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STAY HOME, IN COMFORT

STEVE RELYEA

When there's trouble in the world, many people will seek to add comforts to their homes. The propane industry is well positioned to meet that demand by offering fireplaces, fire pits, cooking equipment, hot water heaters, and similar appliances.

Casey Harvey has seen this in the past, and he is seeing it again during the COVID-19 pandemic. He is director of sales at Ray Murray Inc. (RMI; Lee, Mass.), a distributor of gas equipment and heating, hearth, and outdoor living products.

"We are absolutely seeing an increase in interest in both outdoor kitchens and fireplace products as people stay home, improve their quality of life at home, and look for ways to feel comfortable," he tells ***BPN***. "Fireplaces and outdoor living are really comfort food for the home! We saw this post-9/11 and we are seeing it again now."

This interest can be seen in Google searches, he adds. In May, the number of searches in the U.S. for "outdoor kitchens" was double what it was at the same time last year. The number of searches for "fireplace remodels" was nearly double. Harvey notes that searches for the latter in May were already where they normally are during the peak season, which is late summer and early fall.

"We are ahead of the game in terms of interest, so I expect it to be higher than it was last year," he says. "Search is the first place people go to learn about something, so that is a leading indicator."

The interest in these appliances has been reflected in sales, too. Harvey reports that since stay-at-home orders were regional, the retailers and installers in some areas continued going nonstop. In many places, landscapers were designated essential workers, so sales of fire pits are actually up since last year.

"Outdoor sales have been very strong," he says. "Indoor was down for the first few weeks, but now it's inching up."

"People expect to continue social distancing and not going out, so they are seeing how they can make the most of being at home and with family. That is good for us."

To support those who are selling and installing these products, RMI has long offered training in person. During the pandemic, the company has transitioned to delivering training online. Throughout the months of April and May, it offered live webinars covering propane equipment and hearth and grill.

Harvey suggests that propane marketers who are not currently selling hearth and outdoor living appliances, consider getting into it. They can start by contacting a distributor like RMI to learn more about the latest products and best practices.

"It's a good time to think again about selling ranges, fireplaces, grills, and other gas products," he concludes. "Propane marketers should be all over this next wave of appliance sales (and the corresponding gallons)."

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OUR COVER

Brian Cook, Project Engineer/DCE at Signature Truck Systems, demonstrates the Easy Load Bobtail filling operation. Photo courtesy Mike VanDenBoom.

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NFPA Rules Change Future of Autogas Refueling

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PUBLISHED BY

Butane-Propane News, ISSN 0007-7259, is published monthly by:

Butane-Propane News, Inc.,
338 E. Foothill Blvd.
P.O. Box 660698
Arcadia, Calif. 91066

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Subscription Prices: United States, U.S. Possessions – one year, **$34**, two years, **$50**. Canada – one year, **$43**, two years, **$65**. All other countries – one year **$70**, two years **$108**. Air mail **$50** per year extra. Single copy price within the U.S., Possessions, and Canada, **$10**.

Available on microfilm from University Microfilm International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106.

NEWSLETTER DEPT.

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Newsletter editorial communications and subscriptions for the WEEKLY PROPANE NEWSLETTER should be directed to P.O. Box 660698, Arcadia, Calif. 91066.

AFFILIATIONS

BPA WORLDWIDE BUSINESS
NPGA NATIONAL PROPANE GAS ASSOCIATION

MAILING INFORMATION

Periodical rate postage paid at Arcadia Post Office and additional mailing offices.
USPS 457-950

POSTMASTER send address changes to Butane-Propane News, P.O. Box 660698, Arcadia, Calif. 91066.

Send advertising materials to Tara Molina-Partika at *tara@bpnews.com*.

CPM 40065056 **ISSN 0007-7259**

Canadian Return Address:
DP Global Mail, 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor, Ont. N9A 6J3

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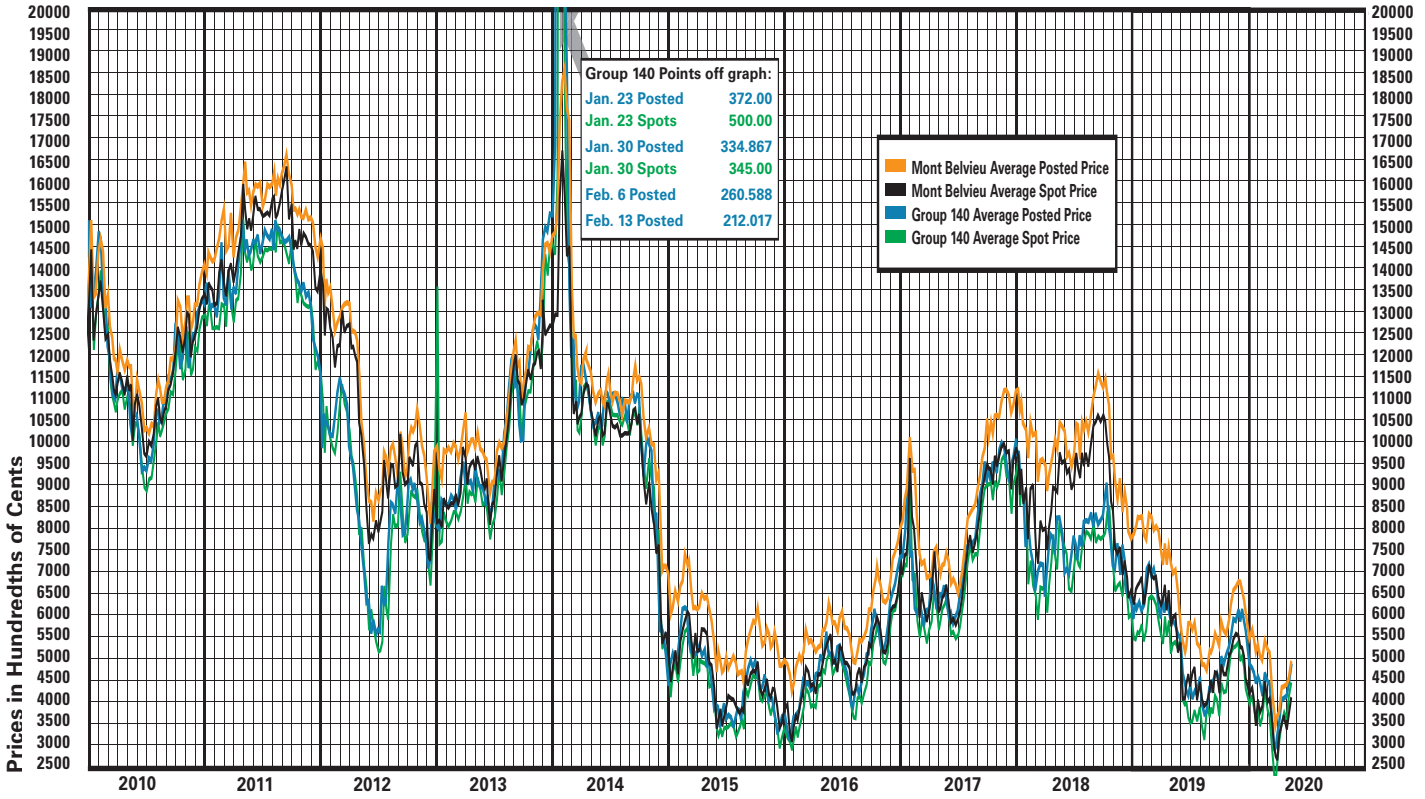


