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Ask yourself what attracts you to your favorite retail store? Is it the choice of products? The level of customer service? Or the functionality of the space? More and more fuel marketers are focusing on improving the forecourt experience for customers, as they recognize the important role forecourt design, including 'wow' factors, plays in improving consumers' fueling experience.

Forecourt & Pricing Strategies

The majority of fuel customers who are shopping simply for fuel are price driven. Therefore, fuel marketers are first and foremost employing tactics onsite to capture those additional in-store sales, by providing media at the pumps, geo-fencing with mobile apps, and even pump-side vending machines to enhance the forecourt experience. "In the past, marketers looked at the dispenser as a piece of equipment, which they wanted to purchase and maintain as least expensively as possible," says Norman Turiano, a fuel marketing strategist and owner of Turiano Strategic Consulting. "It was not part of the customer experience or connected to sales inside of the store, or the overall experience with the property in totality."

Today, a critical factor for fuel marketers is to understand the importance of correlating fuel prices and fuel volume with forecourt design, in-store sales, and overall store profits. Some stores that properly invest in their forecourt technology and design experience increased in-store sales alongside higher fuel sales, while other stores see less of a direct

correlation—or even reduced in-store sales when they ignore the role forecourts play in their bottom line.

"Pricing strategies and processes are becoming more sophisticated and we are seeing more companies leverage technology to gain an advantage," says Allison Wroe, director of marketing at PriceAdvantage. "We now have media (including video monitors) on top, and built into the pump, to promote additional sales. Some vendors offer inexpensive solutions because third party vendors pay for the equipment and installation in exchange for them offering advertising on the equipment. Some of the more savvy fuel marketers own, and manage, those media displays themselves."

Pumped Up Technology

In today's media-saturated world, people have come to expect visual and verbal stimulation throughout their day. Whether it is through satellite radio, Internet cafes, or television-strewn sports cafes, consumers are surrounded by advertising messages and news programs aplenty. And petroleum marketers are following suit—installing media stations at the pump to entertain, inform, and

engage customers in their purchasing decisions.

Advancements in today's dispenser technology, whereby fuel pumps are tied directly to mobile devices, has taken the industry by storm. Here's why: with the majority of consumers using or having access to smart phones, a tremendous number are using these mobile devices to enhance their purchasing prowess—and that includes "at the pump."

Today's retailers are using in-dispenser marketing and smartphone apps to connect with those consumers and give them a reason to come inside for a higher margin purchase, and to come back again. Simply put, dispenser marketing is a simple extension of any existing marketing efforts. Promotions that are already created and displayed inside the store can easily be leveraged at the pump.

Experts agree that you need to structure your content so it is the most meaningful to those whom you have identified as your key audience. Sure good design is a critical element in attracting the attention of your customers, but remember your content ►

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is your greatest lure—no tricks or gimmicks, just the goods. And because of time constraints—you only have about 3 to 4 minutes to capture the attention of fuel purchasers, strive for brevity with media screen content. Providing engaging info that entices consumers to venture into your interior environment is paramount.

You want to find unique ways of “infotaining” your customers to help your establishment enhance its brand memorability in consumers’ minds.

In addition, fuel marketers are using the technology within the forecourt experience to further entice consumers to enter the store and make an additional purchase.

“Retailers are using proprietary customer loyalty mobile applications—tying user behavior, such as in-store purchases, to fuel prices,” Wroe says. For example, King Soopers (a Kroger company) just awarded their club members an

additional 500 loyalty points—which equates to .50 cents off per gallon.

“Fuel marketers can use fuel pricing software, such as PriceAdvantage, to calculate just how a promotion can impact fuel volumes and profits at a specific location,” Wroe says. “By monitoring same day, week, or month store sales, marketers can target specific customers in their loyalty database to push highly impactful promotions for both fuel and in-store sales.”

Design Methodology

And although traffic flow and forecourt design can vary from store to store, the key to creating an effective retail environment—both inside and outside the store—comes from a solid forecourt design that not only looks great, but also serves the ultimate purpose of every store—to sell merchandise.

