

Car wash: CROWN JEWEL

Two retailers pay special attention to their car wash offerings

By Bill Grabarek

Two convenience store retailers take too much pride in their car wash facilities to consider them just another offering for customers. Instead, they consider them to be a focal point, if not *the* focal point, of their businesses.

Graham Enterprise Inc., Mundelein, Ill., recently completed renovations to one of its CITGO AmeriStores that is catching everyone's eye, and Shiner's One Stop in Orlando, Fla., is maximizing its real estate with an impressive multiple profit-center facility.

Family affair

Approximately three years ago, Graham Enterprise bought the convenience and petroleum retail site located on a busy strip of road about 30 minutes outside of Chicago in Oakbrook Terrace.

The CITGO-branded site, one of 18 locations for the company, was recently



Shop 'til you drop: Not only does Shiner's One Stop offer Mobil gasoline, detailing services and a 120-foot tunnel car wash, but it also has a 3,000-square-foot convenience store with a quick-serve restaurant pizza offering.

renovated and included improvements to the interior and exterior of the c-store, the canopy and the pump island.

"We like to present a place where we would like to do business," Matthew Graham says. "We think about the customer as well as the bottom line. We really want to take care of the customer as if it were us doing the business here."

Graham and his three brothers, John, Patrick and Gene, are the third generation to lead the family business, which began in 1922. The company operates 15 of the 18 stores it owns and is also a distributor for Marathon and Phillips 66.

Attention to detail

Site improvements also included razing the existing in-bay automatic car wash and replacing it with a 100-foot tunnel car wash. Graham's goal was to create a car wash with Nordstrom, an upscale fashion retailer, in mind. And that means image is everything.

Customers will notice the attention to detail immediately as they approach the entrance of the car wash, which is kept extremely clean and has a large mirror to help motorists align their car's tires onto the track.

Customers also will notice the brightness of the tunnel as their car passes through. The ceiling has con-

Judging a book by its cover

To attract customers to their locations, both Graham Enterprise Inc. and Shiner's One Stop paid a lot of attention to the exterior look of their buildings.

"In this business, the nature is to keep up with the competition. CITGO had come up with a new look and we wanted to be on the cutting edge," says Matthew Graham of his AmeriStore's Oakbrook Terrace, Ill., location.

The company even took the AmeriStore concept and applied it to the building of the car wash, adopting the towers and the awnings.

"We want to be looking the best we can and if that's the latest and greatest look, we want to be a part of it and help to push it along," Graham says. "There's a lag [in return on investment] because there's a large investment to make it happen, but I think the reward outweighs the outlay of money you are putting down."

Shiner's One Stop was looking to catch the eye of passing motorists, too.

"Architecturally, our site is very distinctive," owner Chip Burton says. "We really begin our marketing from the curb. We create facilities that are inviting and I think comfortable."

"The customer finds a lot of ease with which to move around the facility. The gas islands, which is where the majority of your volume in terms of cars is, is the focal point of the layout. All the other offerings are very visible and very inviting from the pump island area."

ventional lighting as well as skylights. The wall to the left features several large windows to allow more natural light during the day and to provide a greater sense of security at night.

The tunnel, Graham says, "offers enough light to show the customer the safety and cleanliness we provide."

The site even caught the attention of CITGO Corp.; several representatives have made their way to the Chicago suburb to tour the facility.

The car-wash equipment is from Maywood, Ill.-based Automated Vehicle Wash (AVW), and was chosen for its simple design, effective cleaning capability and ease of maintenance.

Graham paid attention to the slightest of details, which included perfecting the angle of air flow to get the driest car possible at the end of the tunnel, according to the car wash manufacturer.

For Graham, the decision to replace the in-bay automatic car wash with a tunnel car wash was an easy one.

"There's a considerable savings of time on the customer's part, and then from the marketer's perspective, there's the possibility of making more money because of the volume," says Graham,

acknowledging that "a lot of people don't have the property to do what we're doing."

Graham Enterprise, which is considering franchising its car-wash offering, relies on another piece of equipment to maximize the car-wash facility.

"When it's the coldest of tempera-

tures, and that's really when the [car-wash] season is at its high point, we are able to keep this place open because of these heaters that are up on the roof," Graham says.

"When the doors are open, you really need a heating system that will keep you open. That system does a terrific job. That is an advantage for us because we are able to stay open while others are closed up."

Expediting the process

Customers can execute the entire transaction themselves because they can pay for their gasoline and a car wash at the pump.

To keep the line of vehicles to the car wash moving, the keypad to enter the code was placed farther from the car wash, about five car lengths back. And right next to the keypad is a drive-thru window.

