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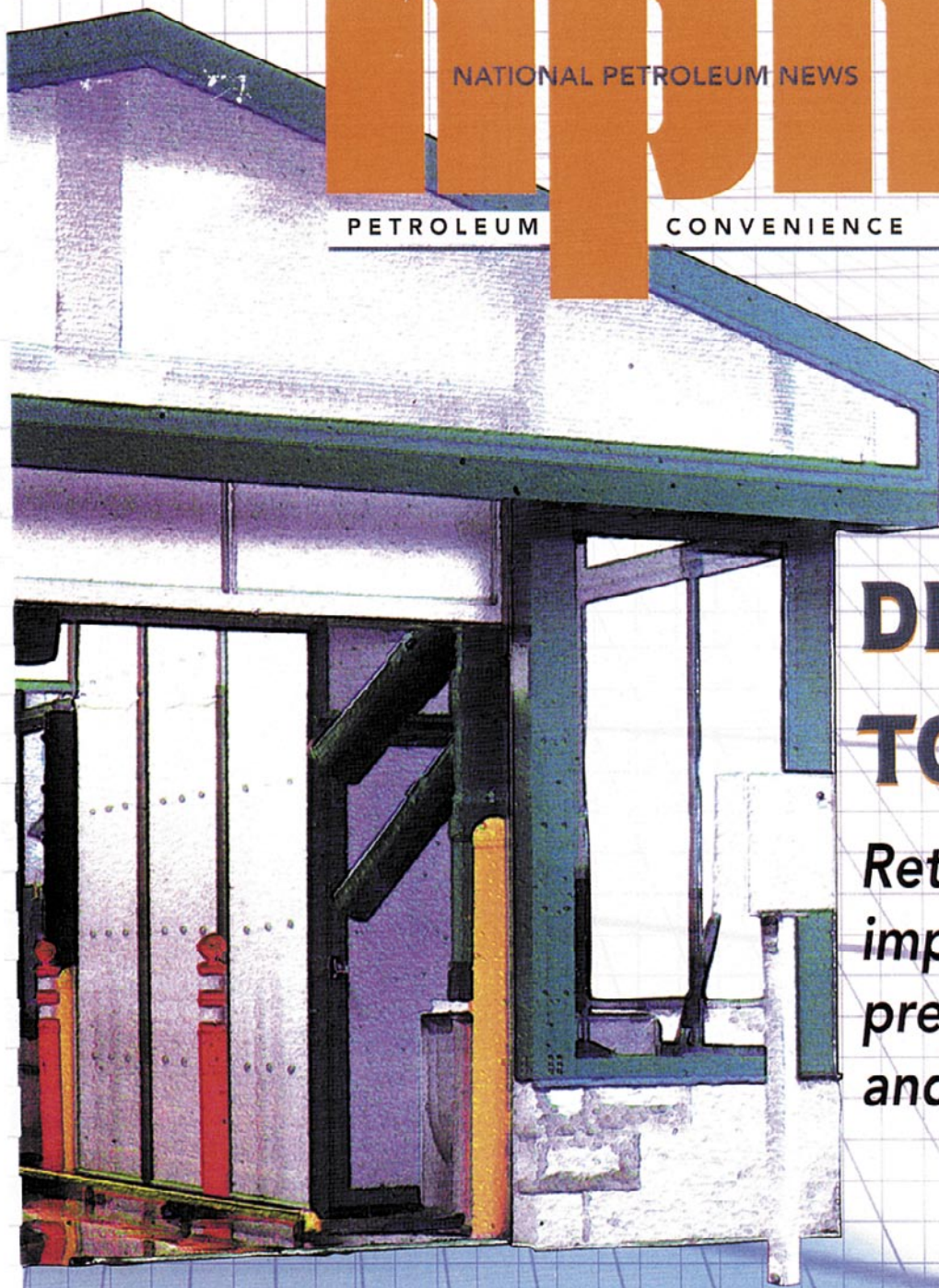
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PETROL EQUIPMENT

BY CHRIS TRACZEK

In the endless search for profit centers, many gasoline marketers have turned to a product that has often been viewed as a novelty or afterthought — the car wash. A free car wash with a fill-up used to be the industry standard, but marketers, who have seen their profit margins sliced to the bone by the rise in oil prices, have discovered that a good, timely, reliable car wash can help fill that profit void.

