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The Apple Store of Packies Opens in West Hartford

Korky Vann

Savvy Shopper

I'm a retail technology junkie. I research items online before heading into stores, shop with my smart phone in my hand and use apps to scan product bar codes, compare prices and access promotions and discounts.

I love those CVS kiosks that print out coupons geared to my shopping habits and always choose a self-checkout lane at the supermarket. As far as I'm concerned, all those bits, bytes, clicks, taps and apps enhance my brick-and-mortar experiences.

So when I stopped by the newly-opened Maximum Beverage package store in West Hartford, I was immediately a fan. (Maximum Beverage is the new incarnation of the former Dot.Com Wines.)

The 10,000-square-foot space is like the Apple store of packies. It features a giant

iPad-like touch screen near the front door where customers can pull up food and wine pairing suggestions, video clips, cocktail recipes and calendar of events. Want a bottle of Nino Franco Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Rustico? A map highlights where in the store it can be found.

Twenty-three digital overhead screens and interactive shelf displays feature additional product information. Pick up a bottle of wine, for example, and the screen above displays vineyard information, virtual tours and ratings.

At the tasting bar, a 60-inch screen will allow Skype-sessions with winemakers from around the world. An app for smart phones and tablets, is on the way. No hand-scrawled neon signs advertising Colt 45 and no stacks of dusty cartons. The place is classy and wired.

Store founder and president Brian Whitney says the technology, which was developed in partnership with

Frontex, an IT infrastructure and business process automation solutions company in Rocky Hill, took six months to develop, was created specifically for the store and allows customers to ask staff for assistance or make their choices independently.

"Shopping a wine store can be intimidating and often people are uncomfortable asking for help," says Whitney. "This way, if they want to, they can navigate on their own."

More and more retailers and manufacturers are turning to in-store technology, says **George Haley**, professor of marketing at the **University of New Haven**. By implementing digital signage, self-service kiosks, mobile devices and other technology, retailers can cut expenses and increase sales.

"These sorts of technology let retailers cut down on labor and staff training costs, while still providing customers with product information and encouraging sales," says

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Haley. "Some customers like the advances and some don't, but people are going to have to get used to it. We're going to see more and more."

Like interactive store fronts where customers can use a screen to shop and purchase goods even when the store is closed. Store messaging services that send a promotion to your smart phone when you drive by one of their locations. At Bloomingdale's in New York City, shoppers can try on sunglasses without visiting the eyeglass counter — or even going into the store. Interactive window displays at the chain's Lexington Avenue location project images of sunglasses right onto your face. (Gives a whole new meaning to the term "window shopping," doesn't it?)

Some JC Penney stores feature interactive kiosks with touch-screen displays that let you find merchandise in different sizes and colors and offers a virtual dressing room where you can store the items you're interested in until you make up your mind.

Staff around the new Nordstrom Rack near Westfarms are equipped with hand-held mobile checkout devices, so customers can

make instant purchases rather than waiting in line at the registers.

And if you prefer the personal touch, well, stay tuned. Coming soon, to a store or mall near you, virtual sales help. Marketing Ad Group is promoting their Holographic Greeter technology to retail businesses. The eerily-lifelike, 5-foot-4 female holographic image interacts with customers, provides product information and gives directions.