

## QUICK HITS

### IDEAS TO GO

# What's the Bright Idea?

LED lights offer a significant return on investment with a brighter, longer life.

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY



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**T**here's a station perched in a residential area in the middle of my evening jogging route that was recently retrofitted with LED lights. Whereas the station's canopy lights used to provide just enough light for me to make out the time on my watch, today it offers sufficient brightness to require passersby to wear sunblock. More important, the bright lights have worked in deterring parking lot loitering.

The LED switch is gaining momentum with convenience store retailers, as they retrofit older stations with LED lights and install them in new stores, re-

alizing a number of operational benefits.

#### LONE STAR STATE SAVINGS

Bill Houston, maintenance manager for Sherman, Texas-based Lone Star Food Stores, said his company traded out 400-watt metal halide lights for LEDs at four of his company's 15 stores, which feature gas stations. While he was aware of the energy and cost savings attributable to LED lights, Houston said the initial switch was necessitated not by savings but the Texas heat.

"With 110-degree weather, we noticed a strain on our canopy wires," he said. "We had a lot of issues with burnt

wires. We needed to reduce their load."

With 30 lights under each store's canopy, he faced either reducing the number of lights or working with more energy-efficient fixtures. After crunching the numbers and considering the long-term benefits of LEDs, he chose the latter.

Working with Cincinnati, Ohio-based LSI Industries, in November 2010, Houston replaced all of the canopy lights at his Dennison, Texas, store, a relatively expensive undertaking — "Total job cost was around \$18,000," he said — though one that achieved a 66% reduction in energy usage, a bottom-line savings for the store.

"We're saving literally \$400 to \$500 per month at the store to light the canopy," he said, a reduction that he said will provide complete ROI in just over two years.

Facing similar energy load problems at three other stations, Houston converted those to LED, too — a steep cost that offered a sizable, immediate return from his local utility company. "We had [financial] incentives from the utility company that owns the grid in our area to reduce our energy load, and I completed the paperwork to apply for those incentives," he said. "It was a straightforward process...there's a lot of documentation and paperwork...but less than three months [after submitting the proper forms], we received just under \$17,000 back."

Houston said all of those locations will see a complete ROI in "just about two years," and besides the cost savings, he said the LED lights offer superior

## LEDs HOLD THEIR BRIGHTNESS LONGER THAN HALIDES, A SUBTLE BENEFIT BUT ONE THAT RETAILERS SHOULD NOT OVERLOOK.



brightness at his canopies, “which draws more customers because the lighting is such good quality.” And whereas his previous lights used to draw swarms of bugs at night, “because there’s no UV element in LEDs, you have almost no bug activity under the canopies,” he said.

### (NEARLY) MAINTENANCE FREE

Perhaps the biggest operational benefit for LEDs lies in their dependability. “It’s been a huge improvement for us,” said Nick St. Romain, marketing and IT director for Mansura, Louisiana-based St. Romain Oil Company, whose previous canopy fixtures required nearly monthly maintenance. “I have five sites [where LEDs are installed], with 30 to 40 lights per site, and I’ve had maybe five failures in the last three years.”

Additionally, LEDs hold their brightness longer than halides, a subtle benefit but one that retailers should not overlook, said David Hutchinson, president of Elk City, Oklahoma-based Hutchinson Oil Company, who has installed LED lighting at several of his company’s 13 stores.

“We’re seeing a longer life of the [LED] lighting,” he said. “With the old style, after a couple of years, the light began to fade. Even though they didn’t go out, you didn’t always realize it but the light became dimmer.”

### INSIDER TRADING

While a green impulse may be all that is needed to prompt some retailers to switch to the more energy-efficient LED, a careful assessment of aesthetic and financial elements is in order.

“We haven’t switched the interior lights, we find the light is too abrasive,” St. Romain said, adding that new fixtures have emerged where the sharpness is reduced. However, “we looked at it but we’ll pass for now — it’s a nine-year ROI on a fixture rated to last 10 years.”

For Lone Star, while Houston said the company “ultimately would like to move everything to LED,” he said he’s satisfied with the brightness emitted by his existing interior lights, and like St. Romain, he doesn’t see a quick ROI for the conversion.

Mike Lawshe, president of Ft. Worth, Texas-based Paragon Solutions, a retail design and consulting firm, said assessments like St. Romain’s and Houston’s are essential, for LED is a valuable option, but not optimal for every scenario.

“People say we should put in LED everywhere to save money, but that’s not true,” he said. “There’s a value to it but it shouldn’t be everywhere...In coffee areas, for instance, you want a reduced level of light...you don’t want it as bright as an LED.”

Minda Matthews-Smith, director of marketing for LSI Industries, agrees, adding, “LED is not necessarily the best solution for all interior applications. There are some really good energy-efficient fluorescent fixtures that do a great job in the interior. Each lighting

application needs to be considered and then retailer selects the most efficient and effective light source — with LED, one size does not fit all.”

### BORN IN THE U.S.A.

Once you’ve decided to make the switch to LEDs, one size definitely doesn’t fit all, said Sam Odeh, owner of Illinois-based Power Mart Corp., emphasizing that retailers need to be picky about LED products.

“The biggest thing is finding a company that will use U.S. products versus Chinese ones,” he said, adding that American products are far more durable. “Ask the provider whether they’re using U.S. or Chinese products, and if they’re using one from China, make sure you have a good maintenance program.”

Matthews-Smith agrees, stressing the importance of support for any LED purchase. “Understanding who you are buying from is important no matter what type of lighting fixture you buy. You want to partner with a solid, experienced lighting manufacturer with an expertise in LED technology — one that you know is going to be around for the long haul to stand behind the product and its warranty.”

For those who have considered options and implemented the LED change, the praise is nearly universal. “This truly is an easy way to take load off the grid, make your store look better, bring more nighttime customers in, and feel good about doing it,” Houston said. 

*Jerry Soverinsky is a NACS Daily and NACS Magazine contributing writer.*

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## We Care Decals

The tamper-evident We Care decals helps retailers identify potential security breaches if skimming devices are inserted at fuel dispensers or other unattended PIN-entry devices. The decals (or labels) can also help retailers address some of the PCI compliance mandates that are now required. Used on fuel dispensers near the credit/debit transaction area, We Care decals show a “void” message if they have been lifted,

providing a visual alert to store employees so action can be taken. The labels assure customers that their data is secure, and discourages criminals targeting the store.

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