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C-store Industry Comes Together Again at 2021 NACS Show

Day one of the annual convenience channel tradeshow got off to a strong start.
Convenience Store News Staff Report



CHICAGO — After a one-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 NACS Show opened Tuesday with a series of education sessions covering a wide range of topics, from electric vehicle charging and food safety to building customer loyalty and driving traffic into stores.

The theme of this year's show is "We Got This!" — an acknowledgement that despite merchandise shortages and supply chain disruptions during the past 18 months, the convenience store industry rose to the occasion and continued to meet the needs of its customers and communities.

Day one also included the opening general session, during which NACS President and CEO Henry Armour welcomed convenience store retailers, distributors, suppliers and other members of the industry back to the first NACS Show in two years.

"Isn't it great to be back together in person?" Armour said as he enthusiastically greeted attendees from the stage at Chicago's McCormick Place.

Armour outlined a three-day theme for the show, starting with "resilience" on Wednesday, when the general session will feature multiple retailers that overcame big obstacles in 2020 but came out stronger than before.

Thursday will offer a look into the future. Armour will be joined by 2020-21 NACS Chairman and Texas Born CEO Kevin Smartt and 2021-22 NACS Chairman and CEO of The Hub Convenience Stores Jared Scheeler. The retail veterans will dive deeply into three major strategic issues that are impacting, and will continue to impact, the c-store industry: last-mile solutions, age verification, and electric vehicle charging.

The theme for the final day of the 2021 NACS Show will be "innovation," with best-in-class retailers sharing how they are meeting the future today.

Armour concluded by reminding attendees that the NACS Show remains "the greatest show on Earth."

"Get ready," he said. "It's going to be great!"

Meeting Your Customers

The COVID-19 pandemic and technological innovation are fueling a growing demand for self-service inside the convenience store. Three-quarters of consumers say they are more likely to use self-checkout options, 62 percent of c-store operators plan to invest in self-checkout based on anticipated increases in traffic, and 32 percent of operators say they are more likely to add self-service options like mobile apps and handheld scanners in-store, according to the "Meeting Consumers Where They Are — Everywhere" education session, held Tuesday at the NACS Show.

"I don't think it's any secret that changes are happening more rapidly than we've ever seen before," said Matt Miller, global solutions manager at NCR Corp.

Shifting consumer behavior, a plethora of new technology providers, economic changes and a changing competitive landscape are all contributing to a situation in which customers expect more choice in how they interact with the point-of-sale.

Sammy Gupta, product manager at Dash In Food Stores, owned by La Plata, Md.-based The Wills Group, discussed the chain's three-store pilot test of self-checkout. After installing two self-checkout units per store, the company observed numerous customer benefits, such as faster service, more privacy and multilingual capacity, while also seeing positive results for the business, such as improved customer service and operational efficiencies.

Although the pandemic made it difficult to compare the resulting data to pre-pandemic figures, Dash In is happy with results, according to Gupta. He noted that getting internal input from all the relevant departments — including the operations, IT and compliance teams — kept things aligned and made sure everyone got the data they needed.

He stressed that store associates "are still the backbone" of a convenient transaction, and retailers need to make sure that engagement with customers remains a key part of training. Even when customers opt to use a self-checkout unit, employees can assist in upselling and age verification.

Offering a mobile experience is also key to meeting customers where they are. Since the start of the pandemic, mobile transactions have only increased, and may continue to do so for some time.

"Everything's been on a high trajectory," Miller said. "Nothing's peaked as of yet."

Adding a loyalty program to a mobile app with mobile payment is the "holy grail," he said, advising retailers to get as many services into a mobile app as possible.

What's Driving Trips?

In the "Evolving Your Trip Drivers" session, presenters noted that c-store operators should stay aware of several residual consumer behaviors that have lasted since the early days of pandemic lockdown.

Shoppers still tend to stay within their own "local orbits," which were initially formed by limited mobility and social distancing requirements. This is partly due to the fact that 35 percent of c-store shoppers report they are largely still virtual when it comes to work or school.

American consumers are cooking more at home, and plan to continue doing so, presenting an opportunity for c-stores to offer take-home meals during the evening dayparts. Mark Meisner, director of marketing and advertising at La Crosse, Wis.-based Kwik Trip Inc., said the company's take-home meal program has provided "a unique opportunity." The retailer has made a practice of using local ingredients when possible and gotten creative with promotions, such as teaming up with Molson Coors Beverage Co. to pair meals with six-packs.

Delivery and digital ordering also deserve further investment. Kwik Trip's partnerships with third-party delivery services have grown to approximately 10,000 orders per week chainwide, said Meisner.

