

Self-service a big factor at NACS Show 2006

by [Joseph Grove, contributing editor](#) * • 18 Oct 2006



[Kiosks](#) and [ATMs](#) may not have resided in the high-voltage, skin-themed booths of energy drinks and adult magazines, but they managed to pack their own punch Oct. 8-10 in Las Vegas at the 2006 National Association of Convenience Stores show.

Amid mammoth exhibits hyping one of the dozen or so high-octane beverages at the event—where cheek-baring models wrestled one another or were dropped into dunking booths at the whim of giant fuzzy dice—several self-service innovations called out to the 25,000 or so c-store owners and operators who attended.

Self-service was on the minds of show organizers as well.

Jeff Lenard, a NACS spokesman, said kiosks and similar technology are increasingly important to [c-store](#) executives, especially as they court younger customers.

"Young people are used to dealing with technology and expect it," he said. "They think your business is more progressive and quality-oriented if you have kiosks."

The key to sustaining growth, Lendard said, is deploying kiosks not merely for the sake of deployment.

"There are two factors: First and foremost, they have to be convenient. Second, they have to take the labor equation where it needs to go," he said. "It's not about reducing the workforce. It's about letting machines do what machines do best, and people do what people do best."

Scott Hartman, NACS board chairman, told attendees in the opening general session that demand for convenience has never been stronger, a fact that presents both challenges and opportunities for convenience store retailers.

"Time is money, and time is really what we sell," Hartman said. But convenience is a commodity virtually every other channel is trying to feature, too, he noted.

"Clearly, technology will play an ever-increasing role at our stores. And it already is in Asia. The cell phone you have today acts nothing like the ones they are using in Japan and Korea. But you will soon see them here," Hartman said, noting that they already serve as electronic wallet, personal scanner and personal navigation system and locator.

"Customers will receive offers on their phones, redeem electronic coupons with their phones and Web applications will allow them to find the lowest priced products between them and their next destination," Hartman said. "As retailers we will market our gas prices to customers as they drive down the highway and customers will have their cars programmed to seek out food offers they prefer. The in-car convenience store billboard is closer than you think."

NACS is doing much more than looking at the future of technology; it is helping shape it, Hartman said.

"At NACS, we believe that technology is an investment, that if you make it wisely, it should yield a competitive advantage," he said.

Referencing an industry pain point, the huge and growing problem of interchange fees, Hartman asked attendees to "give out one big industry boo!"

NACS is actively fighting to reduce them and "is poised to push the issue even further in the next Congress," Hartman said.

"While we continue to be on the forefront in battling these ridiculous interchange fees, the NACS Card Processing Program that we introduced in 2003 at the NACS Show also has allowed smaller independent operators to reduce their expenses to the tune of more than \$4,000 per store, per year," Hartman said. "Because other card processors dropped their rates to be competitive with ours, we estimate the net savings overall to our industry is upwards of \$60 million."

Some show exhibitors

Blackstone and **InComm**, players in the prepaid market, showed kiosks that will enable customers to pay bills in addition to paying in advance for services.

Card Scanning Solutions introduced a new version of ID Scan, its driver's license scanner, which can read information from IDs from all 50 states while rejecting counterfeits and putting solid data in database fields.. The software and scanning technology in the new iteration completes the scan and read in about one second, beating by nine seconds the time of the previous model.

Coinstar, known best for its green, coin-counting kiosks at the front of grocery stores, announced it had received the 2006 North American Frost & Sullivan Award for Competitive Strategy Leadership for its e-payment products category-management program. The program uses analytics to fine-tune prepaid efforts, including wireless, long-distance, and cash and gift cards.

Corporate Safe Specialists featured its new Brinks-friendly kiosk, which debuted last month at The Self-Service & Kiosk Show. The self-service device is compatible with the key system used by the armored car company, enabling c-store operators to host cash-accepting kiosks without creating a security weakness; employees need never touch the money.



Julia Shih, marketing director for Card Scanning Solutions, demonstrates a new version of ID Scan, which can scan, read and transfer to database information from driver's licenses from all 50 states. The scanner, which will go to market in January, does the job in about one second.

Self-service newcomer **Pan-Oston** showed its Utopia line, applications that can be custom-configured for the small spaces typical of the c-store environment as well as for big-box food retailers. Units can be positioned on the floor, with or without a security scale, or tabletop, with biometric capability. "The biometrics can be used to reduce the number of keys and cards c-store operators have to give employees," said Russell Strickland, self-scan project manager for Pan-Oston. "They can be used for loyalty programs as well, when they're customer-facing."

Triton Systems provided a preview of its new low-cost ATM, the RL2000, which will formally debut in

2007. The ATM provides more functionality than traditionally found on low-cost machines. Featuring the Win CE.net 5.0 operating system, the RL2000 has a large storage capacity for journaling and comes with an optional 8-inch VGA color display that supports improved advertising and screen-customizing capabilities.