Written by Mark Jaeger
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Port grocery store finds customers make game of saving cash on gas

It is almost two years since Sanfilippo's Sentry, at 101 W. Seven Hills Rd., Port Washington, instituted the Pump Perks program, and store owners say the campaign has changed how some people approach the routine of grocery shopping.

"We have customers who come in every week and say they have made a game of finding out how much they can save at the gas pump," said Steve Sanfilippo, promotions and marketing manager at the store.

Implemented in May of 2008, the program gives customers cash off for as much as 15 gallons of gas at the Quik Stop Shoppe Citgo, 1605 N. Wisconsin St., for purchasing selected grocery items.

Owner Joe Sanfilippo said the store has as many as 1,900 items offering Pump Perks credits, with about 500 featured items added to and removed from that list every week.

"These are basic items that people buy every day like peanut butter, eggs and coffee, not things nobody wants," Sanfilippo said.

The grocery items included in the program are determined by SuperValu, but the father-and-son team said they frequently get suggestions from customers about what items should be added to the list.

Starting the discount program was not cheap, but Sanfilippo said store officials realized they needed to gain an identity in a crowded field of grocery store options.

“We got into the program because we saw a need to stand out from our competitors, and at the time gas was selling for $4 a gallon so the discounts were really appealing,” he said.

“The customer reaction has been fantastic from the start.”

It is difficult to gauge precisely how successful the discount campaign has been, but the anecdotal evidence is overwhelming.

“When we started, we had 25,000 cards printed up. We’re down to about 4,000 cards left,” Sanfilippo said.

The laminated cards are presented to cashiers at the check-out lanes, where accumulated cash is credited to the account.

The card must then be used within 30 days at the Port Citgo gas pump to get the per-gallon discount on gas purchased.

“If you want to know how popular the cards are, come work a cash register or bag groceries some weekend when we are offering bonus money. The cards are everywhere,” Steve Sanfilippo said.

Card use goes to frenzy stage on weeks when the store offers bonus discounts, like this week when an additional 50 cents off per gallon is being credited to customers who buy $50 worth of groceries.

The state’s minimum-markup law prevents selling gas for less than 11 cents a gallon, but stories of customers paying less than $1 a gallon for gas because of the program are not uncommon.

“There are lots of grocery stores between Grafton and our store, but the Pump Perks program more than pays for the gas people would use to come to us,” Steve Sanfilippo said.

“Based on the number of items we have in the program, the average shopper can

save between $10 and $15 a week on gas without really trying using their Perks card. That's $60 a month for most
people, which is a lot in this economy," Joe Sanfilippo said.

Throughout the program, the store has been collecting customer comments that show how well-received the discounts have been.

"In these hard economic times, we can always count on our Sentry to bring us low food prices with great quality and the added extra of Pump Perks. We can now feed our family super quality food and
save substantially on gas," wrote one Port Washington resident.

Another woman was even more direct in singing the praises of the program.

"After I was 'downsized' out of my company, we had to save whenever we could. Pump Perks really helped us out," she wrote.

One customer's testimonial said her family saved $758 in gas last year by adding up the perk pennies.

Sanfilippo said the store invested heavily in software and equipment to implement the program, but it has paid off.

"It is difficult to say how much additional traffic the program brought to our store, but it has certainly been part of the puzzle that is helping us succeed in this market. Our goal is to offer our customers quality products in a clean setting with an experienced team of employees, and all of that comes together to help us thrive," he said.

"The Pump Perks program is just another perk, if you'll pardon the pun, for coming to our store. If we didn't have it in place, I am sure we would see the difference in business."

HANDS-ON MANAGEMENT is the rule at Sanfilippo's Sentry in Port Washington. Owner Joe Sanfilippo (foreground) and his son Steve (behind) frequently pitch in, bagging groceries for customers when business is heavy. The addition of the Pump Perks program at the store has brought a surge in shoppers, especially

when “bonus buck” promotions are held. Photo by Mark Jaeger