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The Magazine for the Independent Convenience Retailer

# Melting Pot

Passion and purpose  
unite an increasingly diverse  
retailer community

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## *Also Inside:*

The Truth about Benefits

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How to Boost Tobacco Profits

# All About Access

*For drivers with disabilities,  
pump accessibility equals loyalty*

By Bill Donahue

For a growing number of consumers, price is not the defining factor when choosing a gas station. Americans with disabilities, a population that has swelled to approximately 54 million, rank accessibility as most important when deciding where to fill up, according to a 2002 survey of more than 400 drivers with disabilities.

Approximately half of all respondents to the survey conducted by Chicago-based Inclusion Solutions rated ready access to gas pumps as the main factor for selecting a station, followed by price, at approximately 30%. Furthermore, more than 80% of respondents said they would frequent stations that implemented systems to improve access to the pumps.

These are not occasional drivers. More than 65% admitted to driving daily, and nearly 40% said they drive in excess of 100 miles per week. Clearly, proactive retailers that help those who cannot always help themselves have more to gain than goodwill alone.

Martin Petroleum Corp., Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., operates eight travel plazas along the Florida Turnpike. Each one bears pumps enabled with Inclusion Solutions' FuelCall, a device designed to improve communication between attendants and those in need of fuel-



**CALL FOR HELP:** Drivers in need of fueling assistance can press a FuelCall touchpad that wirelessly transmits to a unit inside the store, thereby alerting an attendant.

ing assistance. While FuelCall usage hasn't historically been "extremely heavy," general manager Richard Wheeler acknowledges that the technology has helped foster loyalty among drivers with disabilities.

"We're doing our best to serve 100% of Florida's residents and tourists, and

accommodate as many people as possible, whether they're language-challenged or otherwise," he says. "As for [FuelCall usage], it's not something we track, but it's consistent and the folks who use it tend to become permanent customers."

FuelCall helps drivers with disabilities get the attention of attendants to

assist in the refueling process. A driver pulling up to the pump presses an oversized touchpad (for drivers with limited hand dexterity) at an easily accessible height. The device communicates wirelessly to a unit inside the store, alerting the attendant of the call for assistance.

The basic cost of the system is \$799, but small businesses qualify for an Americans with Disabilities Act tax credit that enables them to recoup 50% of annual "access expenditures" between \$250 and \$10,250, according to Patrick Hughes, president of Inclusion Solutions.

"What we're talking about here is the law," says Hughes, referring to the ADA legislation of 1990 through which public businesses are required to meet certain accessibility standards. "But it's also a customer-service issue. It's good business. If you can serve the disabled and senior population, you can serve any population."

Federal policy requires refueling assistance whenever stations have more than one employee on duty. However, drivers with disabilities really have no way of knowing how many employees are working at any given time unless stations post that information in plain view.

## A Balanced Solution

Much of the movement on behalf of the retailer community is spurred by litigation, according to Inclusion Solutions vice president Hollister Bundy. In late 2005, for example, Sunoco Inc., Philadelphia, reached an accord with the Department of Justice to provide access for disabled patrons at 28 Optima locations along the East Coast. The agreement stemmed from a compliance review of Sunoco's prototype

**"You have to do everything you possibly can to serve everyone in the community."**

**BUZZ CALKINS**  
Bradley Petroleum

plans, in which the DOJ found that Sunoco violated accessibility standards. Sunoco volunteered to make modifications to its existing facilities and to build future stores in compliance with standards. A number of other marketers are currently facing similar litigation.

Implementing devices like FuelCall may help protect retailers from such lawsuits in the future, according to Buzz Calkins, president of Bradley Petroleum, Centennial, Colo. The chain utilizes FuelCall at a number of its 30 Bradley Mart locations, primarily at older stores where the pumps cannot be rebuilt. (Sites built before 1992, when the ADA became effective, are required to implement only "readily achievable" modifications.)

"I think a big reason drivers with disabilities are so loyal is that there aren't a lot of businesses that cater to them," Calkins says. "We wanted to do something cost effective that shows consideration for all segments of the population. There are some preventative measures as well in terms of [lawsuits]. You have to do everything you possibly can to serve everyone in the community."

## A Deepening Pool

It's understandable that public businesses cater to the majority because

designing a facility to suit every member of the population would be next to futile. But retailers will soon be put to the test nonetheless. The aging of America's "baby boomer" population—an estimated 78 million people born between 1946 and 1964—will likely result in an increasing number of persons with limited mobility, sight or mental faculties.

The average life expectancy in America climbed to 77.6 years in 2003, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, up from 75.4 years in 1990. While people are living longer, their bodies aren't necessarily keeping up—meaning retailers may one day be catering to more consumers using wheelchairs or who are otherwise incapable of operating gas pumps as efficiently as more able-bodied patrons.

Some forward-thinking manufacturers have already begun to adjust. Gilbarco Veeder-Root, Greensboro, N.C., which manufactures gas pumps and other fuel-marketing equipment, recently introduced the Encore S Series fuel dispenser. The ergonomically designed unit has a customer-interface module that was created to reduce transaction time by 14% through lighting cues and the limitation of hand movement, according to vice president of marketing Richard Browne.

"You have to balance the needs of customers with disabilities with those of other customers," Browne says. "If you put card readers or other components below the 'ADA line,' other people will complain because of where they're situated. You strive to find a balance there, and in some cases you might even need to have a certain redundancy to meet the needs of all customers." ■