

Training Top of Mind for Small Operators

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CHICAGO — Without the benefit of a large corporate office behind them, small operators in the convenience channel often rely on each other for best practices. And that is what they did during the "What Are You Doing? Pop-Up Panel Discussion" held at the 2017 NACS Show.

Taking the stage to lead the discussion on Oct. 17 were Kevin Farley, chief operating officer of GSP Cos.; Wanda Sheffield, vice president of operations at Miller Oil Co.; and Chris Bambury, general manager of Bambury Inc.

According to Sheffield, a key concern for Norfolk, Va.-based Miller Oil is employee turnover, which goes hand-in-hand with training — a hot-button issue for many of the small operators attending the session.

As she explained, her company with 22 convenience stores has a set training schedule for employees: two weeks for a sales associate, working side-by-side with a senior sales associate; four weeks training for an assistant manager; and six weeks for a manager.

In addition, the company holds an orientation program once a month for new employees that covers wide-ranging topics like safety and culture.

Training employees takes investment. "We learned that sometimes to save money, you take shortcuts. We try to avoid that," Sheffield said.

Aside from the investment, it is crucial to find the right employee to train newcomers. As one retailer in the audience noted, "Sometimes the best employee is not the best trainer because they are not the best communicator."

According to Bambury, his Sonoma, Calif.-based c-store business used to put new employees right out there with little to no training. It has now switched tactics.

"It used to be, put the employee on the register and let them sink or swim," Bambury recalled. "That didn't work."

Hiring in his area of Northern California is challenging to begin with, he added, because the area has a very low unemployment rate — about 2 percent. To attract and keep employees, Bambury Inc. has put a focus on benefits, like 100-percent healthcare benefits, and it is looking into retirement plans, the general manager explained.

On the topic of turnover, one retailer in the audience popped up to share that employee screening tests, like the one available through NACS, the Association for Convenience & Fuel Retailing, are good tools to use.

Farley agreed. "Screening tools are important to the process," he said.

Having the manager present in the convenience store on a new employee's first day also goes a long way, one small operator chimed in.

OTHER KEY ISSUES

While human resources topics dominated the pop-up panel discussion, small operators had concerns about other areas of c-store operations, too, including:

Skimming

Bambury told the group that cameras can help a lot, not just with skimming but overall security. And the faster you respond to something on camera, the better. "It's all about minutes," he said, noting it's a little tougher with skimming.

As Sheffield pointed out, "sometimes the cameras catch everything but the skimmer."

Along with the retailer taking measures — including routine employee checks — it is important to educate customers about the newest scheme and "if they see something, report it," one retailer said.

Foodservice

Trying to emulate the Sheetzs and Wawas of the world may sound like a smart business approach to foodservice, but it is not necessarily the best approach. Small operators should "play to their strengths: local, small and nimble," Bambury advised.

"Acknowledging what we have has worked well for us," he said, adding that the level of a retailer's commitment counts.

As for the quick-service restaurant (QSR) vs. proprietary debate, Bambury said a QSR is a "good way to go" for new players in the foodservice space. "To start from scratch is tough," he explained.

For Miller Oil, both approaches work. The company's stores have Subway restaurants and Dunkin' Donuts locations among their food offerings, but the retailer also runs its own fresh pizza program.

"We leave it simple. We have three types of pizza: cheese, pepperoni and meat lovers," Sheffield said.

The pizza program, which the company started three years ago, has become its signature item. In fact, at one Miller truck stop location that features a Huddle House, the Huddle House does well and the c-store sells 5,000 slices of

pizza a month, she shared.

The 2017 NACS Show is taking place Oct. 17-20 at McCormick Place in Chicago.