

From the parking lot to the front-end, retailers are seeking equipment that is flexible, durable and visually appealing.



LASTING *impression*

By Kim Ann Zimmermann

THE PARKING LOT AND STORE VESTIBULE offer supermarket customers clues about what to expect on the rest of their shopping trip. If shoppers see a messy parking lot or the store looks dingy when they walk in, they are likely to cast a watchful eye for the remainder of their visit or even head for the exit.

Many supermarkets that have been delaying investing in these areas are now looking for inexpensive ways to make a big impact, say industry observers. "They have been holding off, but you can only delay putting money back into the store for so long," says Harry Newton, director of sales and marketing for Structural Plastics Corp., a Holly, Mich.-based maker of display systems. "They are looking for inexpensive but high-impact ways to spruce up their high-traffic promo areas and vestibules."

The amount of space being devoted to the front-end

is also shrinking. Observers say many supermarkets are looking for ways to make the most of the opportunity to impress shoppers.

"As supermarkets are facing compressing margins and increased competition, they can't afford poor marks for customer service or provide an inferior shopping experience. The front-end is a make-or-break proposition," says Jim Vance, president of Pan-Oston, a Bowling Green, Ky.-based manufacturer and designer of retail checkout products.

He says there are a number of factors that retailers must



consider in order to determine the right front-end configuration, including footprint, average and peak weekly sales, basket size, transaction size, labor costs, store hours, shrink and merchandising strategies. "Retailers are looking for solutions that are modular and scalable and adapt to changing needs," he says.

Retailers are also looking for modular, customizable surrounds that can be tailored to stores' demographics. Technology is aiding in making for a different front-end experience. Observers say mobile POS and iPhones, tablet computers, smartphones and other mobile devices are having an impact on all areas of the front-end, including motorized shopping carts.

"The biggest trend we see is that the Internet is taking on a real strong position as a shoppers' tool," says Steve Scroggins, senior vice president of sales and marketing at Rogers, Ark.-based Assembled Products Corp., which manufactures the Mart Cart brand of motorized shopping carts.



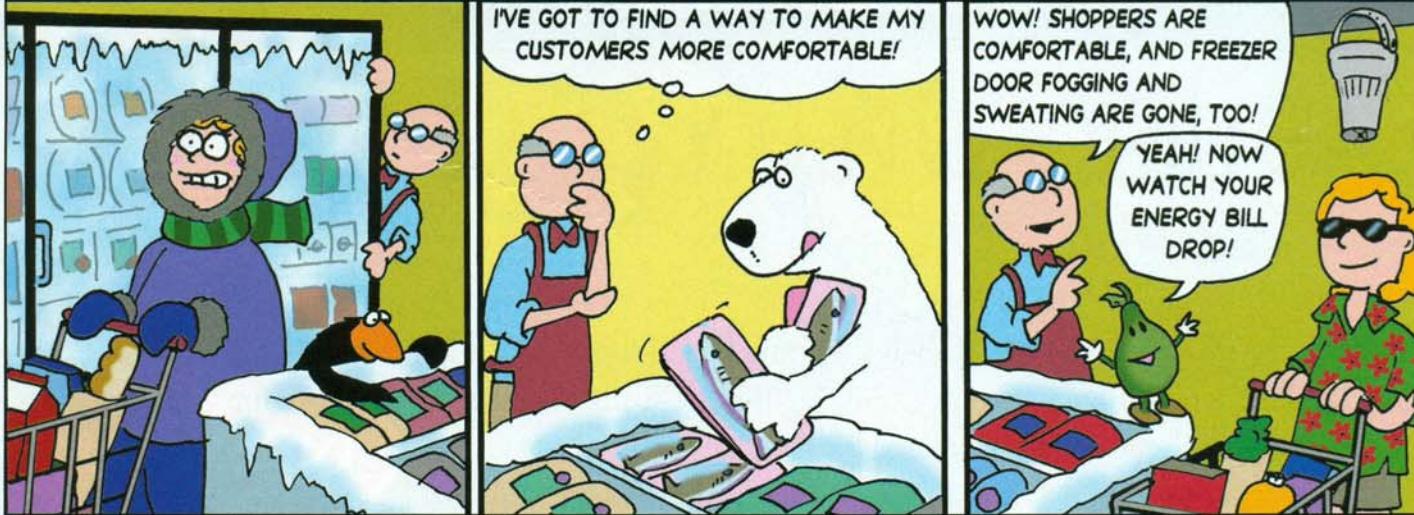
The company is responding to retailer requests to integrate technology into its motorized shopping carts. Scroggins says retailers are looking for motorized carts that can have a tablet mounted on them as well as a USB port so that users can plug in their own devices to use them and keep them charged as they shop. A smartphone mount option will be available mid-summer 2012 and the tablet mount will follow later in 2012 or early 2013, says Scroggins.

