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# And Then There Was One

In early January, a convenience store/retail fuel facility closed its doors. The store opened in 1987 and operated 24 hours per day, seven days per week. What is telling about the decision to close is the store had not undergone any significant changes in 25 years; this fact is the core reason for the closing.

Yep, this 2,400-square-foot store, positioned as an endcap to a small, secondary retail center and offering a fuel forecourt consisting of four dispensers/eight fuel positions, ceased operations and abandoned the community it served. Wow! How could a company do such a thing to a community? “Just is not fair,” cried municipal officials. “How will we function?”

This “matter of urgency” is being experienced by a town of about 3,000 and a total trade area of 5,000. Before the closing of the facility, only three fuel outlets served the area. None of the three is newer than 25 years, and all are outdated in many ways. One of the remaining two offers a fuel forecourt with a limited store offering, and the third has fuel only (with no store). They are the secondary players, with the closed unit having been the primary choice due to location (in the center of the downtown area) and its expanded offering. The closing has brought a wake of disruption to the town; citizens and customers are concerned they cannot adequately be served by the two remaining outlets. They now believe a void exists.

Also, the fuel pumper will close within the first quarter of this year. How is the area going to be served by only one

store/fuel unit that is limited in size and scope? The population feels abandoned. Does an opportunity to step in and fill the void exist for a forward-thinking company? No, not really—because that is not the entire story.



## Moving Ahead

Yes, the first store did close, but only for 90 days. The company recognized that it was an outdated facility and a competitive opportunity had been created due to inaction. So the company determined the potential existed for the creation of a new-generation retail facility. The site is undergoing a raze-and-rebuild that includes the development of a 3,500-square-foot c-store and fuel forecourt (six dispensers/12 positions). The store also will offer a proprietary fresh-prepared food program. It will become an even more important member of the community.

Wait. What about the fuel pumper closing also? Yes, it will happen; however, it will be closed for about 90 days as well. This 28-year-old, limited-in-scope unit is also undergoing a complete raze-and-rebuild; the result will be a new, multi-functional c-store, branded QSR and

expanded fuel forecourt.

So the community and trade area are going to be much better served in the long term. However, the feeling of abandonment could have been easily averted and turned into an absolute positive. The reason for this distress is marginal communication. Neither company did any of the following:

- ▶ Communicated with community leaders, media and customers
- ▶ Sought customer “buy-in”
- ▶ Promoted “what’s coming to serve you better”
- ▶ An on-site graphic presentation; no “wow” factor created
- ▶ Created company/store “ambassadors”; there was no “steward” of and to the community.

Most of all, both companies failed to recognize the importance of community pride and what it means. During more than 35 years of serving the retail industry and traveling to nearly every nook and cranny of this land, one critical lesson I’ve learned is the sheer importance of community pride. A metropolitan area might be only a neighborhood or school district; however, in smaller cities and towns, it is the entire “daily universe of life.” A new retail facility of any type is a point of pride for everyone. It’s an emotional high that allows the opportunity to create customer momentum that will result in absolute profitability for the store and the company.

We must ensure that our store-level associates are “community ambassadors” 365 days a year. Is that sense of stewardship instilled in everyone in our organizations? ■