

When Self-Checkout Stops Being Self-Service



CONVENIENCE SERIES

When Self-Checkout Stops Being Self-Service

THE SHORT VERSION

Self-checkout takes routine transactions off the counter. But in a c-store, every exception that pulls an associate over puts some of that labor right back, as an interruption.

Comfort drops by half when age enters the transaction

Comfortable with technology handling it, no employee involved

Checkout and payment



Age verification



Source: Cambridge Retail Advisors survey of 500 U.S. consumers

55.8% are comfortable letting technology handle checkout and payment without an employee. For age verification, only 27.5% are. And in a c-store, beer, tobacco, and lottery are a regular part of the basket, not an edge case. Biometrics came in last at 4.8%. The technology is moving faster than customer comfort.

— The exception tax

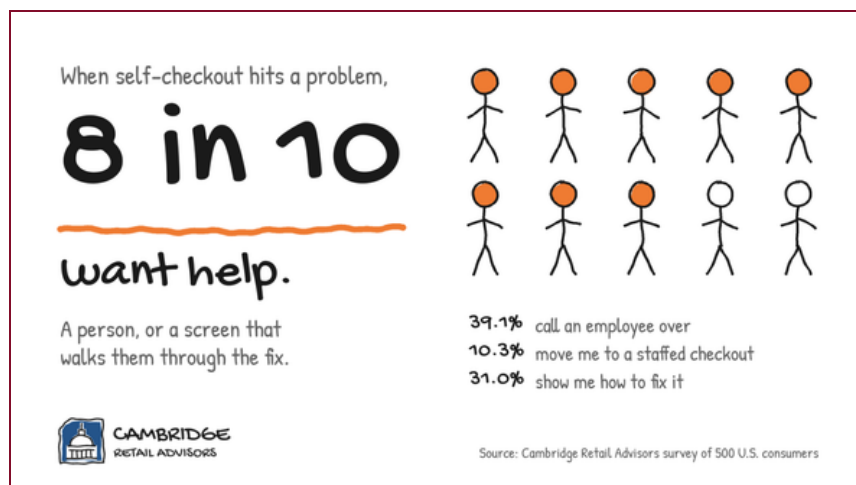
A c-store counter does everything. The associate called to a self-checkout may also be running the register, handling lottery, and helping with foodservice. There may only be one or two people covering all of it. So the cost isn't just the few seconds to clear the screen. Something else can stop too. That's the exception tax.



— Customers will help, if you help them

When self-service hits a problem, 39.1% want an employee called over right away, and another 10.3% want the purchase moved to a staffed checkout. But 31.0% want the system to show what went wrong and how to fix it, and 16.1% would rather try themselves.

Not every flashing light has to become an employee intervention. A generic “wait for assistance” message turns something the customer might have fixed into another interruption.



— What to measure

The survey didn't measure how often exceptions happen, how long they take, or what they cost, so there's no dollar figure here. Your stores can.

How many self-service transactions need an employee? How long does each one take? What was that employee doing when it happened?

— Three things to try

1

Let customers fix what they're willing to fix.

Say what's wrong: wrong weight, scan again, item not found.

2

Check age before the screen.

At the counter or with a digital age pass like TruAge.

3

Make the handoff to a person less disruptive.

A handheld approval beats pulling someone off the food line.

THE TEST

If an associate has to drop what they're doing to clear a self-service screen, did the technology save labor, or just move it?

UP NEXT • PART 5 OF 5

Self-checkout moves the transaction. AI may move the decision.

39.5% are comfortable letting AI buy without asking them again. 44.3% are very uncomfortable with it.

How Much Will Customers Let AI Do for Them? →

About Cambridge Retail Advisors

We aren't software vendors, and we aren't theoretical consultants. CRA is a specialized retail advisory firm of seasoned industry operators who have lived with the systems, led the implementations, and solved the operational friction. Strategy, system selection, and execution grounded in real retail experience. Read the full article at cambridgeretailadvisors.com. See us at NRF '27, Booth 6703.

Source: Cambridge Retail Advisors survey of 500 U.S. adults (18+) who shop at convenience stores, weighted results, September 2026.