Grocers are also seeking equipment that is durable and sustainable. "There is a return to value, and environmental sustainability

is here to stay and continues to get stronger and stronger," he adds. Assembled Products achieved Green Plus Certification by the Durham, N.C.-based Institute for Sustainable Development/Green Plus, a partner with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Scroggins says the Green Plus Certification is a third-party certification that evaluates the full spectrum of sustainability—green, plus people and economic performance practices.

Motorized shopping carts appeal to older consumers as well. As shoppers get older and less mobile, there is an increased demand for reliable motorized shopping carts, says Sue Schaefer, vice president of retail sales at Dane Technologies, the Brooklyn Park, Minn.-based manufacturer of SmartKART motorized shop-

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ping carts and other equipment.

"Our motorized shopping carts can hold up to 800 pounds and have an automatic brake that holds its position," she says. "That is extremely important as these carts are being used by shoppers with limited mobility."

The company has adapted its motorized carts so they can also be used to retrieve shopping carts in the parking lot. Called the QuicKART, Schaefer says it saves on labor and workers' compensation claims. "One [worker compensation] claim can be \$20,000, and the cart is roughly one-quarter of that."

In addition to saving on labor, she says the QuicKART allows for staffing flexibility, as the carts can be quickly rounded up by anyone who has been trained to use the equipment.

Multi-use carts

As households and stores get smaller and shopping habits change, the traditional shopping cart is being redesigned. Paul Giampavolo, president of Safe-Strap Co., a Wharton, N.J.-

based shopping cart manufacturer, says carts have to be flexible and adaptable. Safe-Strap introduced the two-tier Transporter cart in the third quarter of last year to address the need for compact shopping cart design while accommodating people shopping with children and customers purchasing larger items.

The company's Shop-Along line offer a comfortable and secure seating area that can accommodate adults and children, and the large storage area under the seat is perfect for bulk merchandise purchases such as paper products or soft drinks, company officials say.

