

Wal-Mart technology shows it is more than a store



BENTONVILLE, Ark. (AP) — Computer screens glow in vivid colors in the dimly lit room — matrixes of numbers, neon maps of the United States, sprinkled with patterns of dots.

"Can you look at your satellite earth station and tell me how it's going?" a technician at a central console says into a phone.

Waiting for an answer, he absentmindedly taps a finger on a keyboard, perhaps every four seconds, and a number on the screen increases by 30 to 40 with each tap: 37,010. 37,041. 37,075.

No, warp speed is not approaching. Atoms are not colliding.

The readout measures the real-time speed of Wal-Mart charge-card sales this morning, feeding in by satellite link from stores all over the country to the company's headquarters here in the Ozark hills.

And what's colliding here are the giant retailer's plain-folks image — central to its success — and its ultrahigh-tech electronics network, which analysts say is almost equally indispensable.

In the past three years alone, Wal-Mart has spent half of a billion dollars on tech-

nology, CEO David Glass says.

"They've invested heavily in technology, and I think wisely," said Andrew Whinston, director of the Center for Information Systems Management Research at the University of Texas business school in Austin.

"They have an image of being low-cost, very down-to-earth, rural. Behind it all is a very high-tech operation," Whinston said. "They really don't want to project that image to their customer base."

But at Wal-Mart headquarters here, the techno-wizards are proud.

"We can store roughly three trillion characters of information on-line," Mark Schmidt, a Wal-Mart vice president for information technology and communications, was saying as he made his way along a corridor of eight-foot-high, bright blue computers in an enormous room surrounding the control center.

Eight times a day, Schmidt said, shouting over the whir of the cooling system, the computers tally the 1,900-plus Wal-Marts' sales, item by item.

Every tube of Prell shampoo. Every six-roll bag of paper towels. Every T-shirt.

As an item is purchased, it immediately can be reordered. Wal-Mart's computer megabrain sends a never-ending

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stream of instructions to the discounter's high-tech hands and arms, its satellite-monitored truck fleet and its state-of-the-art distribution centers.

Some 3,000 Wal-Mart vendors can tap into much of this information, in a cooperative, eliminate-the-middleman arrangement set up by the company's late founder, Sam Walton.

Computers tucked in the back of each Wal-Mart store and hooked to satellite dishes outside — these are the "earth stations" the technician referred to — let store managers jump into the information stream.

That way, Schmidt said, "They can say, 'This promotion we're running down in Albuquerque isn't doing too well. But

in Jackson, Miss., it's blowing the doors out.'"

Even department-level workers plug in. Anita Watkins, the ladies' wear manager at the Rogers, Ark., Wal-Mart, described using the system to ensure a steady supply of a popular product.

"A Mickey Mouse T-shirt — we got it last week, and I sold about 24 in two days," she said. "I called it up on the computer and said, 'Hey, guys, I need more of these.' " She got them. Fast.

Every retailer monitors its inventory, and nowadays most do so at least partly by computer. Wal-Mart goes much further.

In 1984, the space shuttle Discovery deployed a satellite that beams much of this information within the Wal-Mart network from a geostationary orbit 22,300 miles above the equator.

Besides keeping track of every sale, verifying credit cards in seconds to quicken checkout lines, and handling payroll, Wal-Mart's high-tech network allows for teleconferences between headquarters executives and the stores.

CEO Glass used it for a video talk with store staff about a decline this spring in Wal-Mart's perennially rising stock.

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Psychic message sent to wayward spacecraft

PHOENIX (AP) — They breathed deeply, pushed loving energy from their heads to their hearts and beamed it from a hotel conference room up to the wayward Mars Observer.

"Anything is really possible if we put our minds to it," former astronaut Brian O'Leary said after one minute of meditation Friday during the National New Age, Alien Agenda and Cosmic Conspiracies Conference.

About 250 people joined in the effort to entice the lost spacecraft into beaming signals back to Earth. They don't know when they can say if their exercise worked; although radio signals could cover the distance between Earth and Mars in less than an hour, it's unknown how fast psychic energy travels.

O'Leary, who holds a doctorate in astronomy from the Uni-

versity of California at Berkeley, went through astronaut training in 1967 but dropped out when plans to land on Mars were scrapped.

O'Leary said he wasn't expecting the exercise to work, but he figured it was worth a try to save the \$980 million mission.

"It's no big deal," he said. "It's just an attempt."

NASA lost contact with the Mars Observer Aug. 21, just days before it was to enter Martian orbit and begin the first U.S. exploration of the Red Planet in 17 years.

At the Jet Propulsion Laboratories in Pasadena, Calif., spokeswoman Diane Ainsworth had a stern "no comment" on the exercise, although her receptionist giggled as she took down an earlier request for a call back.

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