

BUSINESS

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Retailer offers high-tech help

Canadian Tire
uses electronic
kiosks to answer
customer questions

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So, you want to change the oil in your car. But you're not sure how much you need or which brand to buy. Or whether you could get an oil filter while you're at it.

You could go down to your local Canadian Tire store and stand in the lineup at the service counter and ask a lot of dumb questions that make you feel foolish while the customer behind you sighs and shuffles from foot to foot.

Or, you could spend a few minutes pushing buttons on the store's new electronic kiosk, which will not only tell you

what aisle the part is in and how to install it, but provide you with a printout of your engine type for future reference.

The electronic kiosk — a kind of TV screen combined with a computer — is one of a host of applications of a new technology called "interactive multimedia."

Interactive because you tell it how much information you want and when you want it, unlike traditional TV which is passive.

Multimedia because it combines voice, video and text in one entertaining and informative package.

Retailers are just one sector of the economy dabbling in this new technology, which can do a host of other things such as train staff and make product presentations to clients.

Eventually, cable TV operators and telephone companies hope to supply the technology

directly to consumers in their homes.

Canadian Tire began experimenting with electronic kiosks in its auto parts department six months ago in hopes of getting a leg up on competitors by providing better service.

The auto parts market has become so complex that Canadian Tire has to maintain extensive manuals on each model to ensure the consumer gets the right part, says Richard Goulet, Canadian Tire's director of merchandising for auto parts.

"You go to the counter. The guy asks you what do you drive. What year. What kind of engine it has. There are three different V6s in some models," he said.

"By moving to electronic technology, we put control back in the hands of the customer. They don't have to go through the embarrassment, after waiting in a long lineup, of not being able to answer the ques-

tions," he says.

Canadian Tire started six months ago with six kiosks in each of two new warehouse-style stores in London, Ont., and Montreal. Now, Goulet plans to extend the concept to 30 more stores next year, including some in Metro Toronto.

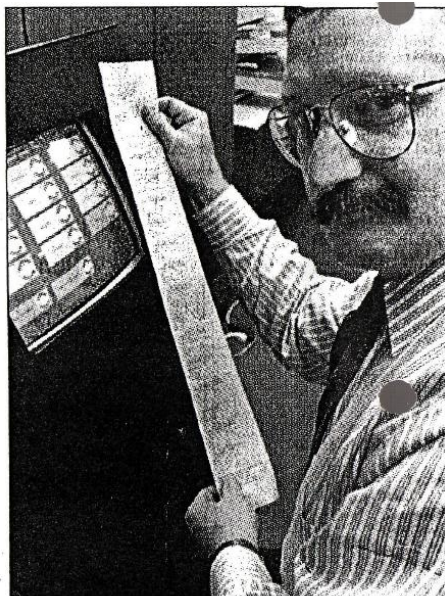
About a third of Canadian Tire's sales come from the auto departments of its 420 stores across the country.

The new technology also is spawning a new market for companies skilled in computer programming and creative marketing.

InForm Interactive, a Toronto production house that worked on the Canadian Tire project, got into the interactive multimedia business just 18 months ago and also has done work for Nissan, Alcan, Zenon and Hunter Building supplies.

The technology has been

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BERNARD WEIL

ANY QUESTIONS? Richard Goulet, Canadian Tire director of auto-parts merchandising, shows how new multimedia kiosks provide.

Canadian Tire's kiosks answer customer queries

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around for nearly a decade, says Shy Alter, president of the \$400,000-a-year firm (formerly Multi-Systems). But the hardware used to be prohibitively expensive for mass applications.

For Canadian Tire, InForm created the part the consumer sees. The snazzy graphics, the voice prompts and other easy-to-follow instructions.

To connect it all with Canadian Tire's huge back office computer, where the parts information is stored, they worked with computer consultants Mark Winter & Associates Inc.

"We see this as an area of growth, definitely," said president Mark Winter, whose four-year-old North York firm writes all kinds of business applications for corporate customers.

"The thing that made the Canadian Tire kiosk successful is that it was built on a database, a huge inventory of information on what parts were available, how they inter-relate, where they're located in the store and what they cost," he said. "A lot of other retailers are just using kiosks as an advertising vehicle."

Altogether, the Canadian Tire project involved an up-front investment of \$200,000, says Canadian Tire's Goulet. But the payoff, he adds, is better customer service.

"It frees up our professional people to deal with customers that have more complicated issues. So we believe it contributes toward better customer service."

"It's not something to take people off the sales floor. It's to enhance the sales floor."