

An Introduction to ATM Test Notes

Intrinsically worthless, demo dollars offer a wealth of collecting opportunities

by Roland Rollins

Just as security printers routinely produce limited runs of non-negotiable "banknotes" to test or demonstrate their technologies, so too do automated teller machine (ATM) manufacturers create test notes, though the latter are not nearly as well known as the former. You may be surprised to learn that while only four manufacturers—Diebold, NCR, Triton, and Wincor-Nixdorf—account for the vast majority of ATMs worldwide, there are over 170 documented producers of ATM test notes.

ATM test notes are produced by ATM manufacturers, service firms, software developers, and cash handling firms, including providers of currency counting, sorting, and authenticating equipment. The test notes are primarily used by technicians to service and repair the equipment, but certainly all test notes provide some promotional value. As such, many depict a vendor's equipment, company slogan, or services available. Nearly all show a company logo.

Hopefully this article will spark interest in this relatively new area of collecting that's a natural extension of banknote collecting. Any type of collecting requires a base of interested collectors and is assisted by a common identification method, most often provided by catalogs or other reference books. I remember well when the first *Standard Catalog of World Paper Money* by Albert Pick was printed. Within a short time, most dealers used "Pick" numbers to identify their banknote inventories, and the rest is history. I am aware of only two catalogs for ATM test notes. Kai Lindman's *Katalog der Test- und Werbeschne für Bankautomaten* was last published in 1995, but is now out of print, very small in coverage (40 pages), and written in German. My self-published book, *The Catalog of Test Notes* (US\$30 plus shipping), is currently in its third edition, covers 1,624 banknote and ATM test notes, and is written in English. It is the source for all reference numbers used in this article.

In many ways, ATM test notes are very similar to issued banknotes, but in respect to the following attributes there are notable differences, some minor and others major.



Age: As the following timeline shows, ATMs only became part of mainstream banking in the past few decades. Compared to banknotes, the universe of ATM test notes is much smaller and therefore it's easier for an avid collector to build a more comprehensive set.

- **1939:** Luther Simjian registers 20 United States patents related to a hole-in-the-wall machine allowing financial transactions. He field tested these at what is now Citicorp. After six months, the machines were discontinued due to little demand.
- **1966:** James Goodfellow, a Docutel employee in Scotland, patents a modern ATM.
- **1966:** John D. White, a Docutel employee in the United States, invents the first free-standing ATM.
- **1967:** John Shepherd-Barron, an inventor for De La Rue, develops a machine—installed in a Barclay bank—which reads checks impregnated with carbon 14, a slightly radioactive substance. ATM cards did not exist at this time.
- **1971:** Docutel is the first company to market ATMs in the United States.
- **1973:** An IBM 2984 comes into wide use in the United Kingdom at Lloyds bank.
- **2006:** 1.5 million ATMs are in use worldwide.

Issuer: While banknotes are produced for specific countries or geographic regions, test notes are produced by multinational companies. To date, 171 ATM and 37 banknote printing firms producing test notes have been attributed. Often a large company may have different test notes made for different countries where it does business. NCR-114a is used in Switzerland, while NCR-135d is used in the United States.

Just as banknotes were produced for now non-existent countries, many test notes were made for firms that have since gone out of business, been absorbed by a competitor, joined with another firm with a new name, or spun off with a new identity.

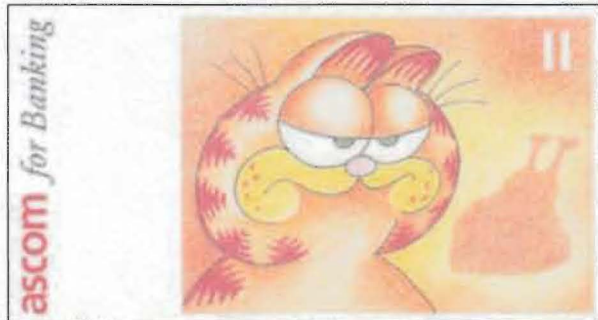


Though NCR is based in the United States, this note (NCR-114a) is intended for use in Switzerland, but is denominated in euros.



This note (NCR-135d) has a similar design, but since it is used in the US, it's denominated in the fantasy currency of "personas."

Unit: Surprisingly, unlike all banknotes which have their denominations expressed in units of a particular currency, over half of all test notes do not! Neither main use of test notes requires such a unit. FUJ-141a has no unit, or value, or logo, or anything except a form number and two red stripes! ASC-103 has two vertical bars in its corners, which are actually the Roman numeral two, not the decimal number eleven. This series of eight notes from Ascom may be the only test notes using Roman numerals.



color schemes, with/without serial numbers, and with/without "specimen" overprints.

Serial Number: While few test notes have true serial numbers, some simulate the appearance of banknotes with "serial numbers" that are the same on all notes. Since the test notes are usually printed by lithography, the expense of a second printing pass to imprint sequential serial numbers is avoided. More common on test notes are arbitrary form numbers assigned by the company producing the notes. Form numbers often have dashes and alpha characters, and may incorporate the year of production.



This note (FUJ-141a) from Fujitsu—Japan's largest information technology company—is so plain all it features is a form number.