MONT BELVIEU & GROUP 140 AVERAGE THURSDAY PROPANE PRICES

MID-WEEK AVERAGE POSTED/ SPOT PROPANE PRICES

(Cents per Gallon)

Date	Mont Belvieu		Group 140	
	POSTED	SPOT	POSTED	SPOT
4-16-20	43.173	33.875-34.625	40.246	33.75-35.00
4-23-20	43.507	36.50-36.875	40.920	36.25-37.50
4-30-20	44.007	33.375-33.625	41.120	35.125-36.00
5-7-20	45.590	36.875-37.25	44.570	40.00-41.25
5-14-20	49.340	40.375-41.00	48.920	44.00-44.625

CANADIAN INVENTORIES

(May 1, 2020)
Thousand Cubic Meters

PROPANE

Region	5-20	4-20	Change	5-19
Propane—East	220.6	126.3	+74.7%	115.9
Propane—West	438.8	286.0	+53.4%	541.9
Total Propane	**659.4**	**412.3**	**+59.9%**	**657.9**

BUTANE

Butane—East	203.2	89.0	+128.3%	184.0
Butane—West	447.0	265.1	+68.6%	514.1
Total Butane	**650.2**	**354.1**	**+83.6%**	**698.1**

Source: National Energy Board

U.S. PROPANE INVENTORIES

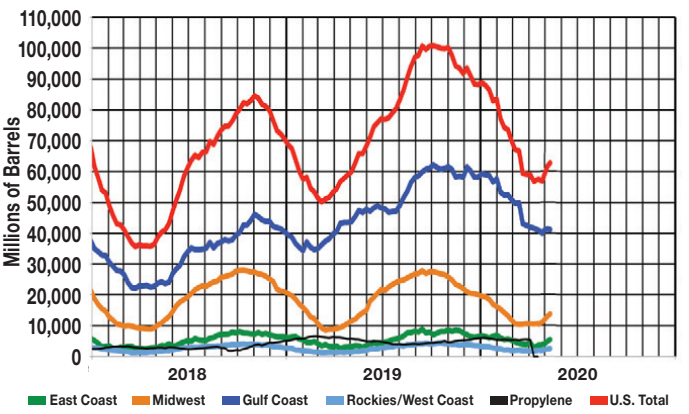
(April 17, 2020 to May 15, 2020 and One Year Ago)
Thousand Barrels

	4/17/20	4/24	5/1	5/8	5/15	5/17/19
East Coast	3,633	3,872	4,109	4,896	5,419	3,483
Midwest	10,759	11,097	11,988	13,031	13,725	13,336
Gulf Coast	41,066	39,938	41,124	41,360	41,109	47,385
Rockies/West	1,983	1,928	2,154	2,338	2,444	1,627
U.S. Total	57,442	56,835	59,376	61,625	62,697	65,830
Propylene	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	5,518

Source: Energy Information Agency

U.S. PROPANE INVENTORIES

Jan. 1, 2018 to May 15, 2020



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RECORD LIQUID FUELS INVENTORY BUILDS EXPECTED

As efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic continue to lead to rapid declines in petroleum consumption around the world, the production of liquid fuels globally has changed more slowly, leading to record increases in the amount of crude oil and other petroleum liquids placed into storage in recent months. In its May Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO), the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) projects global inventory builds will be largest in the first half of 2020. The agency estimates that inventory builds rose at a rate of 6.6 MMbbld in the first quarter of 2020 and will increase by 11.5 MMbbld in the second quarter as a result of widespread travel limitations and sharp reductions in economic activity.

EIA expects global liquid fuels consumption to increase during the second half of the year, leading to inventory draws for at least six consecutive quarters and ultimately putting upward pressure on crude oil prices that are currently at their lowest levels in 20 years.

