



March 2022

FEATURE

Thanks for the LIFT

A lighting, image and facilities transformation revs up sales at one Wisconsin c-store.

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY

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Less than six months into a global pandemic that saw most companies holding their collective breath, trying to stay afloat at a time when consumer spending was plunging and unemployment soaring, Kyle Knutson assessed conditions at his rural Wisconsin convenience store, double-checked his math, and decided that the time was right ... to build a new store.

The decision was an easy one for the c-store veteran and CEO of Synergy Cooperative, whose quarter century of industry experience told him that while the timing to commit to a multimillion-dollar project may have been imperfect, renewing his lease at an aging store at which the state mandated that he comply with upgrades was even less palatable.

“We studied the investment as well as other competitive changes that were happening in our community and decided that a rebuild would position us best for the future,” he said.

With a history dating back more than 50 years in Cumberland, Wisconsin, Synergy Coop has carved out a sizable following as a local gathering place for the town's 2,200 residents, one whose cooperative legal structure conveyed ownership status to its members. It's also a popular stop for vacationers seeking outdoor adventure among the area's hundreds of lakes.

To provide maximum value for his investment, Knutson decided that the rebuild would need to cater to both locals—“we have farmers that stop by



The Cenex-branded location in Cumberland, Wisconsin, recently underwent a complete rebuild through the LIFT initiative.

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regularly”—as well as vacationers. “We felt that anything we could do to benefit the store would benefit the entire community,” he said.

Knutson performed his due diligence and settled on a partner for his rebuild: Cenex.

TIME FOR A FACE LIFT

Recognizing the growing retailer need to distinguish stores and offerings, the Cenex brand offers its LIFT initiative—a lighting, image and facilities transformation process—designed to revamp Cenex-branded c-stores through a series of exterior and interior updates. The two-pronged initiative includes an In-Store Loan Program, which offers optional zero-percent loan funding for qualifying in-store improvements aimed at enhancing customer experience and safety, a critical factor in Knutson’s decision. “That’s something we definitely wanted to take advantage of,” Knutson said. “Plus, the Cenex brand made it a win-win.”

There’s also the Cenex brand’s Halo Image program, which elevates the forecourt appearance of Cenex-branded locations by incorporating improvements made to the canopy, forecourt and main ID sign. Combined, LIFT’s In-Store Loan Program and Halo Image would help Knutson reach his vision to create a next-generation shopping destination for Cumberland residents and visitors. “We wanted people to come into the store and say, “Wow,” Knutson said.



Kyle Knutson and his team leveraged the partnerships available through Cenex to create a space designed for the Cumberland community.



GETTING STARTED

Outside

Breaking ground in August 2020, Knutson worked closely with the Cenex brand, leveraging its Halo Image program to design a store concept that attracted customers from hundreds of yards or more down the road, making it a location that passersby couldn’t help but visit.

The Halo Image program is about casting a bright first appearance on the canopy with a 360-degree LED light band, a prominent Cenex logo and a three-dimensional backlit blue arch. And for Cenex retailers, the Halo Image aligns well with research that shows bright outdoor lighting boosts foot traffic during nighttime hours.

“Not only does bright lighting draw people into the store, but it helps customers feel safer when they’re at a Cenex-branded location,” said Akhtar Hussain, director of refined fuels marketing, CHS Inc., the parent company of Cenex. “We want to make sure the Cenex brand resonates with consumers. By investing in our energy brand, we’re supporting our cooperatives and the communities they serve.”

Knutson agrees. “I truly believe that the new Cenex Halo Image has been the No. 1 driver of people stopping at our store at night. I’d been looking for something like that for a long time. Just to highlight that canopy like they do is phenomenal. It was so exciting when we powered that Halo Image up the first time. It was just perfect.”

Interior

On the interior, Knutson chose a Northwoods-themed store with vaulted, knotty pine ceilings, a modern warmth with comforts that eschew the traditional convenience store vibe. And he spent

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considerable attention on enhancing the store's bathrooms, a top priority for him and his team.

"We focused on features that would have a long-term return on investment," he said. "We wanted to ensure the bathrooms were spacious—bigger than what's normally found at gas stations. We found that if customers stop in stores with welcoming restrooms, they're more likely to look around and grab some food and drinks, too."

While many store owners look at sales per square foot, trying to maximize the use of space, Knutson's priority was about making the store layout welcoming for his customers. As with all Cenex-branded locations, Synergy Coop is locally owned and operated, making it a community gathering place. It's common for friends to linger over a cup of coffee, so Knutson set aside tables for in-store eating.

"As we looked at the layouts of other convenience store chains, we didn't find tables to sit down at or any place to meet," he said.

"We wanted to make sure there was the ability for folks to feel comfortable enjoying each other's company in our store."

There's also a prominent display of open air, refrigerated cases that highlight local products, like meats and cheeses. "That's been very well received," he said.

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HEAVY LIFTing

For Knutson, the entire Cenex rebuild took a little more than five months to complete, and the end product has been transformational.

"Business has been great," he said. "The amount of business we're doing compared to what we were selling at our old store is not even comparable. We're pretty proud of how it turned out and what we have here for the community."

Those are impressive results, especially during a pandemic. Knutson credits the LIFT initiative with that improvement, for delivering a store that aligns well with today's consumers who have rising expectations from their local convenience store. That's why many Cenex retailers like Knutson are pursuing

rebuilt. It's not surprising, too, that the company is receiving a growing number of inquiries from non-Cenex fuel marketers interested in learning about the LIFT program.



“The Cenex brand has helped locally owned and operated stores take advantage of over \$75 million worth of interior improvement projects through the first year of the LIFT initiative alone,” said Hussain. “There are more than 300 locations currently undergoing projects, making us more ready than ever to meet customer demands.”

“It’s no secret. Their customers are expecting more. And they want to be able to meet those expectations.”



ABOUT JERRY SOVERINSKY

Jerry Soverinsky is a Chicago-based freelance writer and NACS Magazine contributing writer.

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