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General Information

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Who Are You?

Alps Electric Secures Mobile Devices With A Touch Of The Thumb

In an increasingly security-conscious world, convenient identity verification is becoming a critical requirement for handheld and notebook devices. Not only are they more likely to be stolen than fixed-location equipment, but they also serve multiple purposes in the modern age. Your cell phone may soon be your credit card, for example.

■ Two Technologies

Japan-based Alps Electric has recently announced two touch-sensitive technologies designed for security applications in lightweight portable devices. One, based on a pressure-sensitive film, is touted by Alps as the industry's thinnest fingerprint input technology, at a mere 0.19mm. Because this film is water-resistant and flexible, it can be used in challenging environmental conditions, such as in mobile phones. It can also be applied to curved surfaces. However, it is strictly a fingerprint sensor.

The other process, involving a transparent film, allows for the combination of fingerprint verification with other touch-related tasks, such as mouse pointing. The film can be used with Alps' Glidepoint technology to combine touchpad functions with identity verification. Also, because it is transparent, it can be placed on top of an LCD display to permit touchscreen applications. It is possible to envision commerce-related kiosk applications for this technology, where a consumer could use the touchscreen functionality to place an order and then have his identity checked via a fingerprint scan.

With Glidepoint already in use in many notebook computers, it would also be a reasonable assumption to expect that the next generation would incorporate the new transparent film solution, allowing users to secure their notebooks and access touchpad functions without requiring additional real estate on the keyboard.

■ Raising The Bar

This synergy of functions may help Alps maximize market share in a crowded market. Fujitsu, for example, offers a complete solid-state fingerprint sensor. This device has the advantage of integrating image processing directly on the chip and features a USB interface, but is neither flexible nor transparent, restricting its applications to dedicated identity checking. And at a

thickness of 1.4mm, it is almost 10 times as thick as the Alps pressure-sensitive film. Once Alps integrates its new processes into complete packages for use by manufacturers, it will raise the bar for companies such as Fujitsu to offer competitive form factors and functionality. ■

by James Turner

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