As with the March and April STEO, EIA's forecast reductions in global oil demand come from three main drivers: lower economic growth, less air travel, and other declines in demand not captured by these two categories, but largely related to reductions in travel because of stay-at-home orders. Based on incoming economic data and updated assessments of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders across dozens of countries, EIA has further lowered its forecasts for global oil demand in 2020 in the May STEO. The STEO is based on macroeconomic projections by IHS Markit (United States) and Oxford Economics (for countries other than the U.S.).

In the May STEO, EIA predicts global liquid fuels consumption will average 92.6 MMbbld in 2020, down 8.1 MMbbld from 2019. EIA projects both economic growth and global consumption of liquid fuels to increase in 2021, but remain below 2019 levels. Any lasting behavioral changes to patterns in transportation and other forms of oil consumption once COVID-19 mitigation efforts end, however, present considerable uncertainty to the increase in consumption of liquid fuels, even if gross domestic product (GDP) growth increases.

Members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and partner countries (OPEC+) agreed to new production cuts in early April that will remain in place throughout the STEO forecast period ending in 2021. EIA assumes OPEC members will mostly adhere to announced cuts during the first two months of the agreement (May and June) and that production compliance will relax later in the forecast period as stated production cuts are reduced and global oil demand begins growing.

EIA forecasts OPEC crude oil production will fall to less than 24.1 MMbbld in June, a 6.3 MMbbld decline from April, when OPEC production increased following an inconclusive meeting in March. If OPEC production declines to less than 24.1 MMbbld, it would be the group's lowest level of production since March 1995. The forecast for June OPEC production does not account for the additional voluntary cuts laid out by Saudi Arabia's Energy Ministry on May 11.

EIA expects OPEC production will begin increasing in July 2020 in response to rising global oil demand and prices. From that point, EIA foresees a gradual increase in OPEC crude oil production through the remainder of the forecast and for production to rise to an average of 28.5 MMbbld during the second half of 2021.

EIA projects the supply of non-OPEC petroleum and other liquid fuels will decline by 2.4 MMbbld in 2020 compared with 2019. The steep decline reflects lower forecast oil prices in the second quarter as well as the newly implemented production cuts from non-OPEC participants in the OPEC+ agreement. The agency believes the largest non-OPEC production declines in 2020 to occur in Russia, the U.S., and Canada.

BLOSSMAN ACQUIRES GEORGIA PROPANE OPERATION

Blossman Gas Inc. (Ocean Springs, Miss.) has acquired A & A Gas of Carrollton, Ga. A & A Gas, a family-owned propane company, has served customers since it opened in 1981. Details of the acquisition were not offered.

When A & A employee and family member Patrick Steed was asked about the decision to choose Blossman Gas for the sale, he stated, "It's been great to find another propane family such as Blossman that is as passionate about the propane industry, safety, and customer service as we are."

The acquisition is a good fit for both companies. "This is an exciting acquisition," said Stuart Weidie, president and CEO of Blossman Gas. "After 38 years of service and loyalty to their customers, we are pleased that A & A Gas selected Blossman Gas to transition their business."

NFPA STANDARDS COUNCIL TAKES ACTION

The National Propane Gas Association (NPGA) reports the Standards Council of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) met in April to consider business related to NFPA 58 and other standards of interest to the propane industry. With three proposed tentative interim amendments (TIA) before the Council, only one was issued. TIA Log No. 1481 will revise the ASME container marking requirements in 5.2.8.3(C) and 11.3.4(B)(13) in the 2020 edition of NFPA 58 to no longer require a marking of the type of construction of the container on the nameplate affixed to the container. This is the result of a previous change to the requirements in the ASME *Boiler and Pressure Vessel Code*.

The Standards Council also approved the appointment of

Robert Blackwell of Independent Propane Co. as a principal member of the NFPA 58 Technical Committee on LP-Gases, along with David Kennedy of Blossman Gas as his alternate. NPGA also gained a seat on the Fuel Gases Warning Equipment technical committee with the appointment of senior technical advisor, Bruce Swiecicki. This committee is currently working on the first edition of NFPA 715 *Standard for the Installation of Fuel Gases Detection and Warning Equipment*.

GLOBAL ENERGY DEMAND TO PLUNGE THIS YEAR, SAYS IEA

The International Energy Agency (IEA) writes the COVID-19 pandemic represents the biggest shock to the global energy system in more than seven decades, with the decline in demand this year set to dwarf the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and result in a record annual decline in carbon emissions of almost 8%.

The new report from IEA, released April 30, provides an almost real-time view of the COVID-19 pandemic's extraordinary impact across all major fuels. Based on an analysis of more than 100 days of real data so far this year, IEA's Global Energy Review includes estimates for how energy consumption and carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions trends are likely to evolve over the rest of 2020.

"This is a historic shock to the entire energy world. Amid today's unparalleled health and economic crises, the plunge in demand for nearly all major fuels is staggering, especially for coal, oil, and gas. Only renewables are holding up during the previously unheard-of slump in electricity use," said Dr. Fatih Birol, the IEA executive director. "It is still too early to determine the longer-term impacts, but the energy industry that emerges from this crisis will be significantly different from the one that came before."

The Global Energy Review's projections of energy demand and energy-related emissions for 2020 are based on assumptions that the lockdowns implemented around the world in response to the pandemic are progressively eased in most countries in the coming months, accompanied by a gradual economic recovery.

The report projects that energy demand will drop 6% in 2020—seven times the decline after the 2008 global financial crisis. In absolute terms, the decline is unprecedented. To put it in perspective, it is the equivalent of losing the entire energy demand of India, the world's third largest energy consumer. Advanced economies are expected to see the biggest declines, with demand set to fall by 9% in the U.S. and by 11% in the European Union. The impact of the crisis on energy demand is heavily dependent on the duration and stringency of measures to curb the spread of the virus. For instance, IEA found that each month of worldwide lockdown at the levels seen in early April reduces annual global energy demand by about 1.5%.



