



In Rivard Report Panel, Robotics Firm CEOs Talk Pandemic's Impact on Business

Before the coronavirus pandemic started, San Antonio-based robotics company Xenex was already putting its disinfection robots in hospitals. But once businesses all realized they would need to prioritize sanitation, business inquiries rolled in.

"Hotels started calling us, restaurants started calling us, office buildings, and the government is using them in all sorts of places, but they need disinfection everywhere and that's what happened over the last eight or nine weeks," Xenex CEO Morris Miller said during a Thursday afternoon panel hosted by the Rivard Report.

The "Tech of Tomorrow: A Conversation with Xenex and Plus One Robotics" virtual event launched a Rivard Report event series examining how businesses have had to change their business models as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Plus One Robotics CEO Erik Nieves joined Miller and Rivard Report technology reporter Lindsey Carnett for a discussion on how the two robotics companies have adapted to the coronavirus crisis. Nieves co-founded Plus One Robotics [in 2016](#) while Miller, who co-founded cloud services company Rackspace, stepped in as Xenex's CEO [in 2012](#).

During the hour-long discussion, the two men talked about how their business operations have changed and how they pivoted their vision for the future. Nieves explained that though he originally perceived Plus One Robotics' products (billed as "[robot perception software and solutions](#)") as designed for parcel sorting, his company truly specializes in hand-eye coordination.

"It's just artificial lines and mechanical hands," Nieves said. "And when you put that lens on, you acknowledge that you all of a sudden see that there are 100 different manifestations of hand-eye coordination, in a warehouse or a fulfillment center or etc. ... So we started to think in terms of a more general skill set for the technology."

Plus One Robotics now provides an attractive solution for a world dependent on e-commerce and grappling with the coronavirus: When a robot is handling your packages, that means fewer humans are touching it, lowering the chance for contagion. (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said coronavirus is [unlikely to spread through mail](#) but cautioned people to wash their hands after handling mail or packages before touching their faces.)

"Today, if you click on online order from your direct to consumer e-commerce or whoever it is that you order from, there's an average of 22 different people that are going to touch that order before it shows up at your port," he said. "Twenty-two. And in this age of transmissibility where that is so forefront in people's thinking, people want fewer than 22 people touching their orders."

Robots and human employees must coexist, Nieves acknowledged, and in that case, people would like to know the humans that do handle their online orders are not sick. That's where Xenex finds its place. In May, the company [became the first](#) to manufacture a device proven to kill the novel coronavirus, Miller said. And completely disinfecting a room takes very little time. A hotel room only takes six minutes to disinfect, which costs 90 cents. A hospital requires more time and money – about \$3 for each disinfection run – because there are more bacteria and viruses to kill. But that cost-per-use price should be low enough to encourage businesses to invest in robotic disinfection, Miller said.

“I think that at some point you're going to insist if I'm going to stay at your [hotel], I need to know that I'm safe,” Miller said. “Spend the extra money. I'm willing to pay \$3 more so you can make a profit on it, but I want a properly disinfected room.”

The Xenex robot [uses a xenon light bulb](#) that kills the novel coronavirus. The robot has also proved its ability to kill Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in five minutes.

The robots are designed for industrial use, so people interested in having their homes disinfected should simply call the company or email for assistance, Miller said. He also shared his cell phone number and email address with listeners.

“I always answer texts, I answer phone calls, and we would send the strike force out to do the home,” he said. “It's a much more economical way. Just like Erik's robots, these are industrial robots. They're made to be used, hundreds and hundreds of times. And so they're not really practical for an individual.”

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