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Computers Go to Work as Salesmen

WHEN computers began making their appearance on the business scene, mostly in accounting offices at first, a sign printed some signs reading: "Look alive! You can be replaced by a computer."

The gag turned out not to be a joke. People have been replaced by computers, robots and mechanical manipulators in factories, printing shops, offices and warehouses.

Now "electronic salesmen" are showing up in display rooms. The Wall Street Journal reports that a floor covering firm has installed them in 100 of its stores and plans to add 700 more.

A computer manufacturer is preparing to ship 500 in-store "electronic salesmen" to help its retailers sell home computers. Other firms were said to be testing computer devices to boost sales.

Salespeople face direct competition from these electronic entities. This could put a crimp in the attitude that "If you will ignore a customer long enough maybe, he will go away."

Floor-model electronic salesmen seem to be something between a computer and a fixed sequence robot, with manipulating skills added. The description said one could digest answers to eight questions about the decor of a customer's room and then display from three to 10 appropriate floor covering patterns it selects from more than 200 in a nearby sample display rack.

While the robot is doing this, a TV personality pops onto the screen to offer a spiel about the company and its merchandise. This is where the device has it over a lot of salespeople. It is programmed to say the right things. Many humans aren't.

It is not uncommon to encounter salespeople who haven't bothered to learn even basic facts about what they are selling.

Bob Cornforth, architectural engineer, told of shopping for a new car recently. Industry news indicates that automobile sales still are slumping badly, but he said that not one of a half dozen salesmen he contacted called back to see whether he

had bought a car, was still interested or had given up in despair.

That might not have happened if he had been dealing with an electronic salesman. For quite awhile devices have been in use to dial prospective buyers, make sales pitches, and take messages.

Now American Express has devised a computer that can reply to member's incoming calls. It may be in operation next year.

Human salespeople still have a chance, because most of us would rather deal with living beings than with machines. We will do so if the latter are as dependable and alert as the machines.

Years ago the popular Edgar A. Guest expressed the basis for "Good Business" in one of his poems. He wrote:

"The reason people pass one door/ To patronize another store/ Is not because the busier place/ Has better silks or gloves or lace,/ Or cheaper prices, but it lies/ In pleasant words and smiling eyes./ The only difference, I believe,/ Is in the treatment folks receive."