This note (ASC-103) from Ascom of The Netherlands features Jim Davis' Garfield and Odie cartoon characters, and is one of the few ATM test note to express its "denomination" in Roman numerals.

Currency: This may seem obvious, but is not; many test notes lack the name of a currency, or they employ a fantasy currency since, after all, they are not real money. Some even are printed with the phrase "No Value!" That applies to usage in the real world; we collectors attribute our own values to these notes.

Size: Test notes are produced with the same dimensions as banknotes used in the country where the ATMs are deployed.

Obverse/Reverse: Many test notes have different images on both sides, but others repeat the same scene, or are uniface.



This uniface note (DIEB-156) from Diebold may have a blank back, but its front is covered with thumbnail images of many real banknotes.

Variety: Just as with banknotes, small variances exist with test notes. Common sub-varieties include, but are not limited to: blank/advertising reverse, form numbers, dates, old/new logos,

Signatures: The facsimile signatures of company executives—a staple on banknotes—are very uncommon on test notes.

Date: A small fraction of test notes have dates. Of these, many do because the note was produced for an event such as CeBIT (*Centrum der Büro- und Informationstechnik*; German for "Centre of Office and Information technology"), the world's largest computer trade show.



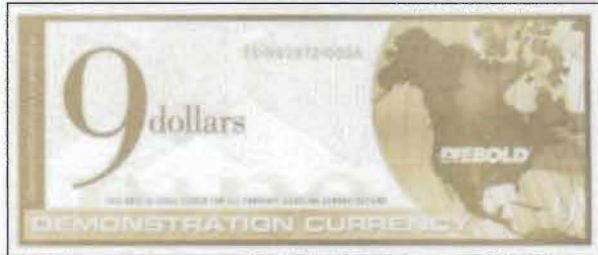
This note (WNIX-123b) from Wincor-Nixdorf has both a form number and date of issue in small type along the bottom front border.

Material: While banknote test notes are usually printed on secure cotton or polymer substrates, nearly all ATM test notes are printed on plain paper without watermarks or other security features.

Availability: There is an important difference in the availability of banknotes and test notes. Since test notes are used in limited geographical areas and are not mediums of exchange, they "travel" infrequently. In fact, only collectors disseminate test notes to other areas. Because of this, European test notes are uncommon in the western hemisphere and vice versa.

Condition: Banknotes are intended to stand up to the rigors of repeated use in economic transactions. Test notes are designed to be cheap and disposable. Over the lifespan of a typical test note, it may be handled fewer than a dozen times, including production, distribution, and use. Test notes show wear easily, but are more often available in uncirculated condition than banknotes. Of course condition influences price, as with all collectibles.

Price: In general, banknote printers' test notes can command as high a value as actual banknotes because the number of printers' test notes available is minute compared to regular issues or even specimens. In contrast, despite their relative scarcity, ATM test notes can often be purchased for less than US\$5. The available information for ATM test notes is still in the early stages, with old finds and new releases common. Putting a high value on an ATM test note based on scarcity is hard to prove, with a very limited market test. On the flip side, purchasing a future rarity at a reasonable price is quite likely. As an example, my personal experience with finding the DIEB-191 note has proved tough.



This note (KLU-102a) from Klussendorf pairs images of 100-mark notes from East and West Germany (SCWPM 31a and SCWPM 34).



This note (PI-101) from Pi Systems, a small Texas-based distributor of ATMs, resembles the United States dollar.

This note (DIEB-191) from Diebold has an odd denomination. Valued at approximately US\$100, it is among the more costly test notes.



This note (SIEM-102b) from Siemens features a crude caricature of Elsbeth Tucher, who appeared on the 20-deutsche mark note of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1960 to 1980 (SCWPM 20 and 32).

Theme: Topical collectors can enjoy a fruitful harvest with themes of cartoons, machines, symbols, caricatures, animals, people, maps, and buildings, to name a few. The single most common theme is probably currency. Since ATMs dispense money, this may not be such a surprise. The following test notes show a single piece of currency, a collage of world currency, a set of currency from a single country, a caricature of the person on real currency, and several images of the same note.

ATM test note collecting is certainly still in its infancy. This week alone, I received four confirmations of test notes assumed to exist from gaps in series, and a scan of a note from a heretofore unknown ATM test note producer. Even though *The Catalog of Test Notes* is in its third edition, there are many gaps and certainly some errors yet to be discovered.



Acknowledgements

My catalog would not be as complete as it is without the great help I received from many different ATM test note collectors, notably Jim Noll (IBNS 3320) of the United States and Henderik Siepel of The Netherlands, both experts in their own right who supplied hundreds of images and information.

This note (IBM-140) from IBM appeals to banknote collectors with its reproduction of the front of France's 100-franc note (SCWPM 154).

Roland Rollins (currencyden@yahoo.com) is the author of *The Catalog of Test Notes*, and is the moderator of the Yahoo Test Notes Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/testnote>). Many other color images of test notes may be viewed at Roland's collector web site (http://currency_den.tripod.com). There are also sections on Propaganda and Counterfeits of War, Hidden Images on Currency, and Security Devices on World Currency.