

Don't Look Back

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One of the nicest days of the summer for my family was a visit to The Great Escape, a Six Flags theme park in Lake George NY.

Our next-to-last ride of the day was on an open-air replica train that meanders through the park at about 5 mph. All the seats face forward except the last row, which faces backward, where I happened to sit.

Mindlessly watching the tracks unfurl behind us, it occurred to me how easy it is, when you're looking backward, to see the path we have already traveled. How clear the curves and straight-aways are, the bumps and dips. Alas, if we could only see forward as clearly.

How could anyone have foreseen the chaos that Hurricane Katrina created in the motor fuel marketplace a year ago? How could retailers in parts of Central New York and the Southern Tier have anticipated that water would be sloshing against the ceiling in some of their stores during the floods of this past June?

Yet, being in an industry that changes as fast as the convenience store business does, you can't dwell on analyzing the events of last year. You can learn from them, but there's no time to look back, you've got to keep looking forward.

While no one can predict precisely what lies ahead, those who use their powers of observation, keep an eye on the competition, listen to their customers, and take time to network with their industry peers through vehicles such as NYACS can form a general sense of future directions.

Those who don't could miss the train. For example:

- If you can't see the "better-for-you" evolution of C-store food products (low fat, low sodium etc.) – now giving way to an "actually-good-for-you" trend (fresh produce, organic foods) – you may be missing out on opportunities to capitalize on changing customer preferences.

- If you don't envision the coming push for alternative fuels, and you're not already thinking about how that could complicate, or benefit, your business, you could get caught with your pumps down.

- If you can't discern the troubling drift toward government regulation of gas prices, or the equally disturbing trend of government turning your stores into agents of social policy (mandated health care coverage for employees), you may lose the chance to tell your elected representatives to quit it before it's too late.

Keep looking ahead. Pay close attention. Use your eyes, ears, and nose to identify approaching rough patches, opportunities, and shifts in direction, and be prepared to adapt in order to keep your convenience store business on track.

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