

New fit for vending machines

January 15, 2010

By Dana Flavelle business Reporter

Mark's Work Wearhouse tries new technique to sell its clothes at two GTA locations.

You don't think twice about buying a chocolate bar, gum or soft drink from a vending machine. But clothing?

Canadian retailer Mark's Work Wearhouse is quietly experimenting with vending machines at two sites. If successful, the clothier intends to roll out more in locations around the country.

The machines were installed in December, in the GO Transit bus terminal next to Union Station and the William Osler Health Centre in Brampton. And while many consumers aren't sure yet what to make of them, Robin Lynas, vice-president of corporate development for Mark's, says both have chalked up some sales.

"I'd love to have 100 of them," says Lynas.

The placements are meant, in part, to raise awareness of the Mark's brand but also to generate sales in new locations. "The theory is to be in more places, and places consumers may not have expected to see us," Lynas said.

While it's not unusual in Japan, or even India, to see everything from iPods to diamond rings sold this way, Mark's believes it's the first retailer in Canada to sell clothing through vending machines.

"In fact, we know there are very few concepts like this in the world," Lynas said.

The hospital machine dispenses everything from nurse's scrubs to loungewear, while the Union Station machine has toques, umbrellas and mittens.

Lynas sees future applications in arenas offering items like gloves and hockey tape.

The prices for Mark's merchandise are the same as in its stores or online. The machines accept debit and credit cards but not cash, partly to deter looting, Lynas explained.

The project was two years in the making, with Mark's partnering with IBM Canada to develop special dispensers to handle its merchandise.

The machines are equipped with sensors that send a wireless alert when the shelves need restocking. The design of the vending machines does need tweaking, Lynas said, to make it more apparent to passersby what's on offer.

