

What would Richard Branson do *with convenience?*

By Anthony Deen

With generic convenience stores seemingly on every corner, the easiest thing for customers to do is head to the location that's ... just convenient. Many C-store chains aim to stand apart from the crowd by ramping up the sophistication of their in-store environments. They are making stores larger, stocking them with healthier, fresher food, and adding modern dining furnishings.

It's a nice start, but in contemplating the C-store of the future, designers need to imagine a world in which consumers pay greater attention to the brand attributes, product offerings,

and consumer experiences available at competing quick-shopping options. That requires being bold and rethinking the category.

How would innovators in other sectors approach the challenge? As the former head of store design for Virgin Megastores, I can't help but contemplate how Virgin founder Richard Branson might approach a portfolio of fueling station and C-store sites.

Ideas from an innovator

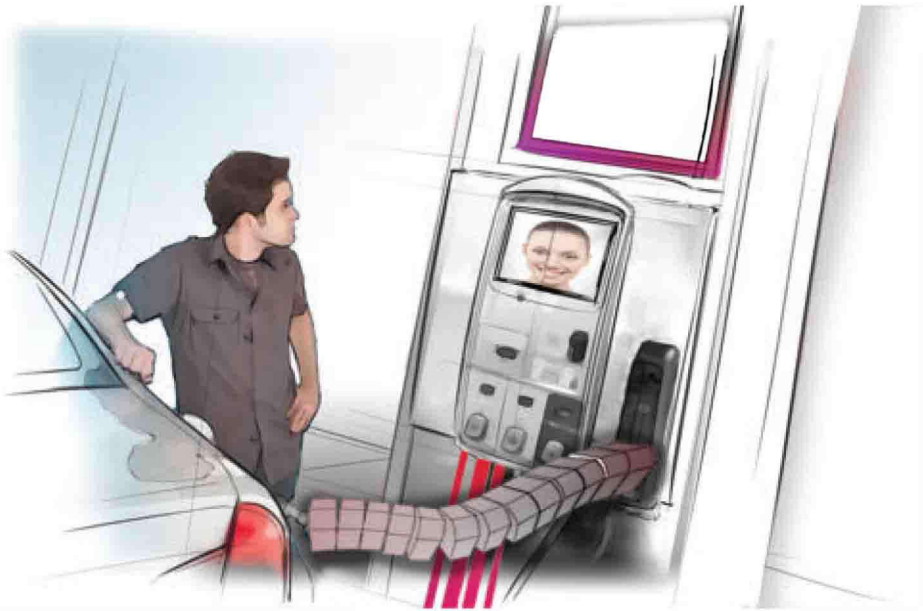
Branson is an innovator to the core. Since the retail gas industry is already mature, Branson's business-centric

inclination would be to jump to the head of the line. Forget about fossil fuels; Branson's Virgin stations would sell electricity, natural gas, and bio-diesel for green vehicles. His goal would be to create focal points for the growing community of drivers who see environmental sustainability as a top priority. His marketing, advertising, and branding for the chain would build loyalty and community around this shared value.

In addition to sustainability, Branson's brand would make its mark by evolving the customer experience. Today, Sheetz has such a substan-



Station canopies of the future will use OLED and fiberoptic illumination systems to transmit daylight.



Fueling stations of the future will use telepresence and robotic fueling arms to make the experience clean and efficient.

tial food offering that people go there regardless of whether they need gas. Likewise, chains such as 7-Eleven and Wawa can thrive even without gas canopies simply because their C-stores are destinations unto themselves. In seeking to evolve the C-store experience further, Branson would focus on selling food, culture, and lifestyle in a fun and comforting atmosphere unlike anything in the sector today. He would shoot for the kind of engaging experience that makes you drive past competitors' locations and come to his C-store.

You can see this strategy in action at Branson's other ventures. Even if you fly coach on Virgin Atlantic, you get a free ice cream bar after your meal, followed by the flight attendant offering you a hot towel. A comforting and relaxing experience isn't

reserved for premium customers alone. In keeping with the Virgin brand, Branson's C-store might offer things like the industry's cleanest, fully touch-free bathrooms, or massage tables in a quiet corner, enabling stressed-out commuters to stop and relax after a maddening stint on the road.

Customized convenience

Virgin Atlantic was the first to offer personalized TVs. This wasn't technology for technology's sake: It was to make the experience more personalized and engaging. Smart use of technology would be part of the picture at Branson's stations as well. You can look around at today's trends and get an idea for what this might entail. This year, Tesla Motors unveiled a cobra-like robot charging station for the Model S. It connects to the car, charges it, and then retracts—all without the touch of a human hand. Branson's C-store would also offer a touch-less fueling or recharging experience. As the robotic "pump" attaches to your car, you could use your phone or display at the "pump" to have a smiling attendant bring your food order right to your car.

Another aspect of your fill-up might be an automatic diagnostic. A sensor

might mind-meld with the general control center of your car and tell you whether anything was asked.

That's convenient, not just for people, but also for a future with driverless cars. Branson's stations would be designed to allow easy access by driverless taxis and delivery vehicles in need of a fast charge. Meanwhile, dashboard-mounted RFID chips would enable human members of the loyalty program to drive up to the pump, refuel or recharge, and drive off without swiping cards or handing cash to clerks inside. Loaded with each club member's preferences, the next-generation pumps would scan customers' RFID chips and then send them customized offers: "Hi, Michelle! It's nice to see you again. As a token of our appreciation, here's half off your regular chai tea and low-fat scone."

On Virgin America's planes, colored lighting creates an atmosphere reminiscent of a small nightclub in a boutique hotel. A Virgin fueling canopy might have OLED-based lighting, using fiber-optics to transmit sunlight from above the canopy or to create a digital light show, pulsing in synch with music. Of course, the canopy and even the store's roof would be topped with solar panels or living plants, reinforcing the brand's stance on sustainability and making customers feel even better about their visit.

Futuristic and fun

Not all of Branson's ventures have been successful, but today's already-evolving C-stores and gas stations could certainly learn a thing or two from his core principles. They include creating a refreshing guest experience in an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere; making smart use of intuitive technology and customer-friendly automation; and investing in teams of well-trained employees who are people-focused. In the C-store space, you can bet Branson's brand would be futuristic and fun—with a social conscience to boot.

Veteran store designer **Anthony Deen** is creative director for CBX (www.cbx.com), a retail design and branding consultancy.