

ICE COBOTICS

Discover Six Benefits Autonomous Solutions Bring to Retailers

A GUIDE TO IMPROVING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION



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What Is Happening in the Retail Industry?

Grocery, Convenience Store, and Retail Troubles

While labor shortages are currently a problem faced by many industries across the globe, the retail industry has been battling this issue for many years. The current shortage issues have only exacerbated the problem faced by the retail industry and drawn these problems into the limelight.

According to many, grocery stores are feeling the brunt of current labor shortages.

Brian Pearson for [Forbes](#), noted at the end of 2021:

“Nearly 6.3 million retail workers quit their jobs in the first 10 months of 2021, and by the end of October, their employers were still trying to fill 1 million openings. Many of these openings, and perhaps the ones that sting the most, are in the grocery aisle.”

Grocery stores are not alone however as “C-store managers also report struggling to find reliable workers who they trust to show up for work each day,” according to [Gilbarco Veeder-Root](#) a convenience store technology supplier.

The labor shortages faced by the retail industry do not only stem from current labor shortage issues. According to Mary Hanbury, writing for [Business Insider](#):

“While the ‘Great Resignation’ was born out of the pandemic, the sentiments behind it have been brewing for years in retail. Decades of stores neglecting workers has turned retail work into a CV stop-gap rather than a viable career, experts tell Insider – and it’s now coming back to haunt the industry.”

The problems run deeper than may appear. Many employees note leaving due to inconsistent hours, lack of good pay and benefits, lack of job growth and progression, and the treatment they receive from management and customers.



Growing Consumer Demands and Expectations

In addition to the issues related to labor shortages, consumers have become more sensitive to and expect more from retailers when it comes to the cleanliness and safety of the indoor environment.

Clean environments are key to creating loyal customers. That and exceptional customer service.

In 2020, [Commercial Zone](#), a waste receptacle company, compiled consumer data regarding customers' concerns and preferences related to store cleanliness.

The gathered data suggests cleanliness is a major concern among shoppers. For example, “64% of shoppers have said they have left a store without making a purchase due to poor physical appearance,” and “37% of shoppers with a store preference say that store cleanliness is the driving force behind their choice.”

92%
say a clean, organized store environment increases the probability they will make a purchase.

69%
of shoppers say they will not go back to a store they feel is unsanitary and will instead shop at a competitor.

Source: <http://www.commercialzone.com/the-importance-of-store-cleanliness>

These issues are not specific to grocery and convenience stores. [Chain Store Age](#), the leading news source for retail business, reported that the top five factors that turn patrons away from any retail store are:

- 5 FACTORS THAT TURN PATRONS AWAY**
1. General bad odor – 78%
 2. Dirty restrooms (e.g., floors, stalls, mirrors, odor) – 66%
 3. Dirty surfaces (e.g., dust on displays, dust bunnies on floors) – 65%
 4. Entryway cleanliness (e.g., cigarette butts, overflowing trash cans, unkempt appearance) – 60%
 5. Dressing room conditions (e.g., dirty mirrors, dirty floors, broken locks, lighting issues) – 56%

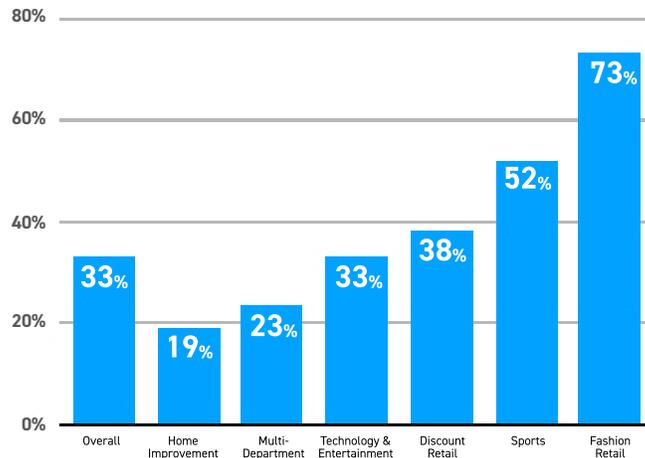
*% are numbers of respondents from the Harris Poll cited in the article (Wilson)

In addition to cleanliness, customer experience continues to drive in-store purchasing. Customers continually look for an “experience” when visiting a brick-and-mortar store. The focus on people is now more important than the focus on products.