"I've had a number of customers in the last few months say that if I didn't have my car wash, things would be really bleak," said Tom Hobby, president of Autec Car Wash Systems, Statesville, N.C. "The margins were really soft in January and February."

Helping the marketer recover those lost profits are a new array of car-wash options that are designed to grab the attention of a buying public that can't resist the allure of uniqueness and high-tech gadgetry.

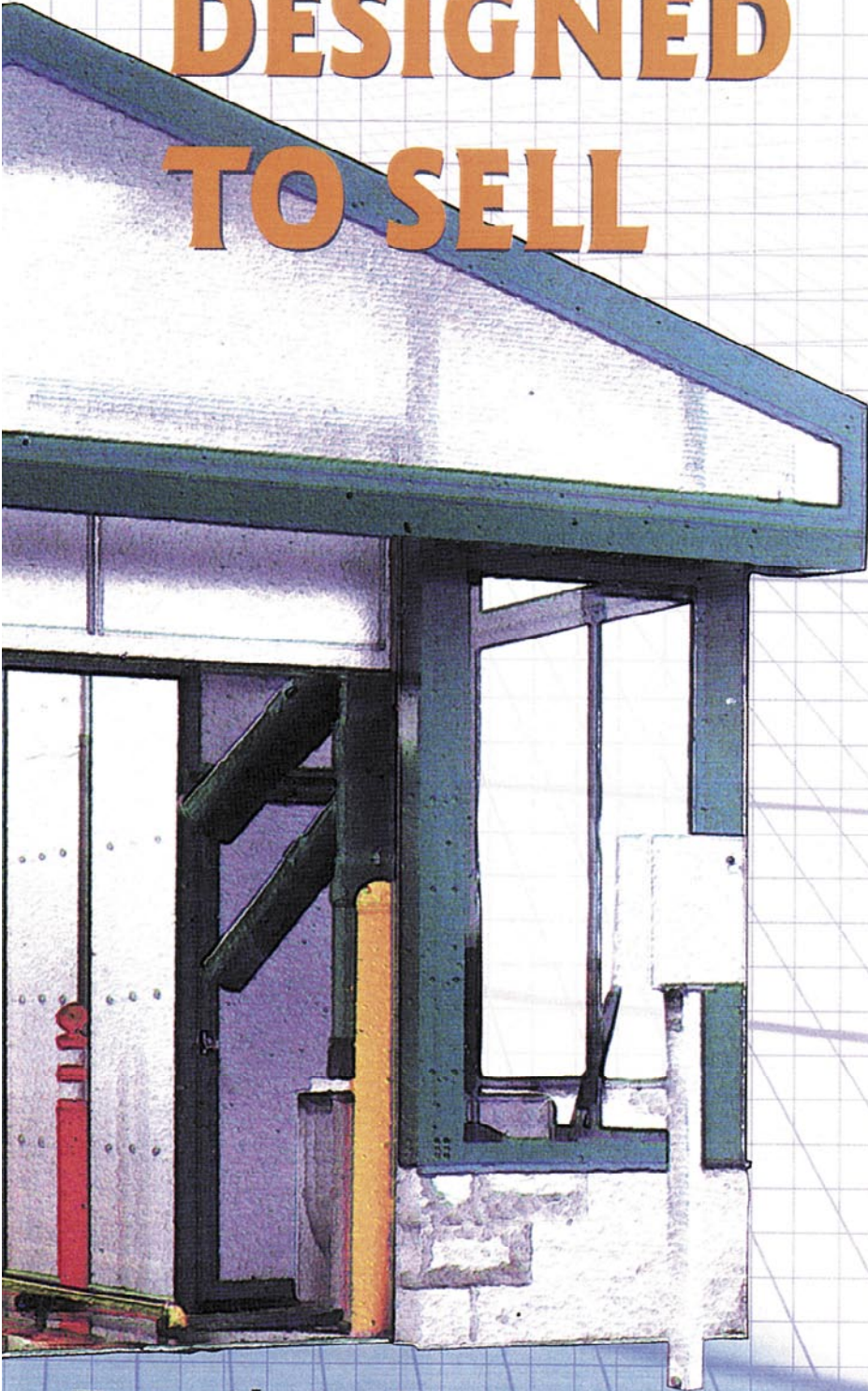
Two of the latest car-wash systems to hit the market, while different, have their inspiration in common sense.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Two years ago, Hobby's Autec struck upon the idea of updating the standard gray-block car-wash structure with the insertion of floor-to-ceiling windows on its drive-thru soft-cloth washes, allowing the customer to see out and the curious gas-station visitor to see in to the bay.