Changes to electricity use during lockdowns have resulted in significant declines in overall electricity demand, with consumption levels and patterns on weekdays looking like those of a pre-crisis Sunday. Full lockdowns have pushed down electricity demand by 20% or more, with less impact from partial lockdowns. Electricity demand is set to decline by 5% in 2020, the largest drop since the Great Depression in the 1930s.

At the same time, lockdown measures are driving a major shift toward low-carbon sources of electricity including wind, solar PV, hydropower, and nuclear. After overtaking coal for the first time ever in 2019, low-carbon sources are set to extend their lead this year to reach 40% of global electricity generation—6 percentage points ahead of coal. Electricity generation from wind and solar PV continues to increase in 2020, lifted by new projects that were completed in 2019 and early 2020.

This trend is affecting demand for electricity from coal and natural gas, which are finding themselves increasingly squeezed between low overall power demand and increasing output from renewables. As a result, the combined share of gas and coal in the global power mix is set to drop by 3 percentage points in 2020 to a level not seen since 2001.

Coal is particularly hard hit, with global demand projected to fall by 8% in 2020, the largest decline since the Second World War. Following its 2018 peak, coal-fired power generation is set to fall by more than 10% this year.

After 10 years of uninterrupted growth, natural gas demand is on track to decline 5% in 2020. This would be the largest recorded year-on-year drop in consumption since natural gas demand developed at scale during the second half of the 20th century. The massive impact of the crisis on oil demand was covered in detail in IEA's April Oil Market Report.

Renewables are set to be the only energy source that will grow in 2020, with their share of global electricity generation projected to jump thanks to their priority access to grids and low operating costs. Despite supply chain disruptions that have paused or delayed deployment in several key regions this year, solar PV and wind are on track to help lift renewable electricity generation by 5% in 2020, aided by higher output from hydropower.

"This crisis has underlined the deep reliance of modern societies on reliable electricity supplies for supporting healthcare systems, businesses, and the basic amenities of daily life," said Dr. Birol. "But nobody should take any of this for granted—greater investments and smarter policies are needed to keep electricity supplies secure."

Despite the resilience of renewables in electricity generation in 2020, their growth is set to be lower than in previous years. Nuclear power, another major source of low-carbon electricity, is on track to drop by 3% this year from the all-time high it reached in 2019. And renewables outside the power sector are faring less well. Global demand for biofuels is set to fall



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substantially in 2020 as restrictions on transport and travel reduce road transport fuel demand, including for blended fuels.

As a result of these trends—mainly the declines in coal and oil use—global energy-related CO_2 emissions are set to fall by almost 8% in 2020, reaching their lowest level since 2010. This would be the largest decrease in emissions ever recorded—nearly six times larger than the previous record drop of 400 million tonnes in 2009 that resulted from the global financial crisis.

Dr Birol added, "…if the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis is anything to go by, we are likely to soon see a sharp rebound in emissions as economic conditions improve. But governments can learn from that experience by putting clean energy technologies—renewables, efficiency, batteries, hydrogen, and carbon capture—at the heart of their plans for economic recovery. Investing in those areas can create jobs, make economies more competitive, and steer the world towards a more resilient and cleaner energy future."

PERC LAUNCHES NEW GRAIN DRYING CALCULATOR

The Propane Education & Research Council (PERC) has launched a new Grain Drying Calculator tool that, by utilizing just three simple data points, will help producers determine the number of propane gallons needed each season. The tool will enable users to estimate the amount of propane each operation will require, making it easier to fill tanks early and prepare for supply needs prior to a seasonal increase in demand.

By simply inputting the average expected yield to determine the number of propane gallons needed to dry their crops by a specific moisture percentage, PERC's tool will calculate approximately how many gallons of propane will be needed.

"With simple inputs, PERC's new tool provides a quick estimate to put producers in a good position well ahead of harvest season," said Mike Newland, director of ag business development at PERC. "In the end, producers are ensured they have access to the propane they need while saving money in the process."

The benefits for producers to use grain dryers powered by propane include: the units provide the power necessary to dry large crop amounts on any schedule, which can curb hidden costs that aren't normally factored in, such as yield loss; they are 50% more energy efficient than other fuels; and since it burns clean, the dryers are long lasting and help to reduce downtime, maintenance costs, and carbon emissions.

To use the new Grain Drying Calculator, visit *Propane.com/grain-dryers.*





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WINLPG OPENS NOMINATIONS FOR 2020 WOMAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS

Nominations for both the Woman of the Year and Young Woman of the Year 2020 awards are now open. Women in LPG (WINLPG) notes that you can either nominate yourself or a colleague, and even if you have applied in previous years, you can apply again.

The prestigious Woman of the Year Award is awarded each year to the outstanding individual who has made a significant contribution to the LPG industry and to the cause of diversity.

The Young Woman of the Year Award recognizes women under the age of 30 (at December 31, 2020) who have made a contribution to the LPG industry or who demonstrate significant motivation.

Submitting your nomination is simple. Visit *https://www.wlpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/WINLPG-2020-Woman-of-the-Year-Award-Application.pdf* for the Woman of the Year Award application form and *https://www.wlpga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/WINLPG-2020-Young-Woman-of-the-Year-Award-Application.pdf* for the Young Woman of the Year Award. Please complete the correct form and return it to Nikki Brown, WINLPG Global Coordinator, at *winlpg@wlpga.org*.

The deadline for applications is August 31, 2020. The winners will be named during LPG Week in November.

