

## May You Help You?

### Like self-service? Let's hope so. All sorts of places want you to take charge

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If the service is bad, you'll have only yourself to blame. Self-service kiosks — those ATM-like machines that let you check in at the airport or check out at the grocery store all on your own — are sweeping into more retailers and service spots. Big-box stores like Home Depot and Wal-Mart are rolling them out, as are movie theaters, convenience stores, sports venues and even courthouses.

U.S. consumers spent \$128 billion at kiosks last year, an 80% jump from the year before, according to IHL Consulting Group. By 2007, that figure could hit \$1.3 trillion. Companies like the technology because kiosks let them save on labor costs. Forrester Research, a consulting firm, calculates that airlines save \$3.52 for every customer who uses a kiosk instead of a live agent at the check-in counter.

For line-hating or control-loving consumers, self-serve provides a nice option. And kiosks have become more sophisticated. United Airlines upgraded its 893 kiosks this summer to offer transactions in French and Spanish as well as English. Of course, if you prefer a smile with your service — or are looking for a job as a clerk — kiosks might leave you wanting. But like them or not, kiosks are here to stay. The newest offerings:

--HOTELS Starwood Hotels has placed kiosks in about two dozen of its Sheraton hotels and is in the process of installing them in the rest of that chain's nearly 200 locations. Guests can visit kiosks to check in, check out, upgrade rooms or leave messages for other guests. Hilton has kiosks in Chicago, New York City and Boston and plans to expand to a total of 45 hotels by the end of the year. Marriott is running a pilot kiosk program in a handful of its hotels as well, and the smaller, members-only hotel chain Club Quarters has kiosks in multiple locations.

--DRUGSTORES In a number of cities, CVS is trying out kiosks that let customers scan their items and then pay with cash or a credit or debit card. One downside: the kiosks can't be used to ring up prescription drugs. Osco and Sav-On are running small-scale tests too.

--FAST-FOOD JOINTS At about half a dozen restaurants in Denver, McDonald's has set up kiosks. Another 50 or so franchisee-run McDonald's locations are also experimenting in states from New York to New Mexico. A few Burger Kings have run similar tests.

As a careful consumer, you should be aware that a kiosk may try to sell you things you don't need. According to manufacturer Quick Kiosk, customers at McDonald's using kiosks were more than twice as likely to say yes when asked whether they wanted to buy a larger size, and their average bill increased 39%.

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