

From gourmet coffee to convenience restaurants, c-stores are taking prepared food to a whole new level

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Sheetz, Inc. has learned a thing or two about the business it created to "put the Sheetz of today out of business."

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service initiatives.

Convenience stores continue to fight the image battle when it comes to prepared foods. But this San Angelo, Texas chain is pulling out all the stops to show customers quality and convenience do mix.

The Roast of the Town Considering the competition – and the opportunity – it's no wonder the likes of ExxonMobil and Petro-Canada have made coffee a central focus of their food-

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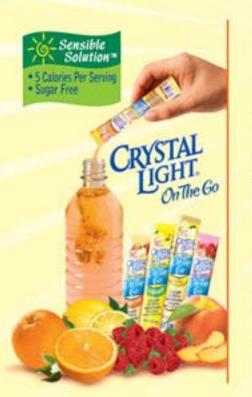
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"Cheat Sheetz"

The Pennsylvania c-store innovator looks to its convenience restaurants to

guide it to a new brand image

— By Paul Rogers

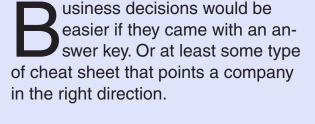


■ What c-store? Sheetz's prototype took the Altoona, Pa. chain in a whole new direction.

FRESH FOOD

MADE TO ORDER





In essence, that's what Altoona, Pa.-based Sheetz, Inc. has in its two convenience restaurant units. A year and a half after opening its 10,400square-foot Altoona prototype and nine months after cutting the ribbon on its near twin in Raleigh, N.C., the stores have already had a major impact on the chain's existing and future operations.

"We decided to build two of these and sit back and evaluate and use them as a testing ground for everything: pay at the pump, the drive-up window, the open kitchen – the list is just never-ending," says Steve Sheetz, chairman.

So far the "cheat sheets" are doing the trick. Sheetz has selected a number of "test" features for integration systemwide: Sheetz Bros. Coffeez, its Fryz fryer program (including French fries, chicken fingers, onion rings and other products), pay-at-the-pump and order-at-the-pump. The fryer program has already been added to more than 100 stores, Sheetz Bros. coffee to 50.

Other items like pay-at-the-pump and order-at-the-pump will take longer to retrofit. ("We don't have a timetable; we'll work through that," says Sheetz.)

And some of the winners from the convenience restaurants will not be able to be shoehorned into all existing outlets. Instead, the company hopes to "maintain the feel" of the Altoona and Raleigh stores in its smaller, more traditional units without integrating every single aspect.

New stores, however, like the latest 5.800-square-foot unit opened in October in Kelly Township, Pa., are getting all the design features that passed the test, like indoor and outdoor seating and the open kitchen for that "food in your face" feel.

The units are part of a well-chronicled effort to transform Sheetz, Inc. - or, as Steve Sheetz challenged employees and the public in general in 2002, to help "put Sheetz out of business."

To get there, the company conducted extensive customer and employee surveys asking, among other questions, "What is Sheetz?" The No. 1 answer turned out to be "a gas station" - not the answer Steve Sheetz wanted to hear.

"One woman in a focus group summed it up best: 'You've got great food, but it's like it's locked up in a convenience store.' We set about to try to unlock it," he says. "Our intention was to try to create a facility that would really be indicative of what our [food identity] was."

Making the grade

Most items at the Altoona and Raleigh convenience restaurants performed as expected, but the company did encounter a few surprises. Road construction stunted sales at the Altoona outlet this summer and the Pennsylvania health department quashed Sheetz's plans to keep the beef for its Carverz hand-carved sandwiches under heat lamps for all to see. But the biggest surprise was the drive-thru.

"The drive-thru window was a real failure when we started," says Steve Sheetz.

menu of 20 items. A customer would roll up, order No. 12, for example, and be off.

"It became apparent that they wanted to order anything and everything in the store. They wanted to duplicate the experience they had inside, at the window," says Steve Sheetz. "Their expectations for [a c-store drive-thru] are different from their fast-food expectations."

Since the company ditched the limited menu concept, weekly drive-thru sales have risen to about \$10,000.

"We hoped to attract more women and young people and that has far exceeded our expectations."

—Steve Sheetz Chairman, Sheetz, Inc.