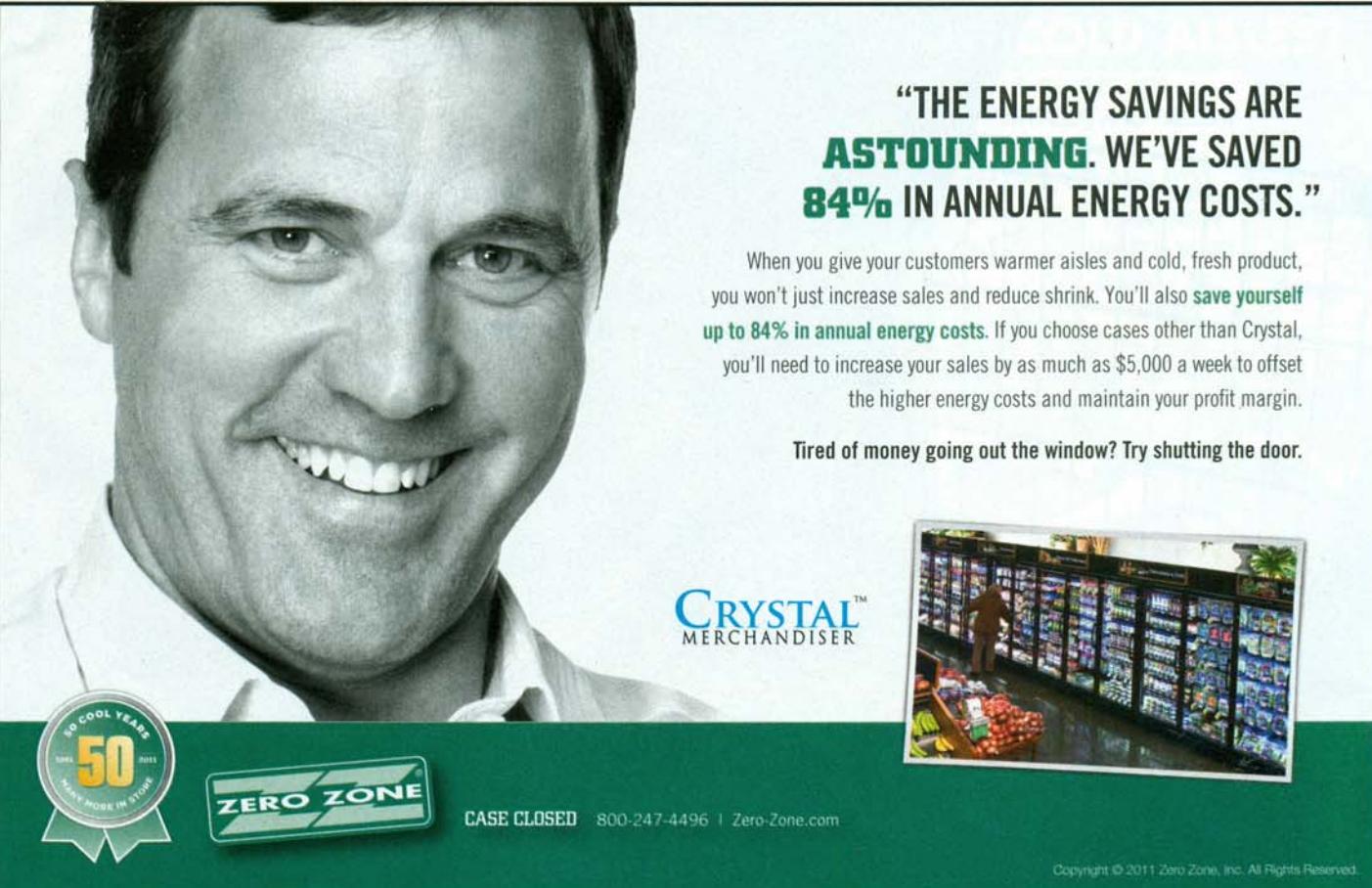
"It is a compact cart with roomy baskets," he says. "The seat flips up so that the cart converts quickly from a stroller cart to a flatbed cart for those who are not shopping with children but are picking up bulky items."

He says there are a number of other unique features to the Transporter. "The baskets were specifically designed to hold reusable shopping bags, it handles effortlessly and the Transport has a stylish and contemporary



look," Giampavolo says. "The stroller seats come in vibrant colors and the frames can be accented to match. The biggest interest so far is in the red and black; and the blue and black color scheme really looks fresh and makes a bold design statement."

One major development that will have an impact on shopping cart manufacturers and retailers is the new signage on shopping carts warning parents against putting infant carriers in shopping carts. The new warning was developed by the American Society for Testing Methods International (ASTM) Shop-



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ping Cart Subcommittee. Giampavolo is subcommittee chairman.

"More than an estimated 20,000 children under 5 are injured by shopping carts each year," he says. "Falls from the cart are the most common cause of shopping cart-related injury in children under 5, and account for 82% of all injuries. Parents should only use an infant carrier that is permanently mounted to the shopping cart."

For toddlers, a shopping cart that looks like a racecar or space ship can make a trip to the grocery store more enjoyable—for both the child and parent. However, for retailers these carts can take up more space than a traditional cart and are difficult to stack.

"Our kiddie carts can be nested and the child is sitting up high, which parents tell us they prefer," says Darren Norley, national accounts manager for RTS retail division of RTS Companies, based in Austinburg, Ohio. The company also provides cart corrals and sanitation stations.

Taking it outside

The branding effort of any good retailer does not start at front door, observers say. It starts in the parking lot.

"The outside of the store, including the parking lot and the cart corrals, is an extension of the store and is a reflection of the overall brand," says Tim Ryan, director of grocery marketing for Bracco International, a Madison Heights, Mich.-based cart corral manufacturer. "From what retailers tell us, the parking lot is viewed as brand real estate more than it was 10 years ago."