The results have, in Hobby's words, "been spectacular" for marketers who are using Autec's glass building.

"What we've seen that is most significant is that revenue, because of the presentation, is phenomenal," said Hobby. "In our area, there are two sites across the street from each other a quarter-mile apart. One is a conventional car wash, tucked behind the convenience store, a block



**Retailers improve
car wash presentation
and profit**

structure. The other is a glass building, on-line with the gas pumps. It does three times the revenue with the same equipment."

The site with the glass building, a Save More in Conover, N.C., did \$15,000 in car-wash revenue in February, not bad for a 29-day month in a traditionally slow time of the year for car washes. Not only were car-wash revenues up, but gasoline sales also increased 14 percent in the first three weeks after the new wash was installed.

"The success of the car wash is excellent," said David Evans, president of Save More, Inc. "With the combination of Autec's Soft Cloth Car Wash and the spectacular glass building, I've tapped into two very crucial components: my customers' safety and curb appeal that edges out my competition."

Jon Lassus of Lassus Brothers Handy Dandy BP in Ft. Wayne, Ind., was one of the first in the country to feature an Autec glass building at one of his sites. The results were immediate.

"Car-wash revenues were \$13,000 the first month and gasoline sales were 200,000 gallons, an 18-percent increase from the highest-grossing month prior to the opening of the car wash," said Lassus.

"Everywhere we've done them it is the same way — the revenues have been phenomenal," said Hobby.

The glass buildings are most prevalent in the Southeast, though Hobby has been selling more and more of the systems to marketers in the Midwest.

The system features an aluminum frame that can be powdercoated to match the customer's needs. The bottom two feet of the walls are polycarbonate, followed by seven feet of glass, then two more feet of polycarbonate. The peaked roof is also made of polycarbonate with four window panes at the top center.

"It looks much like a pool enclosure," said Hobby. "The

presentation is so spectacular with the equipment moving, the neon lights. It's a very effective presentation."

It's also marketed as being safe for the consumer, as well.

"There is also a safety issue here," Hobby said. "You're not driving into a building at night, a closed tunnel. There's no claustrophobia in the building. You can see in, you can see out."

The glass design does bring about the need for more timely maintenance, but what marketer wouldn't gladly



Autec's glass car wash is not only pleasing to the eye but addresses safety concerns as well.

accept that trade-off after a glance at the bottom line?

"We found that a lot of marketers didn't pay much attention to the glass in their building until it was awful," Hobby said. "We've found that through regular maintenance, it isn't a problem. You want to keep the wash presentable so you don't lose the effect, obviously."

The glass building, and all Autec car-wash systems, will also have a positive effect on the environment in the future.

"We're changing to a water-based hydraulic system," Hobby said. "Water is biodegradable, unlike petroleum. It's because of the environment. Any time you have a hydraulic system with

oil and you have a leak, there's a question about what goes into the environment. We're also working on a system that would allow us to retrofit older units with the new water-based hydraulics."

CHOICES, CHOICES

When deciding to install a car wash, marketers and customers have traditionally been presented with two choices — soft-cloth or touchless technology. Much like someone might be a loyal Buick customer or Yankees fan at the exclusion of any other options, marketers and customers have either sided with soft-cloth or touchfree.

Last year, Ryko Manufacturing Company of Grimes, Iowa, unveiled a way to successfully walk the fence between the two.

The introduction of its Select-A-Wash system gives marketers and customers a choice in car-wash options. The Select-A-Wash has the capability to be programmed by the consumer for a touchfree wash or a wash using Ryko's FoamBrite cloth system. For the customer who wants the best of both worlds, both touchfree and FoamBrite can be used in the same wash. The Select-A-Wash is the only system of its type in use in the United States.

"It's been in development for quite a while," said Steve Davis, national sales manager for Ryko. "It sounds easier than it is. It sounds simple until you figure out how to do it. It was more complicated than you think, but it was the obvious answer to what everyone wants at a site. We probably could have called it the Obvious Wash instead of Select-A-Wash."

What has been obvious to marketers using the Select-A-Wash system, according to Davis, is an increase in revenues.

"Operators are realizing higher revenue than they've ever seen before," he said. "They can charge more for a

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