

Food firm checks out 'robot' counters

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A major supermarket chain is about to start testing Canada's first do-it-yourself checkout counters — called Checkrobots.

With the new-style counters, shoppers move their own cans of soup and bottles of bleach over an electronic scanner that reads the product code on the package. Then they pick up their sales slip and take it to a cashier.

Oshawa Group Ltd. of Toronto will introduce the checkout counters next month at one of its Food City stores in Brampton, Ont.

"I think there will be a group of customers who enjoy using these terminals," said Douglas Stewart, president of the group's



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Lil Cochrane tries the do-it-yourself checkout counter at Food City.

Oshawa Foods division.

With Checkrobots, the scanning unit also doubles as a scale for produce to be weighed before the price is calculated. Shoppers press a button to indicate what fruit or vegetable is being weighed.

"Whatever's in the store will be in that machine," company spokesman Sam Crystal said.

As the purchases are scanned, the price appears on a TV screen overhead. The groceries then tra-

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Checkrobots being tested in store

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vel along a conveyor belt and under a security bar, which "knows the shape and weight of every product," Mr. Crystal said.

"If anything is inconsistent, (the conveyor belt) stops and backs up." The TV screen then asks the shopper to try again.

Oshawa Group operates about 100 supermarkets under the Food City, IGA and Dutch Boy names. It also owns Towers and Bonimart department stores, Drug City and Metro Drugs stores and outlets operating under the name Pharma Plus Drugmarts. It also supplies other retail food and drug outlets.

At the Brampton test store, it will test four do-it-yourself checkout lanes, which will feed into a single

cashier. There, any coupons will be deducted from the total bill.

Eight traditional checkouts will stay in operation. "Some people like to handle their purchases right through," Mr. Crystal said. For those who don't, "there will always be (regular) cashiers."

Whether the new system will ultimately prove more efficient is open to question.

"It takes a lot of education for the public," said an industry analyst, who asked not to be identified. "You end up doing much more work as a shopper."

The system has been tested since October of 1988 by Publix Super Markets Inc. of Lakeland, Fla. But the chain has not yet decided whether to make it a more common feature at its 370 stores.

Younger, late-night shoppers appear to like the new checkouts, especially when they have only a few items to pick up, a Publix spokesman said. Some older customers are also smitten with them, he added.

One advantage of the terminals, especially at stores open 24 hours a day, is that "these lanes will always be open," Mr. Crystal said.

Oshawa Group says the new checkouts are not meant primarily as a cost-saving device. "We don't really see it as a threat to jobs," Mr. Stewart said.

The checkouts, developed by Checkrobot Inc. of Deerfield Beach, Fla., cost \$20,000 to \$25,000 each, about four times the cost of installing a more traditional checkout counter.