

MANOR SERVICE STATIONS



ENHANCING THE OFFER

A LEADING INDEPENDENT PETROL RETAILER IN NORTH-WEST ENGLAND, MANOR SERVICE STATIONS PRIDES ITSELF ON OFFERING A LOT MORE THAN A PLACE TO FILL UP THE CAR



With competition high among service stations – especially when faced with the scale and purchasing power of the supermarkets – a key part of the Manor Service Station approach is investment.

“You have to invest to compete; that’s the byword at the moment for all independent retailers,” says the company’s Sales Director, Joe Brough. “The world keeps evolving and we have to move with it. If you go back 20 years, you’d have a service station with a small shop selling cans of Coke, pints of milk and Mars Bars – and that was it.

Now the average size of a forecourt is a lot bigger. People are expecting a lot more when they go into a service station and you have to provide for them.”

Having worked in the industry for some years, Joe’s father and a friend started the company in the mid-1980s, first buying one site then building up the portfolio, running the service stations both independently and also for the oil companies.

Of the 12 sites under the Manor Service Stations banner today, seven are with BP and five recently moved

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to Texaco as that company's pipeline coming out of Trafford Park allowed it to offer a better deal. Apart from two in North Wales and one near Nantwich in Cheshire, the majority are in and around Manchester – including two successful sites at Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 of Manchester Airport. With a head office in Macclesfield, the company has around 120 employees and is committed to helping staff up the ladder by training in-house and promoting from within.

Although offering reasonably priced petrol is always a consideration, there's a recognition that the supermarkets will usually be able to undercut smaller independents and so the company has to look at other ways to

compete. This means enhancing the retail offer with more than just the basics of bread and milk, such as good coffee and food-on-the-go, including hot food and a bakery, stocking a range of alcohol, offering add-ons such as lottery tickets, plus newspapers and magazines, which are still in demand. Car washes and jet washes remain an important part of the offer and can be tied in with money-off vouchers for petrol.

There's also a focus on customer service, with a recognition that people are more likely to come back if they get service with a smile. "Probably one of the most unpopular things that people have to do on a regular basis is stick enormous amounts of money into their car, from which they see no

tangible result," says Joe. "So you need to give them something they want on top of that. As well as making our shops into mini supermarkets, we have to offer that individual service and different sorts of promotions tailored to the locality, so it's not just about what the price of a litre of fuel is that day."

Having invested a substantial amount of money in the retail side of the business, the company is now looking ahead to the next step. The shops have been rebranded as Mace stores but since that company has formed a partnership with Costcutter, there may be the option of further rebranding. While the company has

seen great success with Costa Express, it's currently looking at the possibility of adding drive-through Starbucks and in-store Subways to suitable sites with the right capacity and in the right location.

"Things continue to go from strength to strength, but now we're saying what's next?" says Joe. "What's new and innovative – or will it just be a progression and development of what we have?"

One challenge is fuel volumes dropping off, not only through the recession but also as new cars run more efficiently and more

hybrids come on to the road. This could lead to the addition of electric fill points, although there was disappointment that Autogas didn't take off in the way it was hoped after fuel retailers invested in the pumps.

With fierce competition over suitable sites in the region, both from the multiples looking for growth in their convenience stores – the Tesco Metros and Sainsbury's Locals – and from other independents such as EuroGarages, the company continues to look at potential new sites, while considering the future of its less profitable sites.

"We've had a steady 12 sites for about five years now and we'd like to expand in the north west, but it's a very difficult market as demand is high for good quality sites," says Joe. "It's about investing in sites where we see there's a good future in them. We may end up with a smaller group but hopefully the quality will go up and up."

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