

August 2017

Dear Clients and Friends:

I'd never seen beer in a vending machine, until 1970 at an overseas campus in Germany. Below the dormitory was a basement, the "Ratskellar," a large room with a Coke machine and a record player. We ate peanuts and played a couple of Creedence Clearwater albums until they were worn out. In addition to Coke, there were buttons for Lowenbrau and the local brew, Dinkelacker. Coke or beer, it was all the same price.

Here in the U.S., most vending machines will sell you coffee or soda, candy, snacks, and sundry items. It's different overseas. In Japan, you can find live lobsters in a coin operated machine. Actually, you have to snag the lobster by first positioning and then dropping down a mechanical claw, like you would with a stuffed toy arcade game. Win a crustacean for lunch -- 100 yen for one try, 500 yen for six tries.



That's not a true vending machine, just an interesting side trip. But there are a wide variety of products offered by actual vending machines, mostly in Japan or Europe,

including batteries, ties, your printed fortune, soccer balls, umbrellas, live bait, fresh eggs, and steaming pizzas made in less than two minutes.

Back in the 1960s, my dad always used to buy flight insurance from a coin-operated machine at the airport. He said if the plane went down, at least he would spend his last moments thinking about how much money his family was going to make.



Each quarter bought \$1,000 of coverage, up to a maximum of \$62,500. Tele-Trip Insurance removed its machines from airports after four commercial flights were blown up to collect the proceeds.

The most interesting contraption of all is the now-extinct “Wonder Automatic Lighted Black Cat Cigarette” vending machine. If you were a smoker without a cigarette or even a lighter -- no problem. For only a penny, it sold you one lit cigarette.

What happened inside the machine was a bit of magic, as it selected a single cigarette and raised a tiny coil up to the tip. An electric current turned the coil red hot, and the cigarette began to smoke. Air was passed through the cigarette, to make sure it was burning properly. Then out it came, just far enough to grab hold. One penny, one Black Cat. Let’s see, that works out to 20 cents a pack.



The photograph and the hairstyle date back to the 1930s. Today, you won't find this level of creativity in a vending machine. There must be a thousand federal, state, and local regulations ready to squelch such imaginative ideas before they ever get off the drawing board.

I don't smoke, but it would be fun to buy a burning Black Cat cigarette from the Wonder Automatic vending machine.

For a penny.

Chuck

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