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Gary Frantz | Special to Transport Topics

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Robots Take On the Final Mile

Will Sidewalk Delivery Bots Help Fix Urban Logistics?



The delivery of food and small packages in urban areas has been identified as a potential application for sidewalk robots. (Starship Technologies)

Imagine if the next time you place an order for delivery from your favorite local restaurant, you're greeted at your door not by a person but by an urban delivery robot.

It's an odd-looking little vehicle that resembles a cooler with wheels, but with an antenna and sensors. The top of the box pops open, and you retrieve a bag with your Mongolian beef, cashew chicken and pot stickers. The top closes, and the little robot putters away on the sidewalk.

Such autonomous delivery services are fast becoming another potential disrupter in the landscape of new technologies trying to redraw the map for final-mile urban delivery.

Sidewalk delivery robots already are a reality in some cities, on college campuses and large corporate business parks. The development of these robots is led by a passel of startup companies such as Starship Technologies, Marble, Robby Technologies and Dispatch, and has big-money backing from major players including Mercedes-Benz and Amazon.com.

But is it innovative, disruptive technology that's here to stay, or just a flash in the pan? And how will it affect the way today's trucking and logistics companies operate in congested urban environments? That depends on whom you ask.



Delivery robots must be capable of navigating numerous obstacles in urban environments. (Marble)

“Our focus is on delivering essential common goods in an urban environment, whether from a local store or an e-commerce platform,” said Matt Delaney, CEO and a co-founder of Marble, a San Francisco-based startup.

Marble has built and deployed a small fleet of urban sidewalk delivery robots. It has conducted trials with firms such as Yelp Eat24 and Door Dash, delivering mostly local restaurant orders in an urban setting where the robots operate typically within a 1- to 3-mile radius.



Urban delivery robots could be deployed from vehicles to expand their mobility. Mercedes-Benz Vans has tested this concept with Starship Technologies. (Mercedes-Benz Vans)

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