The company was expecting sales of \$10,000-\$15,000 per week; it was getting only \$2,000. He attributes that to a misunderstanding over what consumers said they were looking for in a drive-thru.

In surveys, customers talked a lot about speed. They wanted a drive-thru that got them back on the road quickly. Sheetz interpreted that as providing a fast-food-like experience, with a limited

On the surprise plus side, Sheetz did far better in shifting its gender mix. A "normal" Sheetz store pulls in a demographic that's about 70-percent male and 30-percent female. The two convenience restaurants are running at 55-percent male, 45-percent female.

"We hoped to attract more women and young people and that has far exceeded our expectations," says Sheetz.

Despite the success of its convenience restaurants. Sheetz is not planning to build more. But it continues to guery its customers to make sure the "food in your face" concept stays on track over time.

Steve Sheetz so far is satisfied with the input of his customers and their response to the foodservice operations, and he expects the North Carolina store to establish a different Sheetz brand in that state.

"When we entered North Carolina (with the convenience restaurant], we wanted to be in a major market like Raleigh so people would see right out of the chute that we are more than just gas. Then we'd open stores around it." says Sheetz.

In regions outside of North Carolina, Sheetz realizes it might take a little longer to redefine the company.

"The image doesn't change overnight. But I doubt 10 years from now that the majority of people, when asked, 'What is Sheetz?' will say, 'A gas station," Sheetz says. "Our goal is for more people to say, 'Sheetz is a place for food – and they also sell gas.' I think we'll see that in 10 years." ■



Among the successes of the restaurant stores is their ability to attract women and young customers, a goal Sheetz had set in designing the prototype.



▲ Video: Steve Sheetz on implementing the best of its convenience restaurants in its new generation of stores.

Town & Country's PREPARED to Serve

Texas chain boasts a focus on high-quality prepared foods — By Steve Dwyer

ne of the most important things one needs to know about San Angelo, Texasbased Town & Country Food Stores is that its chief executive was once its director of foodservice.

Why is that so relevant? Because while Town & Country has excelled at selling fuel and food staples, it's the c-store chain's fresh-food strategy that stands front and center. And the commitment to prepared foods starts at the top.

"Alvin New, our CEO, once headed up foodservice here, and I think that's a clear indication how important foodservice is here," says Brian Donoghue, current director of foodservice for T&C, which owns and operates 143 c-stores in Texas and New Mexico. "We talk a lot about the 'est' factor. We want to provide customers with the cleanest, fastest, friendliest and freshest store experience around."

By most accounts, the "est" factor is alive and well, and much of that's owed to T&C's capability to deliver quality prepared foods to the masses. Town & Country boasts a fresh-food portfolio that's winning friends not only via quality but diversity: Its menu is geared to satisfy all eating occasions, encompassing main meals, side dishes, fruits, vegetables, desserts and baked goods.

The foodservice genesis occurred 25 years ago when T&C began offering corn dogs and burritos to patrons. It soon added hamburgers to the menu, and in the mid-1990s introduced a branded proprietary program called Country Cookin.'

With its proprietary foodservice program currently available in 90 units, menu items include fried chicken, hamburgers, chicken-fried steak, burritos and sides such as corn, green beans and macaroni salad.

To complement Country Cookin', Town & Country also launched "Grab n' Go," a refrigerated program offering freshly made sandwiches, salads, desserts and baked goods. Of late – and with an eye toward healthy consumption – the chain introduced fresh fruits (bananas, apples, oranges) and vegetables (lettuce, tomatoes, green peppers, onions, potatoes) to the menu. If that's not enough, many stores offer Taco Bell, Subway and Godfather's Pizza franchises.

Healthy push

Indeed, promoting healthy consumption was an impetus within T&C's fresh-food mentality. In fact, it was McDonald's fresh salads that sparked the idea that T&C could attract a new type of customer by providing healthy and fresh foods, explains Donoghue.

T&C's fresh-food foray represents a movement by a growing number of c-stores to engage in prepared foods — healthy and/or indulgent. An emerging strategy appears to be taking shape to roll out bigger, brighter and more upscale stores — all requirements to support successful prepared foods.

While Town & Country

▼ Available in 90 of its 143 stores, Town & Country's proprietary foodservice program includes fried chicken, hamburgers, chicken-fried steak and sides.



▼ To foster an image of quality and freshness, all food products are freshly prepared within view of the customer by well-trained, uniformed employees.