According to Pamela Danziger, writing for [Forbes](#):

“Today’s retail visionaries understand that meeting the new needs, desires and aspirations for the people whom their enterprises are organized for – the customers – is the key to success. Those visionaries include Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Angela Ahrendts (Apple), Steven Lowy (OneMarket, formerly with Westfield Mall), Andy Dunn (Bonobos, now Walmart), Neil Blumenthal (Warby Parker) and Rachel Shechtman (STORY Store). Serving the needs of people, not selling product, is the real goal of retail and how the money is made.”

HOW MUCH POSITIVE STAFF INTERACTION INCREASES CUSTOMER SATISFACTION BY TYPE OF RETAILER



The article goes on to explain that in a study of over 30,000 U.S. consumers, respondents stated a positive in-store experience is a deciding factor as to whether they will return—looking for a repeat experience.

The article also highlights: “customers’ feelings about their interactions with the retailers’ staff, that person-to-person connection, are the most important factor.”

What this suggests is that the retail industry needs to do a better job supporting their staff. Without a positive and happy workforce, customer experience can only be so good.

While some retailers have started to make changes, including sign on bonuses to attract more talent, some argue this may not be enough: As reported by [Grocery Dive](#) Françoise Carré, research director at the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston says, “retailers may be overly focused on quickly hiring workers to meet current needs. ‘Are they putting anything in place that would be durable or are they just doing very short-term things to see if they can prompt some response?’ she asked.”

“I believe the industry must meet the challenge to maintain service at an acceptable level. The personal contact is so important since it really defines the character of every store and can be what differentiates the store experience – vital to entice customers to come into a store.”

—Walter Loeb, senior contributor at [Forbes](#), retail news events

Autonomous Solutions Can Help the Retail Industry Exceed Customer Expectations

Basic autonomous solutions have already been adopted by most grocery stores, as seen with self-checkout lanes. Grocers are not alone in this endeavor as other types of retail have begun to adopt this technology as well.

Five Below and Meyer Oil Company (owners of Mach 1 convenience retail stores) for example, also use self-scanners at checkout to streamline the payment process to make shopping more efficient for customers.

Alan Meyer, chief executive officer of Meyer Oil Company, during a [webinar hosted by NACS](#) pointed out, with the self-checkout experience staff can focus on customers. “They can greet them and have a more personal conversation with them. It is a much more stress-free experience for the customer and the associate.”

Other types of autonomous solutions are on the way.

Retail giant Amazon, and Amazon Robotics, formerly Kiva Systems, manufactures, distributes, and deploys warehouse fulfillment robots, designed to streamline order fulfillment by having the robots locate the items and deliver them to the person packing the order. Amazon utilizes this technology in their warehouses.

Wakefern Food Corp., the largest retailer-owned supermarket cooperative in the U.S., recently partnered with Simbe Robotics to bring on “Tally,” the shelf scanning, inventory tracking robot.

According to Dan Berthiaume, senior technology editor at Chain Store Age “The Tally robots autonomously roam store aisles up to three times per day, leveraging computer vision technology to scan products to ensure they are in-stock, in the correct location, and accurately priced on the sales floor.”

When it comes to keeping stores clean, Walmart uses autonomous floor scrubbers to keep their floors clean and to help reduce the workload for retail staff that are tasked with not only providing exceptional customer service, but also completing a lengthy list of daily tasks.



So, how else can automation help retailers get back on track?

1. Automation Can Free Staff to Focus on Customer Service

Adding autonomous solutions can free up staff to focus on creating an exceptional customer experience.

As noted earlier, consumers are now much more focused on in-store experiences:

“That is the new retail paradigm and why people – both the people the retailer serves, i.e. the customers, and the people who do the serving, i.e. retail staff, are the two most critical factors in retail success today. Product is secondary” (Danziger).