He says the company started out making transit shelters until it expanded into cart corrals when it began working with retailers such as Wegmans about five years ago. "We started working with them when their cart corrals had blown away in the 90-mile-an-hour winds in Buffalo, New York," he says. "The story goes that one of our transit shelters was nearby, and they found our name on the shelter and contacted us. Our aluminum structures are durable and sustainable and we can build customized cart corrals with the retailer's colors, logo and design to reflect their brand."

Retailers are even viewing their parking lots as literal extensions of their stores, build-

REDUCING SHRINK AT THE FRONT-END

One trend in front-end merchandisers is the need for attractive displays while preventing theft.

The EWT (Expandable Wire Tray) shelf management system from Trion Industries, the Wilkes-Barre, Pa.-based fixture manufacturer, can help retailers manage back-stock and high theft items under the checkout and at customer service.



"Obviously the biggest use is high theft items like shaving supplies, cold meds, pregnancy tests and even Preparation H, which is highly shoplifted," he says.

ing small garden centers in their parking lots.

"Having live goods in the front of the store really brings some color and curb appeal and draws in customers," says Structural Plastics' Newton. "It also offers the opportunity to inspire, inform and educate." He says this gives retailers that do not have room for full garden centers the ability to offer some limited-quantity SKUs.

Structural Plastics' new tilt-top displays are designed to combine slant presentation with the ability to store bulk stock below. "This maximizes floor space and exposes more product to sell more product," Newton says.

In addition to parking lots, store entrances and vestibules are areas that observers often say are neglected when it comes to merchandising. "Surveys show that retail stores with attractive, well-kept store entrance areas attract more repeat customers," says Earl W. Ford, director of marketing and customer service for Kansas City, Mo.-based Forté Product Solutions, a manufacturer of store display equipment and merchandisers.

Ford says two particularly menacing issues facing store entry environments are trash and smoking materials. To keep storefronts' free of discarded smoking materials, Forté offers a cigarette disposer designed for proper smoke waste collection, "without the hassle of compli-

cated maintenance and labor," he says.

When merchandising outside weather is usually an issue. The company's U-Link Merchandiser is plastic and can be used to merchandise impulse items outside the store, withstanding the weather. The four-foot units can be linked together.

Inside the store, Ford says that Forté Product Solutions' half-size merchandiser is an ideal fixture that assists category managers and store staff to build attractive, impactful end caps. The Forté 48-inch by 22-inch by 8-inch merchandiser is easy





to stock, holds significant product weight and is dimensioned to fit the store's end aisle space, says Ford.

As many retailers look to get product to the floor quickly, they do not want their front-end to look unkempt. Companies such as Safe-Strap offer products that can dress up a pallet display. Safe-Strap's Pallet Guards are interlocking adjustable panels that surround a regular shipping pallet, transforming it into

an attractive display. New this year is Pallet Guard for End Caps, allowing retailers to add a simple end piece to the Pallet Guard to develop an inexpensive end cap fixture that creates a powerful visual, unifying store design, say company officials.

Front-end displays need to adapt to the various sizes and proportions of products that are merchandised at the checkout. Rosemount, Minn.-based Cannon Equipment's Versagrid flexible, configurable, modular display system allows a retailer to layout, arrange and rearrange permanent front-end systems in a way that has not been possible with traditional custom fixtures, say company officials. The merchandiser enables retailers to capture impulse purchases including new SKU introductions, packaging innovations and seasonal promotions with one long lasting front-end system.

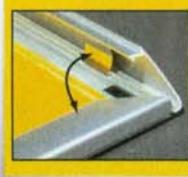
"Retailers told us they were looking for a flexible way to adapt and update their front-end systems to capitalize on changes in con-

sumer preferences, product innovations and corporate directives in a way that just was not possible with traditional custom fixtures," says Kenny Ramsey, Cannon's vice president of marketing and new product development. "It is possible to have a front-end system that maximizes space, increases flexibility, uses standard parts and enhances a shopper's overall experience while delivering increased sales and profits to retailers."

The permanent modular display is designed to last 10-plus years and uses standard components that can be easily rearranged into different configurations for cross-merchandising space, say officials. Shelves, pockets and bins can be changed out, rearranged or locked into place. A unique bracket system with up to $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch vertical adjustment enables very tight pack outs to optimize space. Plus retailers can easily add or change coolers into the system. The system is on a grid that offers horizontal adjustments with standard heights of 54 inches, 57 inches, 60 inches and 63 inches. □

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