

THE FUTURE OF FUELS 2014: AN ANALYSIS THROUGH 2040

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March 2014

THE
FUELS
ISSUE

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IDEAS 2 GO

WINNING PARTNERSHIP

With the goal of helping his community, one retailer hit the public relations jackpot.

BY MICHAEL KLEIN



Establishing yourself in the community as a reputable business can be crucial in developing and sustaining that good business. But how do you show people you are a locally owned, small business when you are a nationally branded station?

Rob Garrett operates four Sunoco-branded stores in northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., including the Seven Corners Sunoco in Falls Church. It's a highly competitive community with

more than its share of branded and independent service stations so Garrett knew he had to do some marketing to get noticed.

"We do flyers offering discounts that we distribute in the community and give to customers who actually come inside the shop," explained Garrett. "We also do the Valpak mailers that a lot of service stations here do, but I wanted to do something more." And more than simply marketing, he wanted to give back to the community.

Garrett realized many of his morning customers all worked at the nearby J.E.B. Stuart High School. As the closest service station to the school, he saw



Kevin Cantwell (left), who runs the bays at the station, and Rob Garrett (right), owner, proudly show their support for the local high school.

“We are very grateful for the support they gave us — the Seven Corners Sunoco Tip-off Tournament was a great success.”

— Brandon Sutphin,
head coach of girls’
varsity team

an opportunity to reach out to the faculty and staff. “We started offering discounts on oil changes and inspections to the staff,” said Garrett. “We tried to grow the relationship, but for whatever reason we couldn’t get it going.”

New Faces, New Opportunities

Then Garrett hired an all-new crew in the bays, including the very outgoing Kevin Cantwell. Cantwell’s daughter Kelsey is a sophomore at Stuart High School, and Kevin is very involved in the school. That was the spark the station needed, and suddenly the relationship blossomed.

“We made flyers again targeting the school faculty, but this time Kelsey took them into the office and asked if she could put them in everyone’s mailboxes. They let her do it, and we started to see traffic increase.”

Cantwell, whose daughter is an athlete at the school, saw the athletics program as a golden opportunity. “I’d talk up the station while I was volunteering at the snack bar during sporting events,” said Cantwell. “I started telling teachers that if they brought their cars in for service, we’d give them a ride back to the school and pick them up after. Lots of places do it, but you have to ask — we decided to proactively market it to customers.”

Garrett credits Cantwell’s involvement in the community as pivotal. “Kevin and his crew were definitely an upgrade for us — both in customer service and quality — but also in terms of reaching out to the community. He’s active at the school, he has a great personal relationship with the community and we definitely were able to trade off that.”

Right Time, Right Place

While the Sunoco brand has a long history in motorsports and has been the official fuel of NASCAR since 2004, Garrett’s suburban Washington location hadn’t dabbled in any sponsorships.

“Through Kevin I learned the school was looking for sponsors for an annual basketball tournament,” recalled Garrett. “I approached the coach and he told me for \$1,000 we could be the signature sponsor of the event. It would be named after us, we’d get a page in the program, and we could put up banners. I jumped on it.”

Little did Garrett know what a lucky decision that was.

Unknown to Garrett, the Stuart girls’ varsity basketball team was in the midst of a legendary losing streak: 82 games and counting, stretching all the way back to 2009. But things turned around for

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the school on the last day of the three-day "Seven Corners Sunoco Tip-off Tournament."

The Stuart Raiders beat cross-county rival the Lee High School Lancers in a blowout. The streak was over and the community was buzzing! Of course local media wrote about the game, but so noteworthy was the win, even *The Washington Post* wrote about the dramatic "victory at the Seven Corners Sunoco Tip-off Tournament."

"I couldn't have bought that kind of publicity," Garrett said. Of course he could have, but it would have cost a lot more than \$1,000. And it wouldn't have brought about the ensuing good will and cementing of the relationship.

"The school sent us a letter and plaque thanking us, which is very nice, but we did it because it's the right thing to do," Garrett said. "I grew up in this community and I think it's important to

give something back when you can."

"We are very grateful for the support they gave us — the Seven Corners Sunoco Tip-off Tournament was a great success," said Girls' Varsity Head Coach Brandon Sutphin.

He's not just talking about his team's first win in years. School budgets are stretched thin and whenever a local business steps up to help fund a program everybody wins. Sutphin says the 2013 tournament was the largest to date, they made money that goes back into the basketball program, and they have Seven Corners Sunoco to thank in part.

The Start of a Beautiful Relationship

Garrett says the 2013 tournament was just the beginning. He wants to sponsor the event again next year and further leverage his participation in the event. He's also developing customer appreciation events around his car wash or service in the bays that will benefit the school directly.

Garrett admits that he, like Cantwell, attended Stuart's bitter rival high school across town. "But that was a long time ago and all that is well behind us," he said with a smile. "We'll stay involved to support the kids." **NACS**

Michael Klein is a freelance writer in Northern Virginia and he roots for the Stuart Raiders year round.

