

DRIVING TECHNOLOGY

The convenience store industry shows its latest and greatest at the NACStech Show

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Making New Customers Regular Customers
Bringing promotions, loyalty marketing to the fueling island

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New video surveillance technologies take on more than just theft

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Are retailers finally putting scan data to work?

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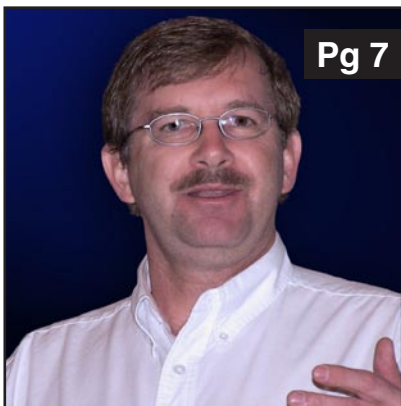


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After years of talk, it appears convenience store operators are finally putting all that scan data to work. And they are finding a return on their efforts in a number of ways.

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Retailers get creative with fuel-island promotions

With increasing costs and stiff competition taking margin out of convenience retailers' gasoline business, the value in drawing customers from the fuel island into the store on a regular basis is clearly top of mind these days.

Given this, retailers are turning to technology to help them convince customers to venture beyond the pumps and into the store aisles. In two separate workshops at the recent NACStech Conference in Nashville, Tenn., retailers and other industry experts discussed the systems they employ to draw customers into the store – and to keep them coming back.

In a session titled, "Merchandising at the Fuel Island," Calloway Oil Co. President Tommy Hunt and Deweese Enterprises Image Director Kim Gianakos each discussed how they are employing new technologies at the fuel island to communicate with their customers and, ultimately, convince them to shop the stores regularly. Meanwhile, [Red Apple Markets](#) Chief Operating Officer Adam Coleman and [Mirabito Fuel Group](#) Chief Information Officer Ross Mirabito detailed their approaches to fostering customer loyalty in a session titled, "Customer Loyalty: What Retailers are Really Doing."

No Nail Polish

For Maryville, Tenn.-based Calloway Oil, the challenge was to find a way to communicate with customers at the fueling islands and offer them a reason to shop its E-Z Mart stores in the face of stiff competition from drug chains and supermarkets in its marketing area. "The problem we all have is that there are a lot of other businesses going after our customers, using gasoline as a lead in," Hunt told attendees, noting that drug chains can be particularly stiff competition in attracting female shoppers. "How many bottles of nail polish have we sold lately?"

Outsite Networks loyalty system employs an interface at the dispenser and in the store where customers can access information on their loyalty points and rewards.



In seeking a way through which Calloway Oil could offer special promotions to customers at the fuel islands, Hunt had set a few criteria. "We wanted it to be automated, so we would not place a lot of demands on our managers and employees, and we wanted to be able to show our suppliers when we were promoting their products at the pump," he said. "But most of all, we wanted to make sure it was not annoying to our customers."

Last August, Calloway Oil became one of the early adopters of the new [SMART Merchandiser system](#) for [Gilbarco, Inc.'s Encore](#) and [Eclipse](#) series of multi-product dispensers (MPDs). The system, which Greensboro, N.C.-based Gilbarco displayed on the NACStech tradeshow floor, employs a web-based interface through which retailers can set up product-specific promotions that display on the dispenser's LCD screens. Using the MPD's payment buttons, customers can select a promoted product and print out a coupon with a scannable UPC at the pump and redeem the coupon immediately in the store.

According to Hunt, customers will typically see as many as 10 to 12 promotions at the pump during an average fill up, and redemption rates have been running between 30 percent and 60 percent. Customers print an average of 1.1 coupons per visit. But most important, the system has resulted in a 10-percent increase in sales and all discounts offered to the customer are funded by product manufacturers – often with incremental promotional dollars.

"We are seeing a measurable result," Hunt said, "and our vendors can see which coupons have been printed and scanned, so they know their products are being sold."

In March, for example, Calloway customers printed and redeemed 1,672 coupons for free milk and in April they redeemed 1,800 coupons for a free pint of ice cream.