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—Matthew Graham
Graham Enterprises Inc.





At your service: An AmeriStore sales clerk from the store can assist customers with code entry at the drive-thru window.



Mirror, mirror: The mirror and forked track at the entrance of the AmeriStore car wash helps motorists get their vehicle tire on track.



Squeaky-clean: Not only does Matthew Graham keep his customers' cars spotless, but he also keeps his AmeriStore car wash spotless, too.

"If a customer has difficulty entering the code, or wants to pay with cash, an attendant will come over ... get the cash from them and enter the code," Graham says.

"Basically, we have a buffer so that if a person has a problem, you still have three or four cars in line that have to be washed before his problem really becomes a problem for us. Once he is able to catch up, which is usually right away, then the line moves well," he says.

Other car wash sites use a somewhat similar system without an attendant, but Graham Enterprise chooses to have an attendant at the entrance of the car wash, and a sales clerk from the store to man the drive-thru window when necessary.

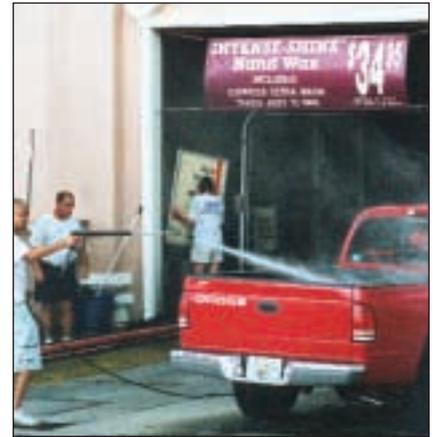
"On a percentage basis, 95% of the customers handle their own code entry. Because it's done five cars away, all the things that used to happen on the conveyor that used to slow things down now happens out there," Graham says.

Promoting the car wash

To entice motorists, the Oakbrook Terrace AmeriStore offered a summer promotion whereby customers, if they bought five washes, received the Ultimate package at the price of the basic package. And if customers purchased the package from one of the salesmen near the pumps, they received a free wash, bringing the cost per wash down to \$3.13 for the best package, which is normally \$9.

"It's a considerable savings and it's a terrific promotion right now. People are really taking advantage of it," Graham says.

The AmeriStore offers an everyday special, which is \$1 off the price of a \$5, \$7 or \$9 car wash with the purchase of five or more gallons of gasoline.



Wax on, wax off: Customers can order various car-care services à la carte at Shiner's One Stop.

Freebies: Shiner's cross-promotes its various offerings.

One-stop shopping

Shiner's One Stop in Orlando, Fla., is a multiple profit-center facility that offers Mobil gasoline, a 3,000-square-foot convenience store with a quick-serve restaurant pizza offering, and a 120-foot tunnel car wash.

Furthermore, customers can order waxing, shampooing and restoration services on an à la carte basis. The One Stop also has three bays for oil changes.

"The commodity of time is getting so valuable today that people really are preferring to accomplish as many tasks

at one location as possible," owner Chip Burton says. Burton has two other locations in Orlando, but they are primarily car wash and detail centers.

Burton says the multiple profit centers help to compete with hypermarkets selling gasoline cheaply.

“We have a lot of customer loyalty, and we market our services synergistically among the various profit centers,” Burton says. Shiner’s One Stop offers a free exterior car wash and a free beverage with every oil change service.

“As you are actually going through the car wash, there’s signage in the dry-off area that you see as you’re passing by, impulse or suggestive signing, about offerings in the c-store, the oil change [bays] and on gasoline,” Burton says.

“I certainly wouldn’t disagree with that, but our goal is to just make a suggestion to people that when they need their convenience needs, whether it be aspirin, cigarettes, coffee, Krispy Kreme doughnuts, that they might as well just get it while they’re there instead of having to make another stop to do it,” Burton says. ■

Weather or not

Not only do the myriad services at Shiner’s One Stop make Burton competitive with hypermarkets, but they also help keep the location profitable during rainy weather.

“The problem with car washing in Florida is we get 100 days of rain a year, and when it rains, the car washing stops. It just gives us more opportunity to maintain cash flow when the weather is a problem,” Burton says.

One Stop’s car-wash equipment is also manufactured by AVW, and it is capable of washing more than 100 cars per hour. Burton says the technologies available in today’s equipment and chemistry allow car-wash operators to get cars clean and dry with little if any labor.

“We can produce a car off the end of the conveyor that’s clean and dry ... and the only people we have serving the exterior of the vehicle are the people that load the cars and prep them,” Burton says.

Customers are able to purchase their gasoline and car wash at the pump; however, Burton is not concerned that these conveniences will adversely affect the volume of customers patronizing his c-store.