We can take prepared foods directly from freezer to oven and eliminate steps." —Brian Donoghue **Town & Country Food Stores**

doesn't employ chefs, it leverages the capabilities of its four field supervisors, who cut their teeth in eclectic foodservice environments. "One supervisor was a food broker. Another gained experience at the hotel level and another in supermarkets," says Donoghue. "Our specialists teach and train store personnel, and provide solutions to district managers on ways to grow sales and gross profits."

In some of its large-box stores, which run about 5,200 sq. ft., T&C might, at any one time, have as many as six employees engaged in foodservice tasks. Store employees must perform 24 hours of training to become certified to handle prepared foods.

Town & Country's prepared-food prowess is defined not only by wide selection, competitive prices and ample space allocations (as much as 33 percent of a T&C's store footprint can be allocated to foodservice), but program perception. To wit: main meals are prepared in front of customers, providing a measure of transparency and trust customers appreciate - especially in light of food safety concerns.

To further demonstrate its commitment to the foodservice model CEO New envisioned, T&C has designed dining areas that provide a clear separation from the rest of the c-store. This creates an authentic, intimate dining experience for customers who opt to dine in.



recently added fresh fruits and vegetables to its offering.

And when customers peruse the T&C menu, the world is their oyster. Signature items include its award-winning 1/4-lb. hamburger and fried chicken. New products, says Donoghue, continuously fill the pipeline. The chain recently introduced a pudding parfait and raspberry cheese croissant that's gaining acclaim.

"We prepare our croissant using a freezer-to-oven technology that enables us to reduce preparation time," explains Donoghue.

He adds: "New cook-and-hold technology has really advanced. We can take prepared foods directly from freezer to oven and eliminate steps. Often all we have to do is reheat and finish a bakery item with a glaze or sprinkles."

Fully equipped

To support the program, Town & Country deploys fryers, convection ovens, proofers, refrigeration and walk-in coolers, refrigerated prep cases, three- and four-compartment sinks and auto-sanitizing dispensers.

The per-store investment for the proprietary program can range from \$60,000 to \$90,000. Thus far, the best-performing stores have been able to realize ROI quicker, thanks to weekly per-store foodservice sales that can reach as much as \$12,000.

This represents about 30 percent of revenue inside the store, says Dono-

Town & Country believes it's shattering the perception that c-stores are slow to deliver quality fresh fare. Donoghue asserts that the company is doing it via its own internal capabilities - but it does have outside help.

The company's warehouse supplier, Grocery Supply Co. in Sulpher Springs, Texas, has been instrumental assisting T&C to source products and "find alternatives to make programs succeed," Donaghue says. "We also count on our broker/manufacturer and vendor community to help find solutions." ■



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▲ Video: Town & Country's Alvin New and Brian Donoghue on the chain's approach to foodservice today and in the future.

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Steve Dwyer L. Bell C-Stores think big when building coffee programs

hen welcoming guests into their home, most hosts - if they care to make a lasting impression – make certain of two things: That the coffee is always hot and fresh. Mississauga, Ontario, Canada-based Petro-Canada can appreciate that tradition.

The chain of 1,500 c-stores refers to customers as "quests" and its store employees as "quest service attendants."

And, yes, the coffee is always hot and fresh.

Through its proprietary "Java Stop" coffee program, Petro-Canada is proving to be the perfect host in the eyes of its clientele. The numbers show why: Petro-Canada, with 545 com-

pany-owned and -operated Java Stop sites, dispenses more than 300 cups of coffee per day in its top-performing stores. It also enjoys annual doubledigit sales growth for Java Stop, first introduced in 1997.

Petro-Canada is among a number of c-store operations that are leveraging employees, merchandising and promotional savvy, and relationships with top roasters and equipment makers, to become retail java juggernauts. And in turn, they're helping bust the perception that c-stores can't brew a quality cup of coffee.

"The perception of coffee at gasoline outlets still is that it lacks quality," Tim Doherty, category manager for Petro-Canada, admits. "At our chain, we depend on GSA's (guest service

attendants) to oversee Java Stop and leverage the advantage we have over coffee houses, which is convenience."

Guaranteed freshness

As c-stores strive to position coffee as an upscale offering, on par with that of Starbucks, strategies like the ones championed by Petro-Canada help grease the wheel for best-practices coffee marketing, industry analysts say.