Positive store experiences for customers are not only related to the cleanliness of the store but also to interactions with staff. When staff are busy focusing on tasks, it can take away from the customers' overall experience.

The [National Association of Convenience Stores \(NACS\)](#), recently reported how Petes of Erie Inc., a convenience store chain across Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma will implement self-checkouts across its 50 locations.

Doug Mercer, information technology director for Pete's says, “Busy stores create new challenges in the shopping experience and we're no different, self-checkout allows us to maintain the standards our customers have come to expect.”

The self-checkout kiosks being installed will allow customers to pay for fuel, snacks, and any other items all in one transaction. Pete's plans to have brand ambassadors on hand to help customers at any point in the process.

According to NACS “Self-checkout helps to shorten wait times at the front counter and free up team members for other valuable tasks like stocking shelves and maintaining cleanliness standards.”

Autonomous equipment, whether it be self-checkout kiosks, inventory scanners, or autonomous floor cleaning machines, like [ICE Robotics' Cobi 18](#), free staff from tasks that take time away from customers. In addition, the important tasks like floor cleaning and inventory management are still being done, adding to the overall store experience.

By offloading these tasks, retailers can redirect energy toward the overall experience in the store. This has a positive impact on customers, causing them to return to the store repeatedly.

“Customers’ feelings about their interactions with the retailers’ staff, that person-to-person connection, are the most important factor.”

—Pamela Danziger, Forbes



2. Automation Can Help Create Clean and Healthy Environments

As grocery and convenience stores continue to increase their offerings in prepared and fresh food, the importance of clean and healthy environments has never been more important.

As previously noted, the appearance of a store directly impacts a customer's decision to buy and return to the store.

Customer perception is critical for a store's reputation and ability to gain loyal customers.

In the case of food, According to Richard Sterling, director of food safety for Circle K, speaking during a webinar titled, Case for Cleanliness "Any customer that is going to be purchasing food is looking for visual cues that it is okay to purchase food from a store" (NACS Daily).

Cleanliness is an essential part of creating a positive perception and a healthy environment.

Sterling goes on to point out "cleanliness is an essential risk mitigation component for any food safety program. It impacts all chemical, physical, and biological hazards that you must control when it comes to food and for food to be safe" NACS Daily).

Increased cleaning of these areas is essential to the overall safety of the environment and customers' perception of the store.

Deploying autonomous floor cleaning equipment, like Cobi 18, ICE Cobotics' autonomous scrubber, not only supports staff by taking on the job of cleaning the floors, but it also allows staff more time to focus on cleaning food stations where prepared and fresh food are housed.

The same goes for all other kinds of retailers as well. A customer is more likely to return to a store when they see an emphasis being placed on cleaning and store safety.

Deploying autonomous floor cleaning machines sends a message of assurance to customers—whether fully realized during the in-store experience or not.

"Any customer that is going to be purchasing food is looking for visual cues that it is okay to purchase food from a store."

—Accreditation, TK



3. Autonomous Solutions Help Support Staff

One of the significant issues for retailers is the large amount of work staff are expected to do each day.

Retail employees, for example, are tasked with cleaning the store, providing exceptional customer service, maintaining inventory, keeping up the appearance of the store, supporting other staff, checking customers out and more.

It can be a lot to keep track of when there is an appropriate number of staff and can feel overwhelming when there are not enough employees to handle the tasks.

Helping staff to feel supported is regularly cited as a promising way to retain and employ workers.

Bringing on autonomous solutions can help staff feel supported because while the robot cleans the floors, or scans the shelves, the employee can focus on customers, the number one priority, and get to other tasks on the daily list.

It can help to relieve some of the stress that can come along with typical daily responsibilities in busy retail environments.

Helping staff to feel supported can result in less turnover and more satisfied workers, which will translate to better customer service.



4. Automation Can Take on Repetitive Work

Repetitive stress injuries (RSI's) are common amongst workers that engage in repetitive movements frequently. RSIs are attributed to overuse of muscles, bones, tendons, and nerves. "This can be incredibly costly for organizations, and dangerous for custodians" according to John Lombardo at [Action News Resources](#).

