

The fuel station of the future

No one could have imagined that the simple filling stations of the 1970s would one day morph into the enormous service stations dotting our highways today, with their vast selection of franchise food stores, playgrounds, shops and a multitude of petrol pumps.



Futuristic view of fuel stations of the future.

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In the same way, it's hard for us to conceive what the fuel stations of the future will look like. What we do know, though, is that they'll be markedly different to what's on offer today.

This change certainly will not happen overnight, says Vishal Premllal, national director of the South African Petroleum Retailers Association (SAPRA).

Premllal explains that most of the changes will be ushered in by the introduction of electronic vehicles but already stations like Big Bird N1 Freeway Midrand, located between Johannesburg and Pretoria, are transforming and provide a prime example of a fuel station gearing for the future. The station offers a pharmacy, as well as a variety of dining options and even online shopping depots.

"This positions it to cater to consumers who would otherwise have to veer off route, into a suburban shopping mall, to obtain

such supplies. In short, customers can get everything they need without leaving the highway. It is all about the customer experience,” says Premall.

He adds that it is interesting to see the transformation starting and the new look stations are all starting to factor in the possibility of customers staying longer at their stations.

“How will these customers be entertained, and what kind of experience are they expecting – especially in the retail space? What kind of value adds can a petrol station offer in the name of differentiation?”.

These are all questions worth considering, especially as the customer evolves from one who is prone to ducking into the forecourt shop for an impulse buy or last-minute purchase, to one who is looking for a way to kill time.

All-round experience

In fact, the entire model must change to place the customer, rather than the car, firmly at the centre.

“Ultimately they will need to be designed in such a way as to make trips to the fuel station more frequent and for reasons that have little to do with filling up,” says Premall.

Where once forecourt stores represented the ultimate in convenience, tomorrow’s customer may expect a fully-fledged supermarket, wifi-equipped work stations, hot desks with meet and greet facilities, and coffee shops. This also makes a station’s destination an important consideration. If en route convenience is no longer an issue, what will motivate drivers to choose one station over another? And linked to this, what kind of services should be in place to make that choice stick?

Winstone Jordaan of GridCars agrees saying the presence of such services on the highway is key. In fact, he maintains that highways stations will prove more enduring than their city-based counterparts, mainly because the latter can’t match the offerings that would keep a customer busy while charging an electric vehicle in the future. “If you’re looking to charge somewhere that doesn’t mean hopping off and back on the highway, a forecourt shopping centre is a far more obvious choice,” he says.

Interestingly the current challenges during Covid-19 have also to some extent accelerated the change. “It has forced business introspection, resulting in business owners adopting leaner management strategies, reduced staff operations, repurposing of the product basket in the Convenience store and relooking the offering on a needs basis.

“The pandemic has exponentially accelerated a level of creative and innovative thinking that now makes the traditional business model look archaic. One thing is certain: although we can’t be sure, exactly, what the fuel station of the future will look like, we can be certain that it won’t have much in common with the features we’re familiar with today. Clearly business unusual appears to be the new norm and the early change adopters will be winners,” concludes Premall.

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