

Just add robots: MIT and Coke show off a smartphone-controlled bartender

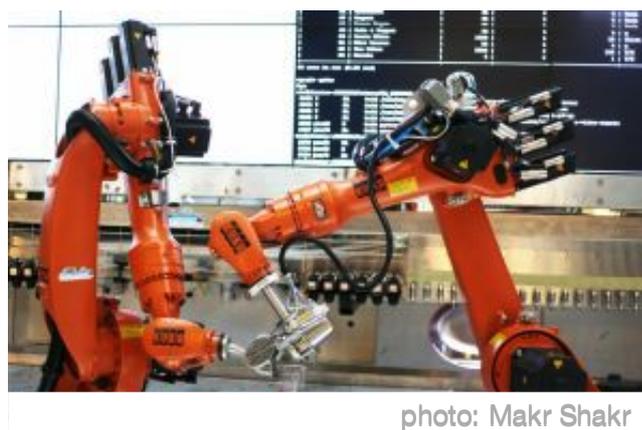
by [Stacey Higginbotham](#)

MAY. 13, 2013 - 7:48 AM PDT

A A

SUMMARY: *The intersection between robots, makers and marketing has hit fever pitch with the creation of a robot mixologist built in partnership with Coke and Bacardi. Meet the Makr Shkr*

[tweet this](#)



We could be saving the world, y'all. But instead researchers at MIT's Senseable City Lab in Cambridge have worked with the The Coca-Cola Co. and Bacardi companies to deliver a smartphone-controlled mixologist that can make an infinite number of drinks (both alcoholic & non-alcoholic) with the touch of a few buttons. Which admittedly, is cool.

A device like this is both a mechanical poster-child showing what's possible for the future of automation as well as an attempt to work out kinks on our way to personal robots that will help reduce drudgery and improve our lives. And yet, despite my love of cocktails and robots, this particular partnership rubs me the wrong way.

It's called the [Makr Shkr](#) and the robot and smartphone app will be unveiled Wednesday at Google's I/O conference. The apparatus has three robot arms, whose movements were modeled after those of an Italian ballet dancer [Roberto Bolle](#), and access up to 100 different types of flavors (alcohols, fruit juice, syrups, etc.) You download the app and then use the app to create the mix of your choice.

MIT is making a big deal of being able to see what recipes people make and how the robot allows others to crowdsource winning combinations. For example, the release includes the following quote, which is presented without irony:

from MIT Senseable City Lab. “The magic moment will be watching the formation of a bottom-up bar culture, as we close the loop between ‘co-curating’ and ‘co-producing,’ in real time.”
[tweet this](#)

To which I say, Bah humbug. Yes, a robot-dispensing bartender whose “arms” are modeled after a ballet dancer and are assigned movements by a professional choreographer (it’s Italian director and choreographer [Marco Pelle](#) if you must know) is clearly theater. But this is art used to package commerce in a form designed to appeal to the frenetic, internet-hardened consumer of today. While plenty of hackers and hipsters might feel immune to a TV spot or a billboard, they will flock to tell their friends about this robot, post videos of it online and in general look without skepticism at what the creation of this robot means.

And of course, people like me, will write articles about it. Because it is cool, and these sorts of endeavors are the future, of both the service industry and commerce. And while MIT is careful to note that this won’t replace your neighborhood bartender, that’s just idiotic.

In Austin, [Briggo Coffee](#), is a robotic coffee-dispensing robot (it’s shaped like a giant cube) that allows you to order your cup of Joe on your smartphone on the way into work and pick it up from the cube at a set time. Let’s also not forget that in the heart of SoMa at Lemnos Labs, [Momentum Machines](#) is building a robot that makes hamburgers. And in Amazon’s warehouses robot pickers abound.



The Brigg coffee-making robot lives inside that cube.

Robots are cheaper at scale, and more efficient than people. For example, MIT boasts that Ma Shagr can not only mix drinks, but can also monitor alcohol consumption and blood alcohol levels. So while it may not wipe down glasses while listening to your troubles, the Ma Shagr has a lot going for it should anyone decide to turn it into a production robot.

So while this is whiz-bang cool it's worth asking the tough questions such a partnership and device bring up. Is this really what we want our MIT graduates working on? And if it is, then what kinds of adjustments do we need to be making in society to prepare for the infusions of robots into the service sector. Perhaps folks can start discussing those things after they get their Ma Shagr-made drinks.