Still, operators shouldn't lose sight of how important the convenience factor is for the immediate-consumption occasion. Customers appreciate the immediacy of an in-person, brick-and-mortar purchase, especially considering they often consume their purchase before leaving the parking lot.

Charging Into the Future

Speaking during the "EV 101: What Is EV and Why Is It Important?" education session, John Gartner, senior director of transparency and insights for the Center for Sustainable Energy, noted that after experiencing pandemic-driven disruption in 2020, electric vehicle (EV) sales rebounded to total 310,272 in the first quarter of 2021 vs. 122,513 in the same period last year. In addition, 12 states have moved to ban the sale of internal combustible engine vehicles by 2035.

U.S. retailers need only take cues from other countries to understand where the industry is going: 80 percent of all new car sales in Norway are EV. That number will reach 100 percent in 2025, said Jim Burness, CEO and general manager of National Car Charging.

"Most auto makers have stopped all R&D on the internal combustion engine," Burness said. "Almost all auto makers are planning for a 100 percent carbon neutral future."

Studies have shown that EV drivers spend more at retail when charging their vehicles. Other benefits include customer retention, customer loyalty, and building a green reputation.

For convenience store operators looking to dip their toe into the EV charging pool, DC Fast Chargers are the way to go, according to Ryan Durbiano, executive sales director of Blink Charging. They can bring an EV charge up to 80 percent in 30 minutes, as opposed to other options that can take anywhere from four hours to overnight.

Durbiano offered several factors for c-store operators to consider when beginning their EV charging journey:

- Type of power available at the site;
- Distance from that power source to the charger location;
- Cellular/Wi-Fi access;
- Permitting requirements; and
- ADA requirements.

Installing EV charging units is not cheap, Durbiano cautioned, noting that chargers can run from \$35,000 to more than \$75,000 each.

Nevertheless, all three speakers pointed out that there are billions of dollars in incentives included in both the federal infrastructure bill and the budget reconciliation plan. They encouraged c-store retailers to take advantage of those incentives before EV owners get accustomed to charging their cars elsewhere.

Creating an Engaging Culture

It's no secret that happy employees make happy customers. That's something all convenience retailers know, including long-time industry players Love's Travel Stops and Sheetz Inc., which took to the stage to talk about the importance of culture and what culture means to them.

"[Culture] is really akin to the water in the aquarium," Jenny Love Meyer, chief culture officer at Love's, explained during Tuesday's "Building Customer Loyalty Through Employee Culture & Engagement" session. "It's always there. It's invisible, but it needs to be nourished."

At Love's, the culture started with its employees and as the company continues to grow its network, having a culture for all team members to embrace becomes even more important.

"For Love's, it's a way that we can center our [employees] on our North Star," Love Meyer said. "We are opening 30 to 40 new locations each year, so we really need that North Star."

At Sheetz, culture is about being fearless — taking risks, being resilient, and taking on challenges.

President and Chief Operating Officer Travis Sheetz said culture fills the gap between training and communication, especially as the company grows. "Culture is what people lean on when you are not there," he said. "It is the backbone you rely on."

Culture is more than a corporate buzzword; it is vital to employee engagement. For many, their job is about more than a paycheck, and culture goes to the heart of that, added Love Meyer.

And employee engagement goes hand-in-hand with customer service. "There is a direct correlation," Sheetz said. "If the employees are not engaged and they don't want to be there, it comes across the counter."

Food Safety & Public Health

Kwik Trip Chief Scientific Officer Dr. Jay Ellingson, EG Group/Cumberland Farms Director of Health and Safety Jeremy Zenlea and Nancy Wilson, Wawa Inc.'s director of quality assurance, risk management and safety, led an interactive session educating the audience on how to handle and prevent food safety problems in their stores.

One of the biggest changes post-COVID-19 is that retailers no longer allow employees to work sick, said Wilson. She also noted the importance of making decisions quickly and across business silos if a foodborne-illness situation occurs in one of the stores. Wilson encouraged attendees to have a food safety fact sheet ready to provide to media in case of a publicized outbreak.

"Food safety is not a competitive advantage," noted Ellingson. "If you're going to be in food, do it right."

He underscored the importance of working hand-in-hand with local health department officials. "It's so important to have a good relationship with your local health inspectors," he said.

Zenlea advocated for getting ahead of any problem quickly. "Get the details and don't let it snowball," he advised.

Following the day's NACS Show programming, *Convenience Store News* on Tuesday evening held its annual Technology Leadership Roundtable and Dinner, which was conducted virtually last year. The in-person event honored Kum & Go LC as Technology Leader of the Year, and featured talks by Deb Hall Lefevre and Mani Suri, the chief technology officers of Alimentation Couche-Tard Inc./Circle K and 7-Eleven Inc., respectively.

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