

Drive C-Store Profits with Quality Car Washing

How the Right Marketing Strategies and Technology Can Improve Revenues, Increase Market Share and Turn Your Car Wash into a Destination

By Mack Ewing

Convenience stores operate in highly demanding environments, relying on several distinct revenue streams to remain profitable. Among the most powerful of these is the car wash, which can be a significant profit driver in the C-store landscape.

Most C-store car washes operate with minimal labor costs to negatively impact the bottom line. Once the operation covers variable costs like utilities, maintenance, insurance, and credit card transaction fees, the average gross revenue per in-bay customer is approximately \$9.90, with the variable cost per unit being \$2.50. This equates to a gross profit margin of 75 percent.

Compare this to gasoline sales, which average anywhere from ~\$0.03 to \$0.07 per gallon, and it's easy to see why car washing is a must for convenience store operators looking to increase their value per customer.

But growing profits through quality car washing isn't only about how well you clean vehicles. It's about the entire experience.

The right marketing and operational plan, combined with tactical investments in your wash technology, can simplify your entire operation, get drivers in your community talking, and set yourself up for long-term growth.

Here is what to consider to turn your C-store car wash into a destination.

Be Strategic with Your Marketing

Just like any other industry, car washing is in a never-ending battle to get customers' attention. This is especially challenging for communities with multiple car washes competing to reach the same audience.

Before you know it, your potential customers can get overwhelmed with competing subscriptions, rewards programs and special offers. While a price-driven offer can be compelling, especially in a challenging consumer environment, they are only part of the equation for encouraging repeat business and building customer loyalty.

Developing a marketing plan tailored to your community's needs will help your operation cut through the clutter and help customers choose you over the competition.

"Every convenience store operator is looking to attract more customers and increase their average basket value per visit," said Mark Tentis, Vice President of Global Sales at OPW Vehicle Wash Solutions. "But to help any profit center grow, it's important to nurture your customers as they learn to trust your site over the others. What will provide the most value for them? How fast and efficient is your car wash service? What does your business offer that others don't? These questions should factor into your marketing plan."

Proactive marketing is a critical step that occurs long before delivering the quality vehicle wash experience that keeps people coming back.

Define Your Brand and Show it Off

A major differentiator for C-stores begins with establishing your brand identity. This is the touchstone of all your marketing and promotional tactics. Clearly define what makes your car wash unique. Emphasize the benefits and value your customers will receive.

Perhaps you've recently upgraded your wash equipment, launched a membership program or special pricing initiative, or simply are confident in your ability to provide a better cleaning than the car wash down the street. Maybe your lines move faster because your car wash is more efficient, or your business has outstanding customer service that vehicle owners won't find anywhere else.

These details should be part of every aspect of your marketing strategy and clearly defined throughout your website and social media channels. This helps give customers an instant, memorable impression of who you are and why your business exists, not just what you do.

What's important here is that you are marketing your genuine strengths.

Whether it's price, speed, quality, or a mix of all three, you will attract the type of customer who aligns with your message. If you say that your wash is the highest quality in your market but it's really only the cheapest, you're not only going to lose out on the price-sensitive demographic, but you'll also disappoint those who come to your wash seeking quality as their primary need.

Out with the Old, In with the New Payment Terminals

Car wash customers want speed and efficiency at a C-store. They pull onto the site expecting open lanes at the pumps, short lines in the store and a fast vehicle wash.

Older payment terminals pose several risks to the operation:

- Inefficient and can cause long lines
- Incorrect operation or jamming, requiring frequent repairs
- Limited payment options
- Hidden fees due to non-EMV compliance

Any of these issues can cause operations to lose money right at the payment terminal.

Upgrading your terminals can mitigate that. Today's systems are EMV-ready, allowing for cards, apps and rewards programs to make the process more efficient for the customer and provide more revenue options for the business, all through a centralized kiosk.

"Devices and customers are communicating more on-site. Tanks, dispensers, phone apps all connect to one system," Tentis said. "Newer generation payment kiosks are the central hub of the C-store. They are convenient for customers to use, and with personalization options like AI-LPR, RFID and voice prompts, it's easy for the business to communicate and cross-sell."

Choose Optimal Wash Systems for Your Operation

Given the high C-store traffic and pressure to maintain uptime, you'll need a vehicle wash system that is easy to operate, reliable and flexible.

In other words, not just any wash system will do.

Finding the style, configuration and chemistry that best fit your site's layout and tunnel length can help you avoid downtime, better control your resources and meet your customers' needs for complete vehicle cleaning.

Standard in-bay automatics (IBAs) are designed to deliver a thorough vehicle wash, but if your site consistently experiences high traffic volume (10+ vehicles per hour is a good measure), your IBA can max out quickly, leaving revenue waiting in line. In such cases, a mini-tunnel system can help you avoid bottlenecks and improve throughput by allowing you to wash more cars faster.

"Finding the right vehicle wash system and chemistry for the site, not the other way around, is critical," said Tentis. "Every site has its own quirks and unique footprint, so optimizing bay space while maintaining efficiency and controlling resources like water and chemicals goes a long way toward improving profitability."

Evaluating your bay to determine which configuration can deliver the greatest impact within limited space is another case where working with a supportive manufacturer is invaluable.

Work with Expert Partners You Can Trust

With varying revenue streams, different responsibilities for your staff and the need to keep traffic and equipment running dependably, C-store operators could use a little peace of mind. After all, the goal should be to grow revenue, not create more complexity.

That is why forming trusted partnerships with industry experts dedicated to helping your C-store car wash thrive can give you a real competitive advantage.

Improving market share and growing profits through quality car washing means implementing a comprehensive plan and using the right systems that work together to help your operation grow. The good news is you don't have to do it alone.

For C-stores facing challenges across different aspects of their business, such as selecting profit-driving car wash equipment and marketing strategies, [OPW Vehicle Wash Solutions](#) is available to support your entire operation.

About the Author

Mack Ewing is the Senior Director of Sales & Marketing at Transchem Group & Turtle Wax Pro. He can be reached at mewing@transchem.com. OPW Vehicle Wash Solutions was formed in January 2019 and consists of [PDQ Manufacturing, Inc.](#), [Belanger, Inc.](#), [Innovative Control Systems](#) (ICS), [Kesseltronics](#) and [Transchem](#). PDQ is a preeminent provider of in-bay automatic wash systems and payment terminals, while Belanger is an innovative leader in soft-touch tunnel and in-bay automatic wash systems. ICS provides industry-leading car wash technology, like payment terminals, process controls and software management and automation systems, and Kesseltronics designs machine controls for successful tunnel wash operation. Transchem is a leading developer of environmentally sensitive vehicle wash chemicals and cleaning products. Together, they create a revolutionary single source for all vehicle wash needs. For more information on OPW Vehicle Wash Solutions, please visit opwvws.com.