Steven Montgomery, president/partner with for b2b Solutions, LLC, a Lake Forest, III.-based convenience store consulting firm, notes that "the most distinguishing and visible merchandising technique for coffee is cleanliness. If it's clean, well kept, orderly and maintained, then the perception is that a store cares about quality. And quality creates a perception of freshness."

Front-line efforts in the store validate c-store coffee. Petro-Canada GSA's are one example. Another is the approach taken by Wawa, Pa.-based c-store chain Wawa, known to be among the first chains with a dedicated in-store coffee manager.

"What this individual is responsible for is ensuring coffee is available and fresh," Montgomery says. The result: Wawa's freshlvbrewed coffee varieties sell on the order of 125 million cups per year.

Fairfax, Va.-based ExxonMobil also believes in the concept of in-store specialization to drive ambitious coffee investments. ExxonMobil designates in-store "brew masters" to oversee its Bengal Traders gourmet coffee program in 1,200 On The Run c-stores nationwide.

Rolled out in October 2004, ExxonMobil hit the ground running in late 2002 by selecting Waterbury, Vt.based Green Mountain Coffee Roasters to develop a plethora of upscale, diverse coffee flavors (from Island Coconut to Pumpkin Spice).

With strong operational efficiencies in place, c-stores can assure more traction with their marketing promotions. As it reached its one-year anniversary in October, On The Run launched a Fall coffee promotion that rewards customers with either free

"We want to make our coffee a destination."

—Tim Doherty Petro-Canada







Wawa, Inc. was one of the first c-store chains with a dedicated, in-store coffee manager.



To compete with full-service coffee houses, c-stores have stepped up their merchandising and variety.



Retailers also offer a range of self-serve dispensing options, from airpots to traditional glass caraffes.

or half-priced gourmet coffee. Called "Free Coffee Mondays," the deal is available in selected cities with local or nearby NFL teams.

"We're very pleased with customer acceptance of Bengal Traders," says Russ Ritenour, ExxonMobil's category manager for dispensed beverages, who declined to share volume numbers for the program. "The results have reinforced our initial reasons for launching a gourmet coffee offering in the first place."

Grounds for expansion

Overall, the challenge of c-stores to, as Ritenour describes, "break through the gasoline halo" that impacts coffee program growth over the years, has been a task unto itself.

Petro-Canada's Doherty believes there's a golden opportunity waiting to be seized. "Petro-Canada is the largest oil company in [Canada], with over 700,000 people a day visiting our stores. They buy fuel, lotto tickets and grocery items. We also want to make our coffee a destination stop for them," he says.

Petro-Canada appears to be pushing the right buttons. Merchandising on coffee is paramount. The chain bundles pastries with coffee on a regular basis – offering, for instance, a 12-oz. java with a package of Famous Amos cookies for \$1.79, says Doherty.

Supported by a 20-foot coffee area – including coffee island and an adjoining coffee bar – it takes guest service attendants about five minutes to brew a 64-ounce pot of coffee, which is then dispensed from thermal servers. Larger stores have as many as eight dispensers locked and loaded during higher-volume morning hours, a period when 80 percent of coffee buy-

ing occurs. Relying on a thermal dispensing system manufactured by Springfield, Ill.-based <u>Bunn-O-Matic Corp.</u>, Petro-Canada is not only treating its "guests" properly, it's doing right by itself as well: The chain generates a 60-percent net profit margin on coffee.

Similar to Petro-Canada and other successful c-store coffee marketers, ExxonMobil is pleased to see where gourmet coffee marketing is headed in this industry. The priorities that resonate most with consumers is the assurance of a clean, fresh and friendly environment, Ritenour says.

"I think the effort has taken a lot of time [to become acclaimed as coffee providers]," Ritenour says." In our strongest Bengal Traders' markets, we'll put our coffee program up against anyone's. We're committed to this segment and we'll continue to communicate to consumers that we indeed offer gourmet coffee." ■



▲ Video: Petro-Canada's Ed Burcher on the opportunity in foodservice and its goal to increase its coffee market share.

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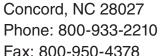
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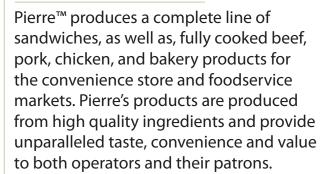
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