ROUSH FORMS NEW TASK FORCE TO DEAL WITH COVID-19 NEEDS

Roush Enterprises (Livonia, Mich.) has joined the ranks of companies repurposing their people, equipment, and materials to help during the COVID-19 outbreak. The company has formed a Medical Task Force that works with healthcare providers to design and manufacture desperately needed items, including: face shields; intubation protective equipment; portable high-volume oxygen supply units; field hospital bed design; ventilator wire harnesses; 3D printed ventilator adaptors; and filter components.

Roush has also partnered with Refraction AI, a robot delivery startup in Ann Arbor, Mich. The company turned to Roush when asked to ramp up production for the REV-1 robot in response to stay-at-home orders. The autonomous robots are traveling the streets in Ann Arbor offering touchless grocery and restaurant meal delivery, empowering a safer, socially distanced reality.

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MASSACHUSETTS COURT SENDS CAT CLAIM TO JURY

DAVID R. SCHLEE

This column was originally printed in the April 2012 issue of **BPN**.

—

In an unusual decision, a Massachusetts federal court recently ruled that a jury could consider a claim that a cat activated the burner control on a gas range, causing a fire that burned down its owner's house. The plaintiffs alleged that the burner controls on the range were defective. The case is *Bertrand v. General Electric Company.*

There was a General Electric (GE) gas range installed in the home of Joseph and Nancy Bertrand in Wakefield, Mass. The range was manufactured in 1999 for GE by a Mexican partner company. It was a standard electronic-ignition range with four burners and an oven. The burner controls extended across the top front of the range. In order to light a burner, the control knob for that burner was designed to be depressed and then turned counterclockwise to the on position. In that position, gas would be released from the burner and an electric spark would light the gas.

The Bertrands were cat lovers—to say the least. The court opinion states they "kept a menagerie of 18 cats that were permitted to roam freely in the house." From time to time, one or more of the cats would leap up on the gas range, and so the Bertrands placed plastic cutting boards over the burners to keep the cats away from them. However, they placed nothing over the burner control knobs, and it appears that the cats had free access to these.

EARLY MORNING FIRE

On Aug. 24, 2006, at 5 a.m., a fire started in the kitchen of the Bertrand home. A smoke detector alarm woke the Bertrands and they made it out of their house with their children. However, flames quickly consumed the house. The firefighters who inspected the remains of the Bertrands' house noted that the back left burner on the GE range had the remains of a plastic cutting board next to it. This, they concluded, was the origin of the fire. Half of the knobs on the stove were damaged from the fire. However, the fire inspector noted that he could turn the knob for the back left burner without depressing it.

> *"The engineer concluded in his report that one of the 18 cats in the Bertrand household had been able to turn the control knob for the left rear burner to the "on" position."*

The "Use and Care Installation Guide" for the gas range contained a number of important safety warnings. The guide stated: "WARNING: If the information in this guide is not followed exactly, a fire or explosion may result causing property damage, personal injury or death." The guide went on to say: "Keep all plastics away from top burners."

This commonsense warning would seem straightforward enough, but it did not deter the Bertrands, who had 18 cats to deal with. It was their practice to keep plastic cutting boards on top of the stove when the burners were not in use. One board covered the two left burners and the other covered the two right burners. Incredibly, there had been a prior incident when Joseph Bertrand observed that one of the burners was on and one of the boards was beginning to melt after he or someone else in the household (a cat?) inadvertently turned on one of the burners without first moving the board. Like the warning in the guide, the Bertrands chose to ignore this warning as well.

CAT-PROOF KNOB?

The fire inspector's finding was enough for the Bertrands to launch a lawsuit against GE, despite the Bertrands' failure to heed the clear safety warnings that came with the range and with their own prior experience. Joseph Bertrand, an attorney, chose to represent himself in pursuing the lawsuit against GE. There is a saying that a lawyer who chooses to represent himself has a fool for a client, but as matters developed, this case may be an exception.

The Bertrands claimed that one of the cats turned the burner knob on, which caused the fire, and that the GE range was defectively designed or manufactured, so that the burner control knobs could be turned without depressing them. The Bertrands hired a mechanical engineer as an expert to evaluate the burner control knob. Not surprisingly, this expert concluded that the knob was defective. He inspected the range, which had been damaged by the fire, and attempted to manipulate the remaining burner knobs. He took a relatively undamaged knob from

one of the right burner controls and placed it on the valve stem for the left rear burner. He attempted to turn the knob counterclockwise six times. On two attempts he was able to rotate the knob without first depressing it. On the remaining four attempts, he had to depress the knob in order to turn it to the "on" position.

CULPABLE CAT

The engineer concluded in his report that one of the 18 cats in the Bertrand household had been able to turn the control knob for the left rear burner to the "on" position. He concluded that this could have been done by a cat if the knob did not have to be depressed. Presumably, at least one of the 18 Bertrand cats was agile enough to turn the control knob, although the engineer did not suggest the cat was agile enough to depress it and then turn it. It is unclear whether cat behavior and agility are within the engineer's area of expertise. In any event, the engineer alleged that GE was aware of at least one reported incident in which a cat caused the knob on a gas stove to turn, igniting the burner flame.

General Electric filed a motion to strike the engineer's testimony, and for summary judgment in its favor. The court denied these motions and ruled that the engineer's testimony would be admissible. It ruled that the case should be considered by a jury. It explained its reasoning as follows:

> "The evidence from the perspective of the plaintiffs—the one that the court must apply—includes the following: (1) no alterations were made to the stove from the time of its purchase; (2) the Wakefield firefighters found the knob activating the left rear burner—the undisputed source of the fire—in the "on" position; (3) the Wakefield fire investigator was able to turn the knob from the "off" to the "on" position three times without depressing it first; (4) [the engineer] was able to replicate this in his own testing of the stove on two of six attempts; and (5) as improbable as it may sound, at least one other instance is known in which a cat was responsible for igniting a burner on a similar stove."