Calloway Oil spent approximately \$4,000 per site to upgrade its existing dispensers to work with the

tremendous value in information her chain can collect on its customers through its loyalty system.

“We used to think we knew who was coming into our stores, but now we really know about our customers,” she said. “It’s like ‘Minority Report,’ we know so much about our customers.”

“We, as an industry, do not know enough about our customers’ buying habits.”

— Ross Mirabito, Mirabito Fuel Group

SMART Merchandiser system and Hunt says the system has paid for itself through increased store traffic and resulting overall sales – though he is in the process of more closely determining the specific sales lift on products being promoted.

Knowledge is Power

But with the technology being used in systems such as Calloway Oil’s, determining the impact on sales – by product and by customer – is a manageable task, according to Gianakos, who says she finds

At Deweese Enterprises, Gianakos has access to data on more than 130,000 customers in its marketing area who have signed up for the loyalty program at its Super Stop! stores, and the company invests significantly in rewards for customers above and beyond product promotions and discounts that are funded by suppliers.

“We work very closely with our vendors, we put together a marketing program and we convince them to find additional soft marketing dollars [to participate],” Gianakos said.

Deweese’s loyalty program is built around a cartoon fish character it calls Seymour. The Seymour Rewards program employs Norfolk, Va.-based [Out-site Networks](#)’ technology, which combines hardware at the pump and in the store with a web-based interface to build points-based loyalty programs and promotions. The system uses intelligent voice prompts at the pump, such that when participants wave their membership tag in front of the pump-mounted unit, they are informed as to whether they

have earned a loyalty reward or how many points they need until they receive their next reward.

[Click here to hear an audio message from a Deweese location](#)

Deweese invested \$500,000 to roll the system out and has set aside a budget for reward merchandise for its most loyal customers. To Gianakos, the most rewarding part of her job is selecting gifts for the chain’s loyalty program participants. “I have the terrible job of going onto Amazon.com and buying TVs and CD players just to give them to our most loyal customers,” she said.

But just as the company is taking the program seriously, its customers appear to be as well. According to Gianakos, approximately 30 percent of the tags it has distributed are being used. In an attempt to

► Mirabito Fuel Group Chief Information Officer Ross Mirabito has led an effort at the upstate New York chain to include area merchants in its customer-loyalty program.



▲ Video: Calloway Oil Co. President Tommy Hunt describes his company’s use of fuel-island marketing and printable coupons at the pump.



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further increase usage – and to offset some cost – Super Stop! customers interested in enrolling in the program must now purchase their membership tags for \$4 (Deweese’s cost for each tag is \$2). While Gianakos was skeptical about the change initially, she said the company now sells as many tags as it had previously been giving away.

Like other chains employing loyalty programs to generate merchandise sales from gas-only customers, Deweese has taken to creating special promotions on Wednesdays – its slowest days. Now



◀ Red Apple Markets’ Chief Operating Officer Adam Coleman used a series of “triple reward points” offers to loyalty program participants to lift sales at struggling stores. The results were even better than he had hoped.

customers purchasing products on Wednesdays receive double reward points and, according to Gianakos, tag usage is up to 45 percent on that day.

Double Day

For Ashoskie, N.C.-based Red Apple Markets, the “double points” concept has served it well in drawing customers into its loyalty program. According to Coleman, the 25-store chain is closing in on its 50,000th loyalty customer, representing one in every four adults in its marketing area.

When Red Apple first installed its loyalty system – the same Outsite Networks system employed by

Deweese, Coleman’s goal was to get customers to shop the store one additional time each week. “We figured if we could get them to shop one additional time per week, we would just about double our business,” he said.

To attract additional attention to the program, Coleman ran “triple points” promotions on Wednesdays in his stores, and soon Wednesdays became his highest-revenue days, surpassing Fridays. Similarly, Coleman said he has generated more sales in his first winter with the program in place than he had the previous summer without the program.

Since then, Coleman has used the “triple points” approach to help turn around struggling stores. In one instance, he ran a two-week “triple points” promotion in a highly competitive market and advertised it in the local newspaper. The results were record sales and record fuel volume for the location. “We used the newspaper ads to attract customers who were not already buying gas at our stores, and we saw a 42-percent increase in inside sales, which was much more than we could have anticipated,” he said. “We had to call [wholesaler] J.T. Davenport to get more product delivered.”