Mopping is one cleaning task that can cause injury in employees that engage in this work frequently.

Lombardo points out, "Mopping is the second-leading cause of [cleaning-related injuries](#): These types of injuries result in significant financial loss to organizations in time, production efficiency, and worker's compensation."

According to John Lombardo, for Action Unlimited Resources, "If floor cleaning is a key service in business operations, it's imperative to reduce or remove the possibility of repetitive motion injuries by choosing the appropriate, ergonomically designed tool for the task at hand."

Bringing on autonomous solutions, especially autonomous cleaning machines like [Cobi 18, ICE Robotics' autonomous scrubber](#), can help reduce injury because staff no longer must spend lots of time mopping—which can lead to RSI's.

In addition, instead of time spent cleaning floors, staff can focus on restrooms, fitting rooms, store fronts, and surfaces that need to be wiped down frequently to help limit the spread of germs and contribute to a healthy environment.



5. Automation Helps Improve Technology Skills for Workers

One complaint of today's workers across the board is that of not enough training, or a lack of skill development and job progression within a company.

Technology is one area where continued education and development is necessary, and workers look for this when searching for employment.

Bringing on autonomous technology creates opportunities to teach staff new skills.

In fact, according to Bryan Pearson for [Forbes](#):

“More than half of all retailers are planning to add training that is designed to improve their employees’ technology skills, [Retail TouchPoints reports](#). Count supermarkets among them, especially as digital purchasing becomes more of a standard.”

Providing staff with opportunities to learn how to operate and manage autonomous machines, like [Cobi 18 by ICE Cobotics](#), is one way to continue staff development. This not only benefits staff members but it is good for retailers too.

“The more that workers can be hands-on and therefore familiar with these technologies, the more likely they will stay with the employer and improve efficiencies. Bonus: AI also can be used to detect the best-fit job candidates” (Pearson).

Improved employee retention means more skilled and knowledgeable workers, and this can directly impact the bottom line for a business as well as the overall customer experience.

“Forty percent of shoppers said they will spend less money and time in a store if they’ve had...a negative experience, and 43% said they are more likely to shop at a competitor after a similar negative in-store experience.”

—[Marianne Wilson, Chain Store Age](#)



6. Automation Can Help Managers Set Clear Goals and Reward Employees

Often times frustration between management and staff is related to unclear goals or expectations. One of the benefits of bringing on automation is [fleet management technology](#), which is a cloud-based data tracking system.

Fleet management software, depending on the program, comes with a whole host of applicable data insights.

Some of the most important for the retail industry are the ability to track the performance of the machine, including time spent completing the task it is designed to accomplish and even to track routes.

In the case of [ICE Cobotics' i-SYNERGY fleet management software](#), managers can log into an app, so they can be off site if necessary, and view a Clean Score.

The Clean Score is based on parameters set by the operations or management team and allows managers to quickly determine if the site is on track to meeting the day's cleaning goals or if additional support is necessary.

By setting goals in the i-SYNERGY app and tracking the progress, managers will better understand how much cleaning can be accomplished each day and even start to understand times and routes that are best to run in the store.

Through understanding this information, managers can coach staff on best times to operate autonomous technology and set realistic goals in terms of what should be accomplished each day.

Plus, this is a great way to incentivize staff, create fun, and offer rewards when goals are met. Not only does this benefit store managers, as they know when the job is complete, but staff can have fun in the process.

This is likely to translate to a happier and more loyal customer as well. When customers see staff are happy and enjoy their work, they are more likely to feel they are shopping at a place that appreciates staff, and this can add to the overall experience in the store.

While the retail landscape continues to shift, employers that bring on innovative solutions and put an emphasis on supporting staff are likely to lead the way in terms of loyal shoppers and overall success.

Today's workers and consumers want a different kind of experience, whether while working or shopping, and automation is a key solution to making it happen.

ICE Cobotics is a leading technology and cleaning solutions supplier. Our team is ready to help you get started with autonomous solutions. For additional information on Cobi 18, contact our [service team](#).

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