The case was settled for an undisclosed amount after this decision. The court's opinion does not identify which of the 18 cats turned the burner on. Presumably, the culpable cat would not have been on the verdict form for an allocation of fault. However, it is likely that GE would have argued that the real cause of the fire was the Bertrands' negligence in failing to follow the clear safety warnings that accompanied the range.

David Schlee is a shareholder in the Kansas City law firm of Schlee & McCarthy PC. Readers may contact him at drschlee@schleelaw.com.





OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS, WHAT DOES VICTORY LOOK LIKE?

NANCY J. COOP

Six months is a time frame that used to seem within our reasonable grasp. Is it in today's world? This month's question was asked of our participants at the end of April when "shelter-in-place" orders and other restrictions were widely implemented, while in some states being extended and in other states being lifted or considering how to phase into a re-opening of aspects of daily life. There is a common enemy in the coronavirus pandemic yet our colleagues state the nature of the enemy and a depiction of victory in different terms.

Our VERBATIM column continues to ask provocative questions of our colleagues. Taken from a familiar "Heard on the Street" format, we offer our responders a chance to reply via email, allowing them to be thoughtful and direct. What is offered below are their personal opinions.

MARKETERS

Over the next six months we will see a dip in business, but it will come back strong as the economy opens back up and people can get back to work. I feel that our customers will become more thoughtful about where and how they spend their money. Since propane is a necessity I believe that it will come back as strong as ever. Crude prices may put a different twist on how and where we purchase propane. Overall I feel good about the recovery of the economy.

T. BRAD DUNCAN
Allaround Propane Inc.
Fruitland, N.M.

Over the next six months victory comes with reduced COVID-19 cases and the economy bouncing back to become stronger than ever. Victory is the small things we take for granted; eating out, traveling for work or vacation, staying in hotels, watching a movie at a theater, going to a game. What you make of the time you have today, will be fruitful six months from now. Stay connected to your friends, family, colleagues and customers, help out where you can, it will go a long way when this is over!

HAYLEY KARICOFE
AmeriGas
Churchville, Va.

Right now, the entire world is focused on COVID-19 and it takes some real conviction to think past it today. With respect to this virus, victory in six months may come in one of many forms. The most basic victory might be mitigating the spread, continuing to maintain all the CDC guidelines in our everyday lives to minimize loss of life and the impact on our economy. A more optimistic victory would be to either find an effective therapeutic or vaccine within 6 months.

By any measure, minimizing the loss of life while not destroying our economy by putting people out of work and shuttering otherwise viable businesses will have to be part of any calculus in measuring victory.

Irrespective of what victory may look like in 6 months, it may be that we have yet to fully understand this virus and the things in our lives it will change forever. America will absolutely adapt and overcome in the long run.

Beyond COVID-19 our industry must continue to focus on the de-carbonization/electrification of everything efforts by people and government entities that don't understand the value of propane. Our industry is under attack on many fronts; achieving some inclusion in green thinking would certainly be a victory for our industry.

BOYD H. MCGATHEY
Energy Distribution Partners
Parkville, Mo.

Victory over the next six months will look like families preparing to travel and share a Thanksgiving dinner together, scientists and doctors confident they can control the COVID-19 virus, and people are not living in fear of a new silent enemy ready to attack. A presidential and congressional election that is conducted with respect and solid ideas, our propane industry ready and prepared with a solid supply strategy, and finally a new appreciation for life and good health.

GARY FRANCE
France Propane Service
Schofield, Wis.

I think victory will be achieved in the next six months if we can get people back to work and get our economy rolling once again. For that to happen, though, everyone will need to buy in and accept a new normal way of doing things with restrictions and changes from how daily life has been previously. We must keep COVID-19 under control

so that we do not go backward. We cannot afford to see this virus affect our country like we are currently experiencing.

ROSIE BUSCHUR
McMahan's Bottle Gas
Dayton, Ohio

Six months from now I hope we emerge out the other side healthy and stronger than when we went in. Casting off all the negative, there is a lesson to be learned every day in life. What did we miss most as time went on? That is where our heart lies and we should take care of it. If it's good things, let's value them more when we are set free! If not, move forward and be better☺.

JUDY TARANOVICH
Proctor Gas
Proctor, Vt.

Success is when everyone is allowed to go back to work/school and that we learn a few lessons from this experience. 1) Keep at least 3 months' savings for emergency (business & personal). 2) If you are sick, stay home. 3) Live within your means, debt free.

JULIE JOHNSON
Ted Johnson Propane
Baldwin Park, Calif.

INDUSTRY COMPANIES ORGANIZATIONS

Victory will be surviving COVID-19. Victory will be to maintain service to our customers throughout the ever changing operating conditions. Victory will be continuing to employ our team and keep them all safe.

LAUREN CLARK
Bergquist Inc.
Toledo, Ohio

Victory looks like furloughed and terminated employees getting meaningful employment. It looks like being able to freely associate and travel as guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It looks like being free of the fear of getting terminally ill from performing everyday activities. It means that now that we will have learned how to wash our hands, perhaps the use of turn signals is not hopeless!

DAN BINNING
Colorado and New Mexico Propane Gas Associations
Arvada, Colo.

Victory over the next 6 months to me means a return to 'normal'; normal business, normal family gatherings, normal social outings, being able to see the kids and grandkids in person. Victory means keeping our families and employees safe in this environment.

TRACY TIMMERMAN
JARCO
Salem, Ill.

