

## Tunnel Vision

As more c-store car washes trend toward tunnel service, here are four key questions to ask *By Renée M. Covino*

**IN THE CASE OF THE CAR WASH BUSINESS,** tunnel vision can be a good thing. The trend of late is convenience stores opting to install the more expensive tunnel wash vs. the industry-standard in-bay automatic (rollover) wash.

Consider The Spinx Co., the convenience store chain based in Greenville, S.C., which opened its first express tunnel car wash, the Ride 'N' Shine tunnel wash, to coincide with a new store opening in February. Each Ride 'N' Shine wash features an environmentally-conscious water reclamation system and eco-friendly chemicals.

Spinx's Ride 'N' Shine tunnel wash also boasts advanced technology. The system uses a 3-D scan of each vehicle to precisely target soap and high-pressure water based on the vehicle's size and shape for the most accurate clean. The tunnel wash is equipped with specially engineered blowers, too, that are said to achieve a drier vehicle while conserving energy.

"While all car washes may appear to be the same, our new tunnel wash sets us apart from the competition, and our trained staff and high-tech equipment will deliver a great experience and quick, thorough car washes to our

customers," said Stewart Spinks, founder and chairman of The Spinx Co. operator of more than 80 c-stores.

The retailer plans to open many more tunnel washes at its stores (46 locations currently include a car wash). Spinks said the company will continue to measure "the car wash element" and evaluate what impact it has on the retailer's overall offer. With a focus on growth in the Charleston area for the next two years, Spinks believes the car wash element is definitely going to help diversify its offer, so the retailer is not so dependent on petroleum profitability and its contribution, as it has been historically.

Earlier this year, Jacksonville, Fla.-based Gate Petroleum Co. — which also operates car washes at many of its convenience stores — unveiled its first location in the standalone car wash business, under the banner of Gate Express Carwash. Located in Jacksonville, the site features a 125-foot tunnel system that can wash a car in less than four minutes.

Gate Petroleum, which operates and/or supplies fuel for nearly 200 locations in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina, is reportedly positioning standalone car washes near its Gate convenience stores and gas stations. The chain is looking to lead in car wash development as other express-wash competitors enter the market.

Like Spinx and Gate, CEFCO Convenience Stores is yet another c-store operator in the car wash business that recently went more premium with a tunnel system. The Temple, Texas-based chain with 225 stores aims to bring more of a "wow" factor to its car wash customers by way of a waterfall foam feature and high-pressure cleaning for tires and rims.

### Are You Next?

For those convenience store operators already in the car wash business, or those looking to get into it, here are four key questions to ask to determine if a tunnel car wash is the best type of wash system for your operation:

#### 1. Do You Have the Space?

Whether it's an upgrade or a new-build, tunnel car wash systems require more physical space than in-bay automatics. For instance, the MacNeil EDGE, a bundled solution from National Carwash Solutions, is an all-in-one tunnel program with express tunnels that range from 85 feet in length to 150 feet. Many c-stores looking to upgrade allow for at least 100 feet. In the case of the MacNeil EDGE, other specifications include a



minimum of 16 feet in tunnel width and a minimum of 12 feet in tunnel height. Electrical specs are between 208 and 460 volts; water specs are 100.9 gallons per minute.

**2. What Are Your Goals?**

Getting a leg up on the competition and being first to market were driving factors for both Spinx and Gate Petroleum. However, it's good to go beyond that — as they did — with a clear vision of benefits.

In the case of CEFCO, the intent was also to have more satisfied customers, but with reduced labor costs. With the upgraded system, all that its staff has to do manually is clean the inside. Based on initial results, sales and profitability are up in the car wash — with an added bonus of increased inside store sales.

**3. Are You Ready to Do the (Proper) Math?**

The most common call that car wash equipment supplier Sonny's Enterprises Inc. gets from c-store operators is asking how can they upgrade and make their car wash more profitable.

Sonny's cautions that car-washing success does not necessarily follow the volume of gasoline sold or the amount of inside store sales. "Car



washing potential requires a significant amount of due diligence not as simple as 'we sell 250,000 gallons of fuel a month, so we should sell X amount of car washes per month,'" said Kevin Collette, vice president of sales at Sonny's, based in Tamarac, Fla.

To properly analyze, many factors must be evaluated, such as traffic, traffic patterns, demographics, car washing competition, and then the physical attributes of the site itself. "Once a c-store operator understands these critical criteria and teams with an experienced car wash professional, the wash could then be converted or designed to maximize the site's true car washing potential," Collette explained.

**4. Can You Maintain Customer Loyalty?**

Once you attract customers with an upgraded car wash, you have to keep them. The best wash services today go hand-in-hand with a loyalty program.

The most attractive ones are designed around "unlimited wash" programs/clubs that allow customers to wash their cars as many times as they desire for a monthly subscription fee. Typically, these programs are sold at three to four times the cost of the base wash price, according to Collette. For example, if the base wash is \$5, the monthly subscription is \$19.95.

The billing is done monthly via a credit card. Premium packages naturally are priced higher. Upgrades are also typically made available when the club member approaches the point-of-sale. "RFID identifies the member and offers upgrades, such as tire shiner and high-quality conditioners, creating an average ticket typically well above the base cost," noted Collette. **CSN**

**ULINE**  
SHIPPING SUPPLY SPECIALISTS

**OVER 2,850  
POLY BAG ITEMS!**

**ORDER BY 6 PM FOR  
SAME DAY SHIPPING**

**COMPLETE CATALOG  
1-800-295-5510  
uline.com**