

A New Culture of Convenience

American Natural offers its customers fuel for their cars and their bodies

By Danielle Romano

Creating “the convenience store of the future” is no easy undertaking for any industry operator or branding team, but Jennifer Pomerantz, founder and CEO of Pittsburgh-based American Natural, and King-Casey, a retail consulting and design firm, were up for the challenge.

Setting out to become the “c-store of the future,” American Natural’s business model is dedicated to offering choice in both fuel for people’s vehicles, as well as fuel for their bodies. This model was created from Pomerantz’s belief that today’s convenience store shopping experience has become a “seemingly less human and unnatural experience,” where customers have traded good food for what’s convenient, she told *Convenience Store News*.

“American Natural was driven to create a new culture of convenience, a more natural culture. An accessible culture built on the belief that, despite your busy lives, you shouldn’t have to sacrifice what is important to you and your family,” Pomerantz explained. “Better food. Better service. Better choices. All delivered with a great sense of community.”

ZONING IN ON IMPROVEMENT

The American Natural brand was introduced in 2011 by parent company Cleopatra Resources. With an acquisition of operating fueling stations and a whole-



American Natural worked with design firm King-Casey to improve brand positioning.

sale petroleum distribution fleet in 2012, the company established a growing footprint around its Pittsburgh base. Today, American Natural has 13 stores operating across Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Seeking a new store prototype for the American Natural brand, the chain enlisted Westport, Conn.-based King-Casey to bring its vision of a “new culture of convenience” to life. Together, the two organizations cultivated a project objective: to create a next-generation c-store design that optimizes sales of freshly prepared food and beverages, according to Howland Blackiston, a King-Casey principal who worked on the American Natural project.

American Natural and King-Casey also had four

sub-objectives for the project:

- Develop a redefined concept definition for a world-class c-store;
- Develop an enhanced brand positioning and new store design for American Natural;
- Create a new interior layout that optimizes operations and products, including 3-D branded design concepts; and
- Develop strategies for visual zone merchandising and customer communications.

To begin, King-Casey used its proprietary COZI (Customer Operating Zone Improvement) methodology to audit American Natural's existing stores and determine how well they represented its desired brand positioning and attributes. COZI is an analytical assessment process that focuses on the customer and how retailers utilize "zones" to create an effective environment.

Looking at American Natural's stores through the COZI lens, King-Casey identified several areas in need of improvement and, thus, opportunities for the new prototype.

For starters, the American Natural logo had a distinctive font for the name, but used a range of shapes, including ovals and rectangles, on an inconsistent background. Also, the company's identity was distinctive, but skewed to a male image, therefore neglecting a fresh food and female focus. Lastly, American Natural had a molecular icon to represent its compressed natural gas (CNG) offering, which was distinctive yet underleveraged.

At the Approach Zone and Forecourt, King-Casey found that American Natural's primary signage only supported the fuel side of the business, without addressing its highly critical "The Eatery" program. Additionally, the CNG differentiator on its primary sign and at the pumps did not stand out from other fuel choices, merely blending in. American Natural — which operates a wholesale petroleum distribution fleet — offers gasoline and diesel in addition to CNG.

Moving into the Food Service Zone, King-Casey identified the need for a major upgrade. Upon walking into "old" American Natural stores, the first thing customers saw was the same thing they'd see in every c-store: racks of candy and potato chips. This zone needed to become the showcase and center of attention for the new store prototype, Blackiston explained.

"Foodservice should be the first thing you see when you enter the store because American Natural is all about fresh, delicious food," he said. "We even recommended that they showcase food equipment that



The new store design incorporates a lounge area that entices customers to stay awhile.

underscores the 'fresh choice' concept, such as espresso machines, a rotisserie grill, and pizza ovens."

ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

American Natural's new prototype debuted just outside Pittsburgh last September. The chain plans to roll out the new store design with future locations, and has begun implementing King-Casey's recommendations at its existing stores, too.

"New" American Natural stores highlight The Eatery's bevy of fresh foodservice options. Taking an upscale approach, the offer includes made-to-order premium sandwiches, gourmet salads, baked-fresh pizzas, and toasted paninis. There's an in-store barista as well, while sweeter fare includes homemade ice cream and hand-scooped milkshakes.

"The core value of American Natural is choice, which the new prototype offers not only in types

STORESPOTLIGHT

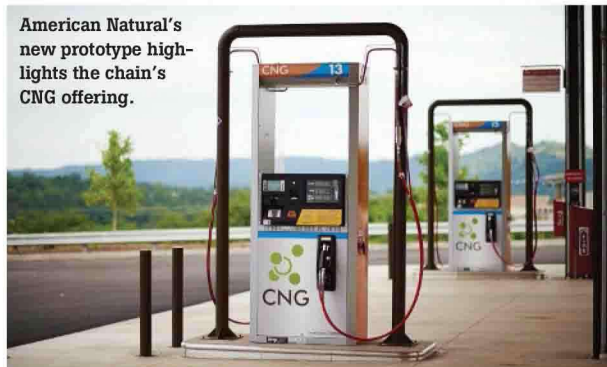
American Natural

of food, but in freshness, quality and diversity,” Blackiston stated. “American Natural’s goal is to make its stores dining destinations in their own right.”

Taking on a more café-style design, new American Natural stores feature counter and tabletop seating for sit-down dining, plus an upholstered lounge area for customers who want to enjoy their barista-made beverages. There is also exterior patio dining.

“The feeling you come away with is that this is a restaurant/dining concept that also happens to offer fueling options. That dining impression is so acute, and the food is so good and popular, that a store manager in the new prototype said that they received a call from a customer asking, ‘Do you take reservations for lunch?’” Blackiston shared.

As the final piece of the puzzle, American Natural launched a new, easy-to-navigate website, american-natural.com, which showcases the new branding and gives visitors an opportunity to view available services, from The Eatery to its multi-fuel offering and wholesale fuel supply.



American Natural’s new prototype highlights the chain’s CNG offering.

Blackiston describes the difference between American Natural’s new prototype and its old model as “night and day.” The chain is now aiming to reach a higher percentage of female customers, and has already seen trucking-fleet operators taking advantage of American Natural’s choices in fuel, as well as its in-store amenities. He expects passenger-car drivers will not be far behind.

“This is a client who really understood the value of branding and design in making a company’s vision a reality... never doubting that these were concepts that would help them realize their business objectives,” Blackiston said, praising American Natural. **CSN**