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## EQUIPMENT

### Rise of the Machines

**Robotic cleaner sales are on the rise. Here's a look at the dominant trend in automatic pool cleaners.**

By John Miles | 6.12.2009

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Robotic pool cleaners are moving west.

After years of popularity on traditional East Coast pools, technological advances have allowed the units to tackle an increasing variety of pool styles, particularly the freeform, aggregate-surface pools often seen in the Sunbelt.

Though the product category has been around for more than 20 years, a trend toward the robotic pool cleaner has begun to emerge. Online visibility and homeowner research helped drive industry interest, and the product's energy efficiency has proved a strong selling point, according to many industry experts.

Furthermore, new advances in technology have propelled the category's expansion into pool markets nationwide.

And while other types of cleaners remain viable, robotic pool cleaners continue to trend from niche to norm.

#### Online to in-store

Much like salt chlorine generators, robotic pool cleaners have been a consumer-driven product category. The industry, however, was slower to embrace the new technology. Yet, the success of the product on the web helped propel a host of interested dealers and manufacturers.

"The consumers were becoming well-educated on products and categories that the industry, in certain markets, was not yet aware of," says Gil Erlich, vice president of sales and marketing for [Aqua Products](#) in Cedar Grove, N.J.

As much as 50 percent of the company's warranty card purchases on the West Coast and Sunbelt region were through the internet, he adds.

As online forums and product info flooded the internet, more consumers brought questions to their service techs and retailers. However, many companies continued to stock more traditional cleaners for their customers.

"As an industry...we spend maybe too much of our time trying to sell things to people that we think they need," says Bill Galuhn, vice president of sales for [Maytronics US](#) in Norcross, Ga. "We need to spend a little bit more time listening to what the consumer really wants to buy."

But the industry has started to catch up with demand.

Within the past five years, the three primary equipment pad suppliers to the industry — [Pentair Water Pool and Spa](#), [Hayward Pool Products](#), and [Zodiac Pool Care](#) — have each added robotic cleaners to their offerings. This is especially remarkable considering the history these manufacturers have behind traditional suction- and pressure-side models.

And though the marketplace is a little more crowded, competition isn't necessarily a bad thing.

"It tells you something about what they think about the future of pool cleaning," notes Stephen Shulman, director of marketing for [SmartPool](#), Lakewood, N.J. "Plus, any exposure they bring to the public, in terms of robotic pool cleaning, is really helpful to all of us."

Although the recent economic downturn has affected the entire automatic cleaning category, robotic cleaners are poised for future growth.

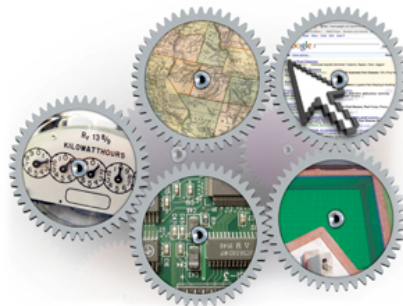
"I think in the long-term, robotics— because they're as robust as they are and they are coming down in price — will give pressure cleaners all they can handle," notes Rich Garbee, vice president of sales and marketing for [GLI Pool Products](#) in Youngstown, Ohio.

Savings along with energy efficiency should convince customers to consider a robotic cleaner, he adds.

#### Selling points

Of course, to succeed on any level, the customer had to get something new out of the product. Selling points for robotic cleaners are many, but one of the most important aspects to their growth has been energy efficiency.

The trend of going green has gained exceptional momentum just in the past few years.



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"Robotic cleaners have always been energy efficient because they're low voltage, but I think the emphasis on the need is stronger today than what it had been in prior years," Galuhn says.

Not only has the worsening economy placed an emphasis on energy-related cost cutting, but energy prices themselves have forced homeowners of all demographics to watch their meters.

"Technology is in our favor — people now want to save money and still want to go green, under the premise that the green is in their pocket first," Erlich says.

**Pacific Gas & Electric** will conclude a study in the fall on the energy efficiency of different cleaner types. Although the results haven't been released yet, early indications are positive for the category.

"You can save in Northern California as much as \$1,500 a year in energy cost alone," Erlich says. "Not only do you not [have] a booster pump or a dedicated line or anything restricting flow, it's the opposite: you now have greater flow in almost every circumstance."

These benefits include longer filter runs, less total dynamic head, and the potential for greater heat and chemical savings due to increased circulation.

Of course, energy efficiency may simply be a pleasant surprise for a homeowner buying the product on other grounds. Ease of use, for example, is a strong draw for homeowners.

"The robotic cleaners are pretty much a DIY product," Garbee says. "You're not hooking up a booster pump or running any lines — you're not tied to anything other than your ability to plug it in, basically."

The plug-and-play installation of robotics is another reason for the proliferation of consumer-driven sales.

"What they really kind of fall in love with more is the ease of retrofit and the intelligence of a robotic cleaner," agrees Kevin Braidic, **Zodiac's** product manager for its automatic pool cleaner segment.

However, like any cleaner, robotics need to back up any claims of savings on electricity with steady performance. While the products worked well on many pools, some adjustments were needed to accommodate the country's widening variety of aquascapes.

#### Emerging technology

As with any product category, advancements in technology has been key to the continued success of robotic cleaner sales. This was particularly true on the West Coast, where sales were less consistent because of the product's relatively short lifespan.

Unlike the rest of the country, the majority of pools in California have hard surfaces, consisting of marble, quartz, pebble or some other aggregate mixture. Many robotic cleaner models didn't fare well on the abrasive surfaces of these pools, as worn-out brushes and motors became too expensive to replace.

Furthermore, the pool season is a full year in California and the Southwest, compared to a 3-month season in the Northeast and Midwest. Add in a sunny climate and additional wear from UV rays, and you have a tough sell in the long-term.

"When we went to California, we now had to face all these harsh conditions that we didn't face anymore...[and] we basically incurred premature wear — as much as four-fold — on the cleaners we were marketing," Erlich says. "Within 3 to 5 years, we lost our dealer base."

Another reason robotic cleaners stalled in California was because of the abundance of freeform pools. Much of the robotic cleaner technology was tailored for Europe, where rectangular tile pools were the predominant design.

"They basically map the width of the pool and then the length, which is ideal in a tile pool," Erlich explains. "Now apply it to a setting where the topography is off because there are actually slopes on the floor and the walls."

Now that vinyl and fiberglass pools have followed a trend toward freeform design, it became imperative for robotic cleaner manufacturers to develop newer, more effective mapping technology.

Technology has also been developed to help deal with raised main drains, which are increasingly common because of the federal Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act.

Furthermore, the popularity of salt pools forced manufacturers to reconsider the design of some cleaners because of the increased buoyancy in the water.

"We're able to make adjustments to the weights and floats on our units to be able to accommodate, so our robot will stay on the floor when it turns instead of lifting up," Galuhn says.

There is even technology to alert the homeowner when the filter bag needs to be replaced.

The answer to addressing such a variety of needs, in part, lay in offering several different attachments for the same model.

"In some cases, we'll supply a couple different brushes depending on what kind of finish your pool has," Shulman says. "[We] supply accessories to make sure your cleaner will work optimally with the pool."

Diversifying the products lines has helped bring the application of cleaners to all homeowners, regardless of region. With the market wide open, robotic cleaners appear poised for even more growth going forward.

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