

THE
NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

Meet Marty: The Newest Non-Human Grocery Store Employee

Thursday, January 31, 2019

In an effort to reduce liability from spills and other hazards, a few grocery store chains will now have a new employee on the ground: a six to seven-foot tall, googly-eyed robot named Marty. Marty is an autonomous robot with a “sensing tower on it with various cameras” giving it the ability to scan the aisles for slipping hazards. As of right now, Marty is unable to actually clean the spill or remove the hazard, but instead he notifies a store employee who comes to take care of the problem. Marty can eventually be repurposed to help scan shelves for blank spaces in inventory and also be used to gather other useful data for the stores.

Marty uses laser-based sensors and is equipped with navigation to move around the store like a self-driving car.

Marty is able to detect and move around barriers in the store and also has the ability to recognize a store customer, stopping and waiting for them to move on before it continues its patrol of the store. Marty can also distinguish between different types of flooring and the level of danger that may be present with each type of flooring if a spill is present. For example, Marty can detect that a slippery object in the middle of a cereal aisle poses more of a threat than on a rubber mat. As such, Marty’s primary function is to make the stores a safer place and aid in helping the human employees locate and remove any potential hazards.

Marty is not designed to replace human employees, as some people fear, but to aid employees in making the store a safer place for customers and to free up employee’s time in order to work more directly and efficiently with customers. The stores that have rolled out Marty have had mostly positive responses to its presence from its customers, especially children who are fascinated and curious about the friendly looking robot. Customers have yet to raise concerns about what the stores’ owners are allowed to do with the data collected by Marty, or even what kind of personal data is being collected from his sensors and cameras (if any), and it has not been addressed by the stores at this point. But, *Marty v. The People* is undoubtedly coming soon!

This post was co-authored by Jill Magnus, candidate juris doctor 2021, Roger Williams University School of Law. Jill is not yet admitted to practice law.

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