"Victory" in the most important sense would be survival; not only of myself,



but of those I love and all who are dear to me. Next, victory would be achieved when we are once again able to interact with each other in the manner we have become accustomed to. Thirdly, victory will have been achieved when each of us is free and able to continue pursuing the lifestyle of our choice.

BRUCE SWIECICKI
NPGA (National Propane Gas Association)
Tinley Park, Ill.

Certainty beyond COVID 19. Getting back on a schedule.

JENNIFER MCKEEN
Georgia Propane Gas Association
Marietta, Ga.

What does victory look like? The assumption is that there must be an enemy to vanquish for there to be a victory. I am going to say that we win the war on stress in six months. People are secure in their jobs, and there are victories in a cure or vaccine against viruses that are bringing the world to its knees.

JOHN JESSUP
North Carolina Propane Gas Association
Raleigh, N.C.

I believe that the propane market will come back strong after the Covid restrictions are lifted. New installations for bulk storage and customer demand will be high. Quick response and follow up to specific customer needs is critical.

ED VARNEY
RegO Products
McKinney, Texas

Keeping everyone safe, healthy and employed. Minimizing risk of exposure to COVID-19, but not living in fear of it either.

JASON SOULON
Westmor Industries
Shawnee, Kan.

SUMMING UP

Fifteen colleagues sharing their vision for a better world over the next six months seems more than aspirational. It seems squarely in the realm of possibility. Yet the unknown aspects of achieving a victory we can embrace keep us alert. What will be our parts to play in the victory? How do we carry with us the lessons learned through a global pandemic? I'm thankful to our colleagues for sharing their insights and giving us various perspectives in a time when we can use them.

Nancy Coop is an industry advocate. She serves as a managing director at Cetane Associates. Readers may contact her at ncoop@cetane.net.



WORKERS' COMPENSATION DILEMMAS

FRANK THOMPSON

Several times a year, we get calls from propane marketers that have had their general liability policy audited. If it has been a warm winter, they are generally happy that there will be a return premium. However, when the winter was cold, and they sold and delivered a lot of propane, we generally hear some light complaining because of the additional audit premium invoice they received.

What agents don't like are the calls from marketers about a problem with a workers' compensation (WC) audit, especially if it has to do with how the auditor classified the employees. The following are two examples of classification problems and a potential solution.

An independent workers' compensation auditor called the propane marketer and made an appointment to do the annual audit. The day of the appointment, the auditor showed up 15 minutes early with an audit trainee.

He was heard to tell the trainee, "I bet you a dollar that the owner comes into the office from the shop, wiping his hands on a rag." Five minutes later, that is exactly what happened; the owner walked in wiping his hands on a shop rag to get the oil off his hands, as he had been changing the oil on a company vehicle.

The auditor pulled the payroll worksheets and looked where the owner's payroll was classified. He saw that it was in code 8810 (clerical), which has a very low rate per hundred dollars of payroll. However, the auditor, based on what he observed, placed the owner's payroll into the governing code for propane companies, which in many states is code 8350, dramatically changing the amount the marketer owed.

This also happened to one of the New Mexico propane marketers who received an additional WC audit invoice for more than $11,000. The auditor had changed all of the clerical payroll of the office staff from code 8810 to code 8350. The reason was because the office staff occasionally filled propane bottles.

Needless to say, in both cases, the marketers were upset

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Arrow Tank and Engineering 30,000-gal. Tri-Axle Porta-Pac

WHAT'S NEW IN TRUCKS AND TRANSPORT TRAILERS?

STEVE RELYEA

While much of the country has had to shut down during the pandemic, the propane industry and its trucks have kept rolling. The companies that build and service those trucks, too, have been busy refining existing products and adding new ones.

Since the industry was not able to gather at spring trade shows this year to see the latest trucks and transport trailers firsthand, we asked several builders to share with ***BPN*** readers the options they are currently promoting.

Several mentioned that one feature to be highlighted during these unusual times is product availability. Production of many of the chassis used to build propane trucks was halted for several weeks during the pandemic. As this was written, the plants of the chassis manufacturers had just reopened. The truck builders said there may be lingering effects on lead times for new propane trucks, because many suppliers of truck components were shut down as well.

Arrow Tank and Engineering Co. (Minneapolis) has expanded its products to include bulk storage vessels, skid tanks, porta-pacs, and transport trailers.

When designing its new "Standard" LPG Transport Trailer, Arrow focused on preventing corrosion. "We all know what the road salts do to vehicles and equipment," said Nate Jacobsen, transport trailer manager. "So, as standard, front and rear framing is constructed of stainless steel." Another highlight is a suspension that includes stainless hangers and shock-less air ride suspensions. "We also provide custom design trailers to optimize bridge and weight requirements per customer tractor layout and states of operation," he added.

Among the porta-pacs now offered by Arrow is a 20,700-gal. unit that is street legal and NFPA compliant. "Our tank design sets it apart from the others by eliminating the need to apply for 'oversized load' permits, making it street legal when transported empty on most roads throughout the country," explained Tim Schweppe, general manager, propane division. "Limiting the overall width to 102 inches meets the federal size limit and lowers the center of gravity. Likewise, the overall length and empty axle weights are under the maximum threshold for most states."

For more information about the new product lines, visit *www.arrowbobtails.com.*



Westmor Industries (Morris, Minn.) planned to introduce three bobtails and one transport at the NPGA Expo in Nashville. All have features that are either refined or new, said Milt Swenson, territory manager, vessel sales and special projects.

Westmor's new LP4 system was fitted to the Mid-Delivery 3200-Gallon Blueline BX Bobtail. The new system provides both high-flow and low-flow deliveries, with flow rates from 5 gpm to 100 gpm, using only one meter, and allows for delivery from either side in front of the tank or from a rear-mounted delivery hose reel. It also features Westmor's patented Ergoload filling system with the sprayfill at waist height instead of chest height.

