

DEUS EX MACHINA



Japan has over 5.2 million vending machines — that's one for every two dozen people. Last year, Japan's brands and manufacturers saw \$62 billion in sales just from vending machines, according to figures from the Japan Vending Machine Manufacturers' Association. Only around 50% of Japanese machines sell drinks, however. The rest sell everything from the utilitarian to the kinky: books, ramen noodles, liquor, iPods, live lobsters, fresh meat, potted plants, eggs and -of course- porn.

Now, vending machines in Tokyo's Shinagawa train station can also sense and interact with customers, according to their age and gender. The machines have three motion sensors and a built in camera that recognize sex and age with 75% accuracy and will try to guess which beverage you are likely to purchase, or will recommend purchases. When no one is in the immediate vicinity, the display shows time of day, temperature, and real-time news, thanks to WiMax high-speed internet connection; but when someone approaches the machine, it shows the 47-inch item selection touch screen. The customer can then zoom to get more information on each particular product. The machines are controlled through a centralized server, allowing for easy monitoring by the vending company. Besides cash, drinks can be bought through a number of Japanese instant payment systems.

The machines are also programmed to have "empathy". In the case of a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, for instance, the machines would dispense beverages for free.

Machines with face-recognition software are going to have many applications in the near future. A new cigarette vending machine being developed now in Japan, for example, will be able to determine if someone is old enough to smoke and then it would decide whether it dispenses the item or not. If it cannot make a viable decision, it would request an ID, to compare the picture it took with the ID.

The Shinagawa machines were developed by JR East Water Business Co., with Omron and Fuji Electric Retail Systems. The goal of this technology is increasing sales through more sophisticated targeted advertising. This technology also translates into quantitative data for advertisers. 500 of these hi-tech machines are expected to be installed in Tokyo train stations and in nearby cities over the course of the next two years. Companies like Panasonic, Samsung and NEC are also developing facial-recognition technology.



Sources:
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