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Supermarkets Look to Automated Checkout

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news://newsclip.ap.org/WX10406042321@news.ap.org Supermarket checkout clerks are going the way of the bank teller _ available if you want one, avoidable if you don't. Self-checkout machines, which let customers scan, bag and pay for their own groceries, offer shoppers a chance to avoid the lines at the checkout stands.

"This is like an ATM for them. It's quicker and easier," said Jennifer Panetta, a spokeswoman for the six-state Harris Teeter chain, based in Matthews, N.C. "They are in pretty much all our stores."

About one-quarter of grocery chains are trying them now, with some 34,000 machines in use in stores in 2003, said market analyst Greg Buzek, president of IHL Consulting Group in Franklin, Tenn.

Buzek, who wrote a report on the equipment, predicts that by 2007 there will be 244,000 self-checkout machines in stores and that virtually every chain will at least some of them.

"The way we shop has changed quite a bit in the last 15 years," he said in an interview. "But the checkout lane hasn't changed all that much."

For example, shoppers have been shifting from grocery carts to plastic baskets, and adding short stops to the big weekly grocery purchase. More than half of supermarket customers bring fewer than 15 items to the register, and self-checkout is ideal for them, according to Buzek's report.

Express lanes were set up to speed these customers through, but self-checkout can be even faster, Buzek said. A space that could fit one or two lanes can handle four to six self-checkout machines, reducing the chance of getting stuck in a line. "There's usually nobody in line at self-checkout," Buzek said.

Customers take longer than a clerk to ring up and bag groceries, but the shoppers do not seem to notice that, the report said. Because the customer is keeping busy scanning and bagging instead of waiting while the clerk does the work, time seems to pass faster.

"I think this is faster if you know what you are doing," said Khatool Reha of Reston, Va., as she dropped a couple of cans of spaghetti into a plastic bag at a Harris Teeter store. "There is no need to wait in line."

When she buys more than 10 items, "I just go over there," said Reha, motioning toward the staffed lanes.

That is the way it is supposed to work, Buzek said. Getting more small purchasers into the self-checkout lanes frees cashiers in the staffed lanes to deal with big-ticket purchases that customers prefer to have someone else bag, he said.



For retailers, the use of self-checkout can reduce staffing at the front of the store. One staffer typically is the only employee needed to assist customers at the self-checkout lanes when shoppers cannot get a bar code to scan or do not know where to put their credit card.

Buzek said there also is less theft at a self-checkout counter.

Employees are responsible for most of the theft in a retail store, he said. One common form is "sweethearting," in which the clerk helps a friend by passing a cheaper item over the scanner but dropping a more expensive one into the bag.

That is hard to do on a self-checkout machine. The computer can identify the object, typically weighing each product-coded item. A customer drops the item into the bag after it is scanned, and if the weight of the bag doesn't change by the proper amount, the machine halts the transaction until things get straightened out.

Wal-Mart has self-checkout in about 840 of its more than 3,000 stores, and is putting the equipment into all of its new stores as they open, said Gus Whitcomb, a spokesman for the chain in Bentonville, Ark.

Whitcomb said Wal-Mart customers have put just about everything through the scanners — even ready-to-assemble desks in "a big gigantic box." Other stores, such as The Home Depot hardware chain, also have been using self-checkout.

Not every food store chain is leaping to the technology. Publix Super Markets, based in Lakeland, Fla., has about 800 stores, mostly in Florida, but only about a dozen have self-checkout, and seven of those were already in stores the chain purchased in Tennessee, said Brenda Reid, a Publix spokeswoman.

The corporate culture at Publix emphasizes having staffers do things for customers, Reid said. "Self-checkout would be very countercultural," she said.

Publix stores where the manager sees a demand for self-checkout can get it, he said, but "nobody is beating down our doors."

On the Net:

IHL Consulting: <http://www.ihlservices.com/en/index.asp>