



MCAD Newswire

Robotics Experts Predict Multi-Billion-Dollar Mobile Robot Industry

BURLINGTON, Mass. (BUSINESS WIRE) May 21, 2004 - A panel of robotics experts at the NextFest future technology conference held in San Francisco last weekend predicted a multi-billion-dollar mobile robotics industry will materialize within the next three to five years.

The panel, hosted by Colin Angle, co-founder and chief executive officer of iRobot Corp., included some of the leading minds in robotics:

-- Rodney Brooks, director of the MIT Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory and co-founder and chief technical officer of iRobot;

-- Ken Goldberg, artist and professor of engineering at UC Berkeley, who holds a doctorate in computer science from Carnegie Mellon University;

-- Alec Hudnut, president of Evolution Robotics, which designed ER Vision software for the Sony Aibo robot pet;

-- Dan Kara, president and co-founder of Robotics Trends, an industry research analyst firm; and

-- Yulun Wang, chief executive officer of InTouch Health, a pioneer in medical robots.

The panel provided consumers with a glimpse into the near future (three to five years), when robots will care for homes, help grow crops, provide playmates for youngsters, serve as caretakers for the sick and elderly, help secure industries and military forces, and intelligently move people from place to place. Some of these scenarios already are being realized, said the panelists. For example, InTouch Health's "robo-doc" helps surgeons make personal patient rounds virtually. While remaining in their office or another hospital, a surgeon can examine a patient virtually and discuss the case "face to face" on a video monitor, allowing personal contact that would be logistically impossible otherwise. Key issues facing the budding robotics industry include the need for better vision and manipulation capabilities, and bringing prices into the range where consumers can afford to buy a robot that does jobs they do not want to or cannot do.

iRobot's Roomba(R) Robotic Floorvac was cited as the world's first truly popular consumer robot, based on sales. Roomba is now in over 500,000 households, said iRobot Chief Executive Officer Colin Angle, who attributed the phenomenal retail results to Roomba's autonomous cleaning abilities and affordable price (\$200).

"In the field of robotics, there's been a desperate need for the practical. There's nothing wrong with being visionary, but I would argue that for most of this industry's history, that's all it did. Today, anyone can go into Target and buy a Roomba, which will actually automatically clean your floor. Roomba is the kind of practical robot that will fuel the growth of this industry," said Angle.

Robotics Trends analyst Dan Kara predicted sales of at least 1 million robots in 2005 and 4 million the year after, an increase of 400 percent.

"Until now, industrial and military applications have been the primary drivers of robot sales, but as the market for consumer robots grows, we will see sales numbers rapidly trending upward," said Kara. "Robotics promises to be an increasingly crucial technology that will greatly improve and enhance human lives."

About iRobot Corp.

iRobot has a long commitment to building robotic products that make living safer and easier for people in many walks of life. Over the past 14 years, iRobot has developed and built innovative products for the military, law enforcement, industrial cleaning and toy industries, and the consumer marketplace. In 2003, co-founders Helen Greiner and Colin Angle were named Ernst & Young regional Entrepreneurs of the Year for their innovative work in technology. For additional information about iRobot, visit <http://www10.mcadcafe.com/goto.php?http://www.irobot.com>.

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