

A glimpse at 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 multitude of petrol pumps. 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.

Not that this change will happen overnight, says Vishal Premlall, national director of the South African Petroleum Retailers Association (SAPRA), a proud association of the Retail Motor Industry Organisation (RMI) representing approximately 750 fuel stations countrywide . He 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 Premlall.

Premlall says it is interesting to see the transformation. 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 in to the forecourt shop for an impulse buy or last minute purchase, to one who is looking for a way to kill time. 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 Premllal.

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 center 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 Premalall.



Caption: Copenhagen-based architectural firm COBE has just unveiled what are possibly the most beautiful and sustainable electric vehicle charging stations in the world. Built entirely from recyclable materials and powered by solar energy, these ultra-fast charging stations not only recharge a vehicle in just 15 minutes but also offer drivers a welcoming place to rest and relax. The first COBE-designed EV charging station was installed on the E20 motorway in the Danish city of Fredericia, with 47 more planned along Scandinavian highways: seven more in Denmark, 20 in Sweden and 20 in Norway.

Caption: Futuristic view of fuel stations of the future

ENDS

COMPILED ON BEHALF OF SAPRA BY CATHY FINDLEY PR.

MEDIA QUERIES CONTACT JACQUI RORKE ON 0114636372 OR JACQUI@FINDLEYPR.CO.ZA.