

C-Stores Embrace Automation

[Brad Perkins](#) May 19, 2023

Technology is helping c-store retailers enhance the customer experience.

Automation is offering new ways for convenience stores to cater to customers, and it's expanding at a rapid pace.

From robotic fresh smoothie kiosks at [Love's Travel Stops & Country Stores](#) (pictured right) to self-checkout and checkout-free stores to mobile apps that provide customized deals, retailers are embracing technology as another way to connect with shoppers and improve operations. Today, connected devices warn of inventory levels or issues with doors and coolers. And new artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT give stores the opportunity to connect at the push of a button.

With so many new ways of attracting and serving customers and operating the stores it may seem like technology is taking over. But it's not about replacement; it's about enhancement.

Enhancing the Store Experience

"People look at the future and make the mistake of thinking it's either this or that," said Daniel Burrus, CEO of [Burrus Research Associates](#), which monitors global advancements in technology. "Will artificial intelligence (AI) replace humans? It will replace humans with humans using AI. We live in a human world and a technical world."

Customers not only return to stores because they have the products they need, but also because they see a smiling face, Burrus pointed out.

A recent survey by [CivicScience](#) showed that a whopping 60% of customers would prefer to interact with an employee during checkout.

“We live in a technological world, but we also live in a human world,” Burrus said. “It’s still about people and relationships. They’re coming into your store because it’s convenient and local. These tools are freeing us up to create a relationship and create trust.”

Those relationships can build loyalty, so when customers think about running out to get something, they think of their local store. Stores can use technology to provide more products, faster service and greater customization and to free up employees to spend more time on customer service. While mobile apps remain vital, the real relationship building begins once customers enter the store.

“Our goal is to create a seamless digital experience that is personalized for our guests and team members,” said Mike Rodgers, chief technology officer, [Pilot Co.](#), which operates more than 800 locations, 750 of which are part of its Pilot Flying J Travel Center network, in 44 states and five Canadian provinces. “We look at technology through the lens of the end user to better understand how we can best serve their needs and make their lives easier.”

That’s the key — adopting technology that makes life easier.

“We’ve found that our guests appreciate technology that gives them more freedom along their journey and have seen increased usage of digital tools that provide convenience and independence, such as mobile fueling, parking and shower reservations, and digital payment options,” Rodgers said. “We are also installing self-checkouts as we remodel our stores to offer more options for our guests to get in and out quickly.”

Technology doesn’t only cater to customers. It can help employees work more efficiently, giving them space to help customers.

“For our team members, we are implementing technology such as handheld scanners, tablets and automation for recurring tasks to help make their jobs easier and give them more time to focus on providing excellent service to our

guests," Rodgers said.

That service doesn't have to solely cater to in-store purchases either. As electric vehicles become more prevalent and cheaper, more drivers will need a place to stop and charge. Having charging stations at the store could entice customers to spend time in the store while they charge. Meanwhile, nearby companies using autonomous or semi-autonomous vehicles will need a place to fill them up — no matter what type of fuel they use.

Regardless of whether it's in the store, in the forecourt or behind the scenes, the increasing availability and better ease of use of technology for everything from sales to marketing to checkout to product offerings will only become more in demand.

"One thing that continues to grow more powerful and cheaper is technology that can make your store look intelligent to help the customer and yourself," Burrus said.