

# Customers Do It Themselves

**H**ave you ever run into a store for one or two small items, only to end up at the end of a long line of customers with full buggies? Well this may be an inconvenience of the past. The Great Atlantic & Pacific Company of Canada Ltd.'s (A&P) Dominion store in Toronto now has an express self-checkout system to combat this problem.

love the opportunity to have an express lane to check myself out."

Although supermarkets and 'superstores' have been Optimal Robotics' main customers to date, its current marketing strategy covers a variety of retailers including home improvement. "We have found in our research and in our installations that any type of store where the (checkout) lanes are

shoppers through the transaction quickly, simply, and accurately. "The customer scans the goods, bags them, and pays with a credit or debit card or cash, as if it were a vending machine." The self-checkout market is booming, with the U.S. market alone estimated at \$2 to \$3 billion. To date, Optimal Robotics has more than 3,500 terminals in more than 800 stores. And consumer response had been very positive.

Scarborough resident Debbie Sobolewski has used the U-Scan Express at the Dominion store since its implementation. "I enjoy doing it myself," she says, and she would choose the U-Scan Express even if a regular cashier were available. Customers remark that the units are easy to use, even for those who aren't computer oriented.

U.S. retailers have been faster to embrace this technology. There are several manufacturers of self-checkout systems, and all agree that, although the technology has been around for a decade or so, its time has come.

In Canada, big-box retailers such as Wal-Mart and Costco are currently experimenting with self-checkout. In the U.S., retailers using

## AUTO CHECKOUTS



Dubbed 'Express Yourself,' the U-Scan Express self-checkout system's debut at the Dominion store, located at Kennedy Road and Highway 401, has been a tremendous success.

It uses technology developed by Montreal-based Optimal Robotics Corp. which was founded in 1992 with the idea to develop service robotics. Service robotics is basically "using computers to automate service type of jobs," says Henry Karp, president and chief operating officer.

After two years of research, the first commercial U-Scan system was delivered to a supermarket in Louisville, KY.

"In the grocery business about 50 per cent of the transactions are the express lanes transactions - let's call them 12 items or less," says Karp. "And this applies to home improvement as well. Some people are building a deck, or a den, and they have these huge orders. And a lot of people like you or me, we walk in and all we need is an extension cord or jumper cables. I would

lined up in the front of the store is conducive to a self-checkout type of system." Retailers view the technology as a tool to help solve labour shortages, cut costs, and improve customer service.

### CHANGING THE WAY WE PAY

The U-Scan Express is a high-speed alternative to the traditional checkout line that allows customers to act as their own cashiers - scanning, bagging, and paying for their items with limited or no assistance from store personnel. The unit operates with a touch screen, visual cues, and voice prompts to guide





*Self-checkout systems are becoming quite popular in the U.S., especially in the grocery and retail sectors. The system is perfect for any retailer that has express transactions of 12 items or less, including home improvement retailers.*



the technology include Kmart, Albertson's, Kroger, and Wakefern. Kmart has adopted NCR's self-scanning technology and expects to have the system in place at its 1,300 stores by the end of the year. NCR's system, called the NCR Self-Checkout, is a convertible system that gives retailers the option of converting from self-checkout mode to cashier-assisted – in less than 20 seconds.

At this time, Optimal Robotics is actively promoting the U-Scan Express in Canada.

"I think it's sort of like the ATM phenomenon all over again," says Karp. "It starts up small and slowly. For a while you saw ATMs only in banks. Now you see them everywhere. The same way today at the pump, you put in your card to pay. You buy your movie tickets outside the theatre – you put in your card to pay. People are becoming more and more familiar with this type of self-service technology."

