit with shoppers, even after they leave the store.

"Our tags will know when those products are picked up and worn," Statler said.

But will consumers want tracking technology embedded so deeply in their lives? Statler said Wiliot is well aware of potential consumer concerns.

"Our business is dependent on people accepting the real benefits of having a digital identity associated with our products," Statler said. "We're responding on multiple levels."

The company has "fast-tracked" its security goals, encrypting all signals that their chips send. This is a costly commitment as it requires decryption down the road, but Statler said it was critical to gain the trust of consumers. The company is also complying with privacy legislation in California and Europe, and will not collect data unless consumers choose to opt in.

All in all, the startup has raised \$70 million in capital, with a \$30 million round in January 2019. The latest infusion of cash will provide the resources for Wiliot to support its customers' pilot projects and further develop Wiliot's cloud machine-learning components.

Statler said the company plans to hire two applications engineers at their San Diego office, bringing the local headcount to 10 people. Across all its locations, Wiliot employs 45 people.

©2020 The San Diego Union-Tribune
Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Bluetooth stickers on your clothing? Startup Wiliot gets \$20M for tracking tech (2020, February 20) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-02-bluetooth-stickers-startup-wiliot-20m.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.