

Bigger & Better in Texas

Alon's newest 7-Eleven prototype store in El Paso caters to professional drivers

By Danielle Romano

When Alon Brands LLC bought West Convenience in 2001, the site that is now its newest 7-Eleven prototype store was included in the deal. However, Alon tried to unload the El Paso, Texas, location because it didn't think it was "c-store material," recalled Jonathan Ketchum, senior vice president of Dallas-based Alon Brands, the largest U.S. 7-Eleven licensee.

That was until the state built an international bridge and loop from Mexico into El Paso, and the area became increasingly busy. Alon soon switched gears and instead of unloading the site, it purchased two adjacent parcels in 2015, totaling

changing to take its 7-Eleven stores to the next level. Its newest prototype store in El Paso — the second of this concept — is proof of that. The store opened for business Oct. 19, just four months after Alon debuted its first 7-Eleven prototype in Rio Rancho, N.M.

A NEW KIND OF LEGACY

While Alon's legacy store network features sites that are typically 2,400 square feet, the company had

launched a larger format measuring 3,500 square feet. Still, Alon felt that square footage didn't provide sufficient capacity for a foodservice area with in-store seating. Thus, the retailer decided its first prototype store in Rio Rancho would be 4,503 square feet.

As they say though, everything is bigger in Texas. And so when it came to the El Paso prototype, Alon added even more square footage, taking it to a hefty 5,200 square feet, which company officials noted exceeds the c-store industry norm.

For El Paso, Alon worked with Advancement Branding and used the Rio Rancho store as a starting point for graphic design. However, it then melded that design with the company's classic truck stop layout. "We wanted to replicate what we did in Rio Rancho, but this site was a unique opportunity," Ketchum told *Convenience Store News*.

Using much of the same interior graphics, as well as most elements of the Rio Rancho prototype, Alon recognized the difference in demographics and wanted to accommodate El Paso customers. The newest site differs from Rio Rancho because it is more commercial than residential.



Alon's El Paso prototype store measures 5,200 square feet.

two acres of land to build upon.

"We are committed to growing our presence in the Lower Valley and East El Paso," Ketchum said of the chain, which operates more than 300 c-stores in Texas and New Mexico.

Alon is also committed to keeping up with the rapid evolution of the convenience world, adapting and

“Rio is upscale and growing, and this is more El Paso,” Ketchum explained.

UNIQUE OFFERINGS

Appealing to El Paso’s blue-collar demographic, the store targets OTR (over-the-road) drivers who travel between the United States and Mexico, as well as long- and short-haul commercial and professional drivers. While the store incorporates much of the Rio Rancho décor, Alon substituted more traditional quick-service restaurant (QSR) hot foods to appeal to this demographic, rather than the bakery and smoothie offerings of Rio Rancho.

El Paso also does not feature a wine wall like Rio Rancho does. But the location does offer a beer cave, due to El Paso being a strong market for beer sales, according to Ketchum. In fact, he noted that beer performs better than cigarettes in this market.

This uniqueness gives Alon the opportunity to sell iced-down beer and move more singles. “El Paso is a cash market, [which means] people tend to buy in smaller quantities,” Ketchum said. “This is the first time we’re doing this.”

The El Paso 7-Eleven store additionally differs from Rio Rancho in that its customized foodservice offering includes a Chester’s Chicken restaurant. “We hoped to put in a local Mexican QSR, but they were reluctant. So, we went with a Chester’s that is bilingual to give us a Tex-Mex customized foodservice program,” said Ketchum. Alon wanted a foodservice program here that included chicken because it has universal appeal.

Other amenities offered in El Paso include:

- Three diesel fuel islands
- 20 fueling positions for cars
- Trucker supplies like electronics, books and clothing
- Wi-Fi
- Adva, Alon’s new proprietary brand of water
- A full complement of 7-Eleven’s 7-Select and GO!Yum private brand products
- Interior seating, for which an extra 800 square feet was dedicated. “We felt that we wanted our guests to stay and consume their food on-site,” Ketchum said.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In its first year, Alon anticipates the new El Paso prototype store will achieve 3.5 million gallons in fuel sales, or approximately 300,000 gallons per month, as well as \$2.4 million in in-store merchandise sales, or \$200,000 per month, according to Ketchum.



QSR-style hot foods, including a Chester’s Chicken restaurant, appeal to El Paso’s blue-collar customer base.

Using the El Paso and Rio Rancho stores as a design template, the retailer intends to expand this new concept. Alon already has plans for three other interstate travel stops. The targeted sites are in El Paso and Midland/Odessa, Texas, and Albuquerque, N.M.

“We hope to procure capital to build new or raze/rebuild up to 10 sites next year,” Ketchum said. **CSN**