The Stainless Ergoload Enclosed Deck is another new offering on a Westmor Bobtail. Previously, the Ergoload was only available on an open deck.

A new lightweight 6400-gal. tank rounds out the new bobtail offerings, needing only a tandem axle chassis to meet weight limits in most areas of the country.

Optional metered delivery was added to an 11,500-gallon 250-psi Proline Transport. This transport trailer was designed to make weights and measures-approved deliveries to larger sites while metering the delivery when necessary.

These products will be on display in a Westmor Virtual Trade Show, available starting May 27 on the company's website, *westmor-ind.com*.



H&H Sales Co. (Huntertown, Ind.) is emphasizing the new options now available from Ford. The automaker's Super Duty chassis cabs are now offered with a new 7.3-liter gasoline engine, an updated 6.7-liter diesel engine, and a new 10-speed transmission.

The truck bodies H&H Sales adds to those chassis, to build cylinder delivery trucks and crane/service trucks, have also been fine-tuned. "We have upgraded the quality of the manufacturing process and the finish," said CEO John Hawkins. The company has improved its welding process and begun using improved brands of paint and painting equipment, he explained. For the end user, that means a truck with better welds and an upgraded paint finish.

Looking ahead, H&H Sales will soon be offering Ford's all-new F-600 Super Duty chassis cab. Due to arrive late summer, the F-600 will be the same size as the F-550 but will have a maximum GVWR of 22,000 pounds. "That will allow an additional 2500 pounds of payload capacity on the chassis, for customers who want to put a lot more equipment on their truck," Hawkins explained.

He noted that truck buyers should expect longer lead times. Ford, GM, and Fiat Chrysler halted production at their North American plants in March in response to the pandemic. As this was written, they were planning to begin a phased restart May 18. "It's going to take time to get back to normal," he added.

For current details, visit *www.hhsalescompany.com.*



The key item **JARCO** (Salem, Ill.) is currently promoting is the availability of both its transport trailers and bobtails. The Big 3 makers of chassis for bobtails (Kenworth, Peterbilt, and Freightliner) were shut down for several weeks in response to the pandemic.

"What that means to us and to propane marketers is that if they order now, we'll get the chassis in August or September and then have to build it up," explained Tim Thrash, sales manager at JARCO.

"Most marketers like to have their new truck in early September so they can put it through its paces before the start of the winter heating season," he added. "That is why it's important that we have stock units; marketers can have them now rather than in October or November."

In mid-May, the stock bobtails included 3200-gal. tank units on Kenworth, Freightliner, and Peterbilt chassis, and 3400-gal. tank units on Kenworth and Freightliner chassis. Stock bobtails in production included 5000-gal. tank units on Kenworth and Freightliner chassis. Stock transport trailers included 10,600 gallon (265 psi) MC-331 and 11,600 gallon (250 psi) MC-331.

"With everything being uncertain, some people waited," Thrash said. "We went the opposite way, we went bigger rather than scaling back. We wanted to keep our guys busy and have trucks ready to go. So, now, we have chassis and we have built-up units."

For more information, visit *www.jarco.com*.



At **Ransome Mfg**, backup cameras and strobe lights are options that are chosen so often, they are virtually standard equipment, said Arch Hudelson, special projects director, western region.

"Cameras take some of the worry out of being in close proximity to objects and other vehicles," he pointed out. "Especially given that our propane industry is operating in winter months with inclement weather and shorter daylight hours, these cameras appear to have better visual low-light sensitivity than normal vision."

As for strobe lights, he added. "These identify and heighten notification of delivery status for other vehicles in the area."

Three other options have also seen growing popularity, Hudelson said. One is a protective coating that reduces corrosion and dents and adds soundproofing. Another is mounting systems for computer hardware.

The third fast-growing option is manufactured by STAC Inc. "This is a heat exchanger that circulates engine coolant through one side and propane through the other segment," Hudelson explained. "A portion of heat from engine coolant boosts the pressure/temperature values, thus eliminating some of the low-temp pumping issues one might encounter in extreme cold conditions."

Ransome planned to display these options on three bobtails at the spring trade shows: a Peterbilt, a Kenworth, and a Freightliner.

For more information, visit *www.meeder.com*.



Rocket Supply (Roberts, Ill.) offers two features influenced by engineering seen on fire trucks. The company had planned to highlight them while displaying a 2020 Kenworth T370 bobtail at the spring trade shows.

The company's mandrel-bent plumbing package provides improved delivery flow through less product turbulence. On fire trucks, the fewer hoses and couplings used, the lesser the turbulence and the greater the flow of water. Similarly, on bobtails, Rocket Supply uses straight pipe with a mandrel bend that creates a jointless 90° angle. "That eliminates as many as six to eight turbulence points in the plumbing," explained Steve Bloomstrand, sales and marketing manager. "Eliminating restrictive joints improves flow."

The second feature is a custom-engineered electrical system with weatherproof connectors and a blueprinted harness for long-term reliability and ease of repair. This was designed for Rocket Supply by a company that also makes systems for fire trucks. It uses braided harness that is black but has different colored braids embedded throughout the harness. If a part needs to be replaced, it can be identified by the color. The wiring comes together in a power distribution box that is made from stainless steel and is easily accessible on the exterior of the truck. LED burn fuses located in the power distribution box, make it easy to see which part has failed.

For more information, visit *www.rocketsupply.com*.



Fisk Tank Carrier (Columbus, Wis.) has developed a new truck meant for use in both the propane industry and related fields.

Called the TX-4, the truck has a 12-ft bed, 16-in.-deep boxes on the driver side, 22-in.-deep boxes