

Replacing the checkout line

Grocery chain puts shopping-cart computers to the test

By Hiawatha Bray
GLOBE STAFF

QUINCY — Roseanne Conine brought only \$8 with her to the Quincy Stop & Shop on Southern Artery, and she's got to make every purchase count. So Conine let her shopping cart do the counting for her. Mounted in a niche on the cart's handle, a colorful portable computer called Shopping Buddy glowed up at her, displaying a list of Conine's purchases — a package of frozen stuffed peppers, a carton of orange juice, a gallon jug of lemon-lime punch, and a package of hamburger. Conine scanned all the merchandise herself, aiming Shopping Buddy's bar code reader at the packages. The computer beeped and calculated. The total came to about



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JANET KNOTT

Joanne O'Connell scanned a loaf of bread with a Shopping Buddy as she walked the aisles of the Quincy Stop & Shop.

\$11. Factor in a discount of \$5 for first-time users of the Shopping Buddy, and Conine had hit her target.

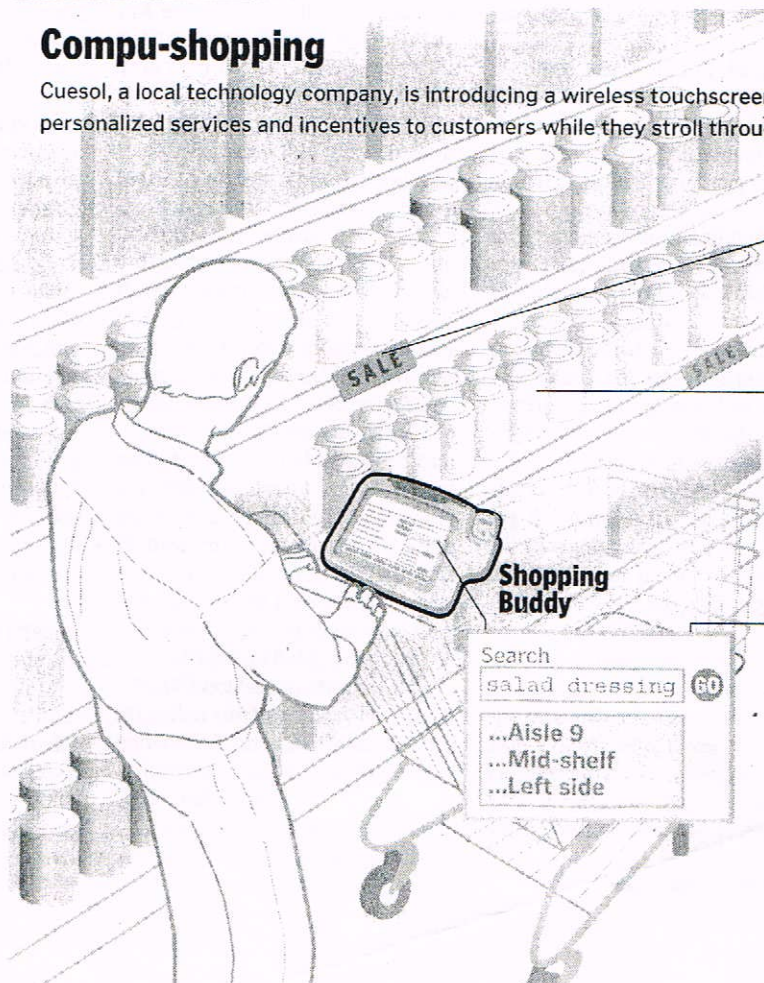
"I'm on a budget, so I have to

know how much I'm spending," said the 45-year-old mother of three, who shops twice a week. So Conine was a willing convert

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Compu-shopping

Cuesol, a local technology company, is introducing a wireless touchscreen computer that delivers personalized services and incentives to customers while they stroll through the aisles.



Your favorites

The Shopping Buddy displays information on favorite products and relevant specials based on the customer's location in the store.

On the label

Displays product specifications and can compare with similar items.

Forgot something?

Shoppers can order from the deli or other departments, and have the order ready for pick-up later.

Where is....

Enter an item and the computer displays exactly where it is in relation to shopper's present location.

Internet ready

Offers in-store, online assistance and access to the store's website for additional information.

Self-checkout

Allows self-scanning for running a total, instant price checks, and because everything is already scanned, a faster checkout.

Grocery chain rolls out shopping-cart computers

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to a new way to buy groceries. Stop & Shop Supermarket Co., a Quincy company owned by Dutch retail giant Ahold, is the first US grocery chain to offer shoppers their own wireless computer terminals for in-store use. Since April, the company has been testing whether consumers who have accepted do-it-yourself checkout lines are ready to take the next step, and total their purchases even before they reach the payment counter.

Yet the Shopping Buddy does far more than ring up purchases. You can use its touch screen to order items from the supermarket deli; when your pastrami's ready, the computer tells you to go pick it up. The Shopping Buddy automatically displays which aisle you're in, what's on sale there, and what you bought the last time you strolled through. If you can't find an item, punch in its name on the touch screen and the Shopping Buddy will point you to the correct aisle. It'll even display a "you are here" map that tracks you through the store like a homing device from a James Bond film.

For some shoppers, the effect is slightly creepy. "I liked it," said Julie Vialpando of Quincy. "It tells me what's on sale." But, she added, "I feel like I'm being watched."

Stop & Shop spokeswoman Faith Weiner said that her company's into customer convenience, not customer surveillance. "Privacy

is an issue that we take seriously," Weiner said. For example, she said, Stop & Shop will not sell personal information about customers. "If you violate a customer's privacy, you violate their trust."

Armed with a Shopping Buddy, Joanne O'Connell of Quincy said, she can race through her supermarket visits. "There's no waiting in line," said O'Connell. "It's really nice to just breeze through." But not everybody is in love with the technology. "My brother-in-law won't do it," O'Connell said. "He says it's taking away somebody's job."

It's an issue that worries some leaders of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, which represents 1.4 million workers nationwide. The union doesn't want to oppose new technology outright, but hopes to bargain with supermarket companies to protect members' jobs even as the self-checkout trend spreads.

In Washington state, the union recently negotiated a contract that accepts the use of self-checkout stations, but requires new negotiations before managers can add more of the stations. "The first concern is over protecting the current jobs of the checkers we have," said Mike Hatfield, president of UFCW Local 44 in Mount Vernon, 60 miles north of Seattle. "We're concerned because right now, it's unknown what impact these" stations "will have."

But Weiner said the use of Shopping Buddies and self-check-

out counters won't cost any jobs. For one thing, she said, Stop & Shop will always have some people ringing up purchases. "We're not looking to replace cashiers because it would eliminate part of the personality of our stores," said Weiner. For another, there's plenty of other work to be done in running a supermarket — stocking shelves, cutting salami, sweeping up. Weiner said the displaced cashiers will be moved to these other tasks.

Cuesol Inc., the Quincy company that created the Shopping Buddy's software, says the system is so attractive it will convert occasional Stop & Shop shoppers into loyal customers. "If the shopping experience is that much more convenient, then customers will spend more of their food budget in your store," said Cuesol's vice president of sales, Mike Grimes.

"There are lots of alternative formats getting into the supermarket business," Weiner said. "You've got drug stores, club stores, and supercenters." If lending computers to customers will bring them back, Stop & Shop is all for it. "For us, it's about being on the cutting edge, gaining a step on the competition."

The Quincy store boasts 100 Shopping Buddies, mounted near the entrances in futuristic looking racks. Each receptacle automatically recharges the computer's battery, locking the machine in place until the task is done. A string of

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Technology raises privacy, jobs issues

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