



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on October 9, 2014

Robotic Pizza Delivery, Banking, and Now Over-the-road Trucking

Last month, Mercedes-Benz [unveiled](#) its “Future Truck 2025,” an essentially driverless over-the-road tractor-trailer rig that the company expects will revolutionize the trucking industry within the next 10 years, if not sooner. While only a prototype, the company is investing millions in the concept expecting that inside the next decade driverless rigs will be commonplace not only in the United States but across the world.



The advantages are obvious: truckers often make upwards of \$80,000 year and are subject to all the usual human frailties, including getting sleepy and angry, causing dangerous conditions. Said Dr. Wolfgang Bernard, a company board member, the new rig “never gets tired. It’s always 100% sharp. It’s never angry; it’s never distracted.” Equipped with technology that already exists in agricultural and military applications, the prototype not only knows exactly where it is at all times but also the speed and position of every vehicle close by. While not eliminating the potential for crashes, it is expected that the new rigs will greatly reduce the number of those crashes in the future. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration more than 300,000 large trucks were involved in crashes just in the United States in 2012, killing more than 4,000 people, mostly passengers riding in automobiles.

The prototype does require a driver, but his responsibilities are limited to getting the rig onto the highway where the “transport manager” software takes over. That software, acting much like Google maps, allows the vehicle to find the most efficient way to its destination while avoiding construction hazards, traffic jams, and inclement weather. It also has a “fall back” option so that when things get too sticky, the driver can take over.

At present, the same driver will need to steer the vehicle in downtown traffic as the software isn’t yet sophisticated enough to pick up all the hazards and ever-changing traffic there. The biggest obstacle that such vehicles will need to overcome are fail-safe sensors. For instance, Google’s driverless car, can navigate crowded city streets and highways largely without aid, but the vehicle’s utility is limited because fog, snow, and rain can interfere with the sensors that guide the vehicle. But it’s just a matter of time before those problems are solved and trucks will essentially drive themselves and become commonplace.

It’s already happening at banks where customer-controlled intelligent robots are taking over most customer transactions inside bank lobbies. As Martin Shires, a representative of NCR, noted: “With [our] ATMs ... you can do 95% of your transactions. Within five years this will be a common sight.” Within months customers may be able to order a cash withdrawal on their smart phones and then drive through their bank to pick it up without ever seeing a human being.

Shires said that there is a pilot program using such express branches already underway in the United States, which have cut operating expenses in half and have meant moving customer service people into



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video call centers instead. Not only do the banks enjoy lower operating costs, but the branches stay open 24 hours a day, increasing customer convenience.

Last summer, Domino's pizza, released a clever video [on YouTube](#) showing a "DomiCopter" delivering two large pepperoni pizzas outside London. Although initially intended to boost the fortunes of the Domino's advertising agency, the company is serious about using this technology to reduce its costs and deliver its pizzas more quickly. A Domino's spokesman wrote:

We had a lot of fun putting the video together. Domino's is an innovative company that is constantly looking at ways to deliver pizzas as quickly as possible. It could be great to think that one day pizzas could fly!

At the end of the video, the voiceover said that, according to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), private drones delivering all manner of goods is expected to be a *\$90 billion industry* within 10 years.

Last December, Amazon made headlines with its drones, OctoCopters, delivering packages to customers in less than an hour of them placing the order. Jeff Bezos, the power and the imagination now behind Amazon, told CBS' *60 Minutes*:

I know this looks like science fiction, but it's not. We can do half-hour delivery ... and we can carry objects ... up to 5 pounds, which covers 86% of the items that we deliver.

As Amazon's effort, called Prime Air, gathers momentum, it's also pressing the Federal Aviation Administration for an exemption to its rules prohibiting such flights at present. In a letter from Paul Misener, Amazon's vice president in charge of global public policy, [to the FAA](#) he wrote:

By this petition, Amazon is seeking its first such authorization, in order to conduct additional research and development for Prime Air....

It is a necessary step towards realizing the consumer benefits of Amazon Prime Air and ... Amazon's continuing innovation in the United States requires the requested exemption for outdoor testing and support of our R&D.

Misener's letter contained a veiled threat that if the exemption was not granted, Amazon would go elsewhere where its efforts would be more appreciated:

Of course, Amazon would prefer to keep the focus, jobs, and investment of this important research and development initiative in the United States by conducting private research and development operations outdoors near Seattle ---where our next generation R&D lab and distinguished team of engineers, scientists and aeronautical professionals are located.

Amazon is persuaded, as is Domino's and Mercedes-Benz, that robots are coming, and they will be here to stay:

One day, seeing Amazon Prime Air will be as normal as seeing mail trucks on the road today, resulting in enormous benefits for consumers across the nation.

The drones and robots which are just lurking around the corner will make Americans' lives safer, cheaper and better.

A graduate of Cornell University and a former investment advisor, Bob is a regular contributor to The New American magazine and blogs frequently at www.LightFromTheRight.com, primarily on economics



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