“The forecourt must be clean, easy to navigate, and properly lit,” says Ed Davidson, a 47-year veteran of the

convenience and gasoline industries, working with 7-Eleven, Amoco, and BP among others, and past-president of the New England Convenience Store Association. Davidson is currently C-Store and Fuel Specialist for Street Corner Store.

“The forecourt is the first visual for the customer and can send a signal of what they can expect inside the store. Safety is directly related to lighting and is especially important to the female customer. Marketers should investigate lighting from their canopies that is more cost effective, while meeting lighting standards set by cities and counties.”

Color schemes for the canopies and the pumps also can help to give an updated look to the forecourt and induce customers to come inside the store.

“Some marketers use gaudy colors on their canopies to attract travelers to buy gas, but that tends to give the customer the impression that the inside ▶

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will be the same,” Davidson says. “Street Corner, for one, is interested in a tasteful, subdued canopy scheme that is distinctive, yet befitting the upscale, inviting design of the store interior.”

Other great examples of forecourt design and layout trends are apparent in the growing prevalence of green elements found in today’s c-store environments. C-stores are revamping their public image across the board by focusing on cleaner and more environmentally conscious fuel at the pump, as well as the materials used outside their stores that also reflect this new, accountable corporate culture.

For example, LED lights are one of the biggest ways to go green. Retailers can incorporate these lights into their design and not only go green, but also reduce energy and maintenance costs for their business. Use of recycled, reused, or reclaimed materials and natural paints are other great ways to go green.

And electronic signage also plays a key role in forecourt design. Fuel marketers have looked to forecourt signage technology to help them maintain a competitive advantage and, in turn, maximize their fuel profitability. Electronic price signs and full fuel pricing systems provide the operators a strategic business tool to make sure they are taking advantage of every aspect to ensure the right price is posted and they are making as much profit as possible.

Electronic price signs are sound investments in any economy because they offer stability, and even profitability, towards bottom line returns. Proper

forecourt signage ultimately pays for itself over time through the measurable capture of fuel margin loss, increased fuel sales and fuel volume, as well as other less tangible costs related to employee efficiency and safety.

Fuel volume and site traffic, which varies from location to location, are the primary factors that influence forecourt signage’s effectiveness and the speed of return. And it’s important to remember that today’s electronic signage is ‘smart’ technology and has the potential to work with other parts for your operation—pumps, POS, back office, and other software solutions. This means that the entire infrastructure of your operations can be one streamlined system.

Making An Impact

The forecourt can have a positive impact on the bottom line if the site features updated design, quality pricing strategies are in place, and the proper dispenser technology is being used to implement those strategies at the exact moment that opportunity presents itself.

“There are currently software companies who are creating intuitive programs and software that integrates with cars to predict customer behavior,” Wroe says. For example, these programs notify them that based on their driving patterns they need to refuel today and inform them about fuel prices and in-store specials at their favorite and most commonly visited, fuel locations.”

Davidson stresses that when it comes to forecourt design, technology is king. “Wherever feasible, the pumps should be used to advertise the loyalty club for

reduced costs, such as cash versus credit for gas, and specials inside on coffee or fountain products,” Davidson says. “Furthermore, marketers looking to grow their business with ground-up locations must take advantage of the new technology from companies such as Gilbarco and Dresser Wayne, whose pumps come with computer screen ordering for store products. This can create impulse sales and reduce customer wait time once in the store. In the past the cheapest format for getting people into the store was to use Pump Topper signage, much of which can be funded by vendors whose products are being promoted.”

Of course everything begins and ends with convenience. For their new c-store with gas, for example, Street Corner will have purchases ready for the customer at the drive thru window, prepaid at the pump so only one transaction is required. They also plan overhead cable delivery to customers at the outside lanes of pumps, again to expedite the customer’s visit.

“Forecourts will continue to play a vital role in building a strong customer base whether the gas is major oil or proprietary branded,” Davidson says. “Speed of completing the visit to buy gas and c-store goods starts outside. You need pumps that are in good working order and signage that is current. You need awareness of your gas prices and emphasis on in-store items like food service offerings, which can start on your price sign and continue at your pumps and complete inside the store. And use the forecourts to erect seasonal displays of products as well.” **igm**