Strength in Numbers

Another way to draw customers into the store is to work with other local merchants to cross promote products and services. In Sidney, N.Y., Mirabito Fuel Group is working with more than 100 area merchants to participate in its loyalty program, thereby increasing its value.

Since rolling out the program in May 2003, Mirabito has used television and radio advertising to build its program participation up to some 70,000 customers.

“We saw a 42-percent increase in sales, which was much more than we could have anticipated.”

**— Adam Coleman,
Red Apple Markets**

“This is a very competitive business and we, as an industry, do not know enough about our customers’ buying habits,” Mirabito said. “Our loyalty program participants spend 90 percent more than non-loyalty customers and they are more than twice as profitable to us as non-loyalty members.”

Through the program, member customers can receive discounts on products not only at Mirabito Quickway stores, but at other area merchants such as [Jiffy Lube](#) and [Dick’s Sporting Goods](#).

“We’ve set up a pretty good network of merchants and we have other retailers coming to us to ask how they can be a part of it,” Mirabito said.

The system is integrated into the chain’s [Verifone Sapphire](#) point-of-sale system, and customers can designate a credit card of their own to serve as their loyalty card if they choose not to carry the Mirabito card.

In addition to discounts for loyalty, Mirabito customers have been entered into sweepstakes for major prizes, such as trips to the Major League Baseball All-Star Game and the NFL Pro Bowl in Hawaii.

“We wanted to create some excitement with our customers,” Mirabito said. “I think we are accomplishing that.” ■

Eye in the Sky

New video surveillance technologies take on more than just theft

- By John Callanan

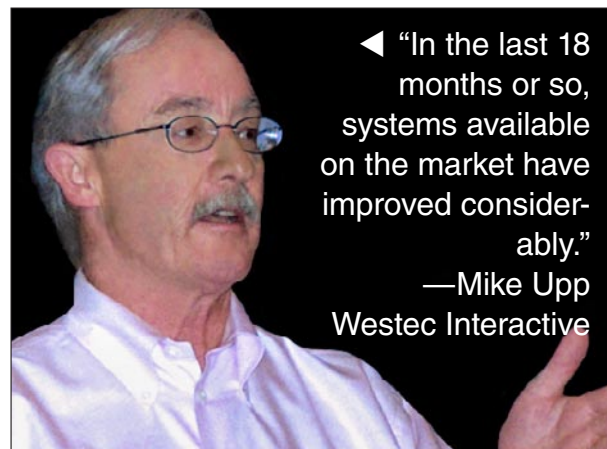


▲ Nella Oil Co. Human Resources Director Mike Belles uses video surveillance technology to monitor employee performance and a range of operational issues

At one time – and even today for some – “night rides” were part of the job for small-chain operators and district managers in larger operations. These evening jaunts would include late night visits to stores to ensure things were being run properly by store-level personnel during the second and third shifts.

Of course, having already worked a long day, what owner, operator or supervisor actually wanted to go back out in the evening and spend their own time looking over stores? Then came video surveillance. A solution? Well, not exactly – at least not yet.

According to industry consultant Steve Montgomery, president of Lake Forest, Ill.-based [b2b Solutions, LLC](#)., video surveillance initially was less than ideal. “When we all started using video surveillance, we saw shrink drop dramatically,” he said. “But then it started creeping back up when it became clear nobody was watching all of those tapes.”



◀ “In the last 18 months or so, systems available on the market have improved considerably.”
—Mike Upp
Westec Interactive

Today, of course, these problems have been minimized with the advent of the digital video recorder (DVR), which captures video surveillance footage and allows it to be quickly sorted and viewed in only the most relevant increments. And while it finally can allow for at least fewer “night rides,” the technology allows retailers to remotely manage a range of activities taking place in their stores.

For Mike Belles, director of human resources for Auburn, Calif.-based [Nella Oil Co.](#), today’s surveillance technology has enabled him to conduct close audits of his employees’ performance. Using as many as nine cameras in each of its Flyers stores, Nella Oil conducts site audits in a range of areas, from customer service and age verification to sign placement, product placement and out-of-stocks.

According to Belles, Nella Oil employs an outside service to monitor and review video footage of its stores and, when something is awry, an email is sent to the appropriate members of the management team. The email includes a snapshot of the video and a description of the problem, so it can be addressed quickly.

While the surveillance has resulted in a reduction in cash theft and merchandise shrink, Belles said the approach has really paid dividends in defending against workers’ compensation claims.

“When it comes to risk management, it really helps,” Belles said. “Claims can be reduced through better data, especially video and audio footage of the incident in

question as it took place. This alone has resulted in three claims against us being denied already.”

What makes surveillance both more affective in its traditional role and a powerful tool in new capacities is recent improvements in the underlying technology, according to Mike Upp, vice president of marketing and business development for Irvine, Calif.-based [Westec Interactive](#). Modern surveillance systems feature DVRs that can quickly be searched and can issue reports on an exception basis, such as displaying video clips of all voids or “no sales” at the register.

“In the last 18 months or so, the systems available on the market have improved significantly,” Upp said. “The advent of digital video and the low cost and broad availability of DSL has resulted in a fast adoption rate.” ■



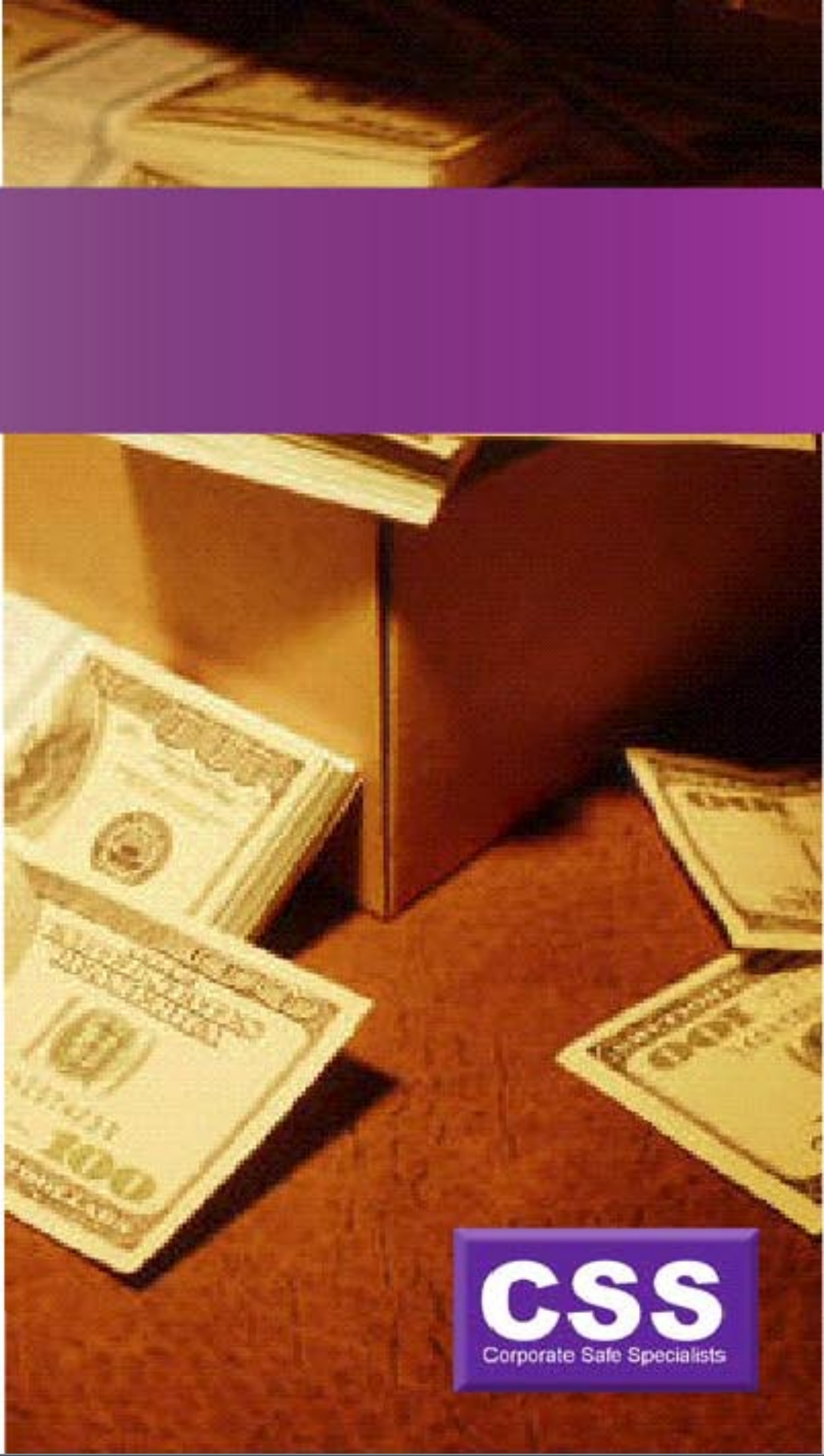
▲ **Video:** Nella Oil Co.’s Mike Belles and Westec Interactive’s Mike Upp discuss new developments in video surveillance technology.

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In 2003 The Subway Franchise Group of Chicago, Illinois and an Owner & Operator of a Subway/TCBY store in Huntington, New York began looking at their cash control systems with an eye on improving operations



Retailers May Overlook Disaster Recovery Plans

By Angel Abcede

CRASHING & BURNING

Two days after the corporate office at [Spectrum Stores](#) burned to the ground, the IT guy left. That's the story Denise Spradley tells when expressing to petroleum retail and convenience store operators the importance of having a disaster recovery plan.

Spradley, director of information technology for Spectrum, said such plans begin with the basics. Making sure lists of executives' cell numbers, bank

“Where does it say in your plan about who removes a shark from the office?”

— David Waters, Gerke & Assoc.

officials, c-store vendors, utility contacts and other key pieces of data exist in more than one location is an important first step.

One such list for the West Point, Ga.-based company involved computers. Spectrum had 17 servers in its office, and the company needed duplicate lists of what applications resided on which server. And because critical records and active data shift over time, Spectrum executives review their disaster plan every six months, Spradley said. “It took seven years to do it,” she said. “And you’ve got to get senior managers to buy into it.”

According to Spradley, executives often don't see the importance of a disaster plan. However, once the critical step of executive support occurs, crafting a workable plan becomes important. One element of such a plan is to consider all possibilities. David Waters, senior consultant with [Gerke & Associates](#) in Columbia, Mo., said street corners or buildings chosen as designated meeting places may no longer be there. Waters, who was involved with Miami-based [Burger King](#) when its corporate headquarters was decimated by Hurricane Andrew in August, 1992, said, “You have to have a strategy that will work when landmarks are gone.”

The unthinkable may be as bizarre as removing a shark from the third floor of the corporate offices (which occurred at the Burger King offices). “Where does it say in your plan about who removes a shark from the office?” Waters quipped.

When looking back at what needs to happen during an emergency, Waters had several important

► In 2004, multiple hurricanes in the Southeast left a swath of destruction in their wake, destroying homes and businesses.



thoughts. One was to empower employees. Often-times, lesser ranking employees may be in the position to make important decisions. They should be empowered to do so, Waters said. Cashiers often become the people who open the stores to provide neighborhood assistance in some situations.

Creating strong ties to vendors and other key businesses is important too. These partners can provide office space or computers. “Vendors can play a role in minimizing the costs of recovery,” he said.

Waters detailed steps in creating a disaster plan.

- ➔ Conduct an overall business assessment. Doing so will help a company prioritize critical areas.
- ➔ Create “modular” plans. Disasters occur in degrees. While an entire emergency plan may not be necessary, sections of that plan may apply to specific circumstances.
- ➔ Create criteria and procedures. For instance, who declares emergencies?

Chris Mooberry, strategic accounts manager for [Generac Power Systems Inc.](#), a Waukesha, Wis., supplier of generators, said the blackout in 2003 that occurred over much of the Northeast is testimony to the fragility of the nation's power grid. “Yes you’ve got hurricanes, ice storms and earthquakes, but anyone can lose power,” he said. ■

► West Point, Ga.-based Spectrum Stores' corporate offices burned to the ground, motivating the chain to upgrade its disaster-recovery plan.





Retailers begin to do more with scanned data
By Angel Abcede



Scan data is becoming more and more meaningful, as petroleum retail and convenience store operators implement not just the scanning process, but applications that help turn data into usable reports, analytics and alerts.

That's the message retailers received from four peers speaking at an educational session on the topic at this year's NACStech Conference. Tracking sales, promotions, rebates and product positioning are just a few uses of what were once mountains of impenetrable transaction data.

Danny Norris, controller at [Fast Petroleum Inc.](#), a 43-store operator and wholesale jobber in Dalton, Ga., has had a central pricebook set up for about six years and just recently moved to scanning. "The biggest challenge was coming up with money for ad-



◀ Thornton's Inc. Vice President of IT Services, Tony Harris, discussed market basket analysis in one of several sessions focused on store performance.

ditional software modules, store PC upgrades, POS upgrades and scanning hardware," he said, adding that the company spent roughly \$600,000 to implement scanning at its sites. However, he said the rewards have been great. Immediately, the company saw an improvement in overall gross profit margin of 0.58 percent. Shrink percentages improved by 38 percent. And they were able to get rid of between 25 and 30 slow-moving items on average per store.

In time, many retailers will expand the scope of their automated processes, incorporating elements such as rebates and promotions. Kathleen Stobierski, store product analyst with [TravelCenters of America](#) in Westlake, Ohio, spoke to the group of roughly 150 retailers in the session about her company's improved rebate-tracking process. These processes evolved over the past two years, she said, and focus on cigarettes and beverages. The new procedures use scan data versus vendor-supplied data, to collect rebates faster. Overall, more detailed tracking, better vendor contracts and improved product mix has resulted in a 48-percent increase in what Stobierski defined as "beverage accruals" in 2004 versus 2003. The program continues to change as suppliers update rebate rules.

Eric Hinkle, director of retail automation for [Town & Country Food Stores Inc.](#) in San Angelo, Texas, addressed the topic of promotions and "force-outs," adding that prior to making use of scan data, the chain's promotions were vendor driven, with little analysis done to determine true effectiveness. In addition, they handled force-outs based on generalized store classifications. Today, with its own scan data, the company gets more accurate daily information and is able to quickly identify and remove force-out items that fail to sell.

Such intricacies in item delivery can also apply to product placement. Jenny Bullard, chief information officer for [Flash Foods](#) in Waycross, Ga., said her company uses an SQL database to feed product movement information into their planogram software. The information allows for a better use of cooler and shelf space.

Logistically, Bullard emphasized the importance of using the data. Scanning in images of products

Who's Scanning Today?

More petroleum retail and convenience

store operators are scanning today, but that's not the whole story.

Lesley Saitta, CEO of Impact 21 LLC in Lexington, Ky., says that while the percentage of retailers reporting they have scanning has increased, most don't use the sales data to grow their business or learn about their customers.

1991 ▶	2%
1996 ▶	16%
2001 ▶	71%
2004 ▶	84%

Source: NACS
State of the Industry
Report 2004

or downloading such visuals from suppliers helps produce planogram sheets that employees can post in places like the rear shelves in coolers. She advised making 100 percent adoption of company planograms part of the manager's bonus schedule.

In the end, these efforts can generate both hard- and soft-dollar benefits. Bullard, for instance, said she sells scan information to data-collection services. "Typically technology costs show up [in reports] as a big negative number," she said. "I can sell scan data and make up for the cost of computer systems." ■

For two days in Nashville, the convenience store industry's techie set got to speak their own language, share lessons learned, and kick the tires on the latest industry technology at the annual NACStech Conference.

With a heavy dose of educational sessions and a wealth of information to take home, attendees came away up to speed on where the industry is headed as it relates to retail technology. On the show floor, vendors provided hand-on demonstrations of new products and services, making the event a one-stop shop for all things techie in the c-store industry.

Using the navigation buttons at right, you can browse through our virtual photo album of photos of the event and its attendees.

Techie Heaven



Photo 1 of 10

Alan Levine of Verifone demonstrates the functionality of the Topaz POS system for Patrick Dougherty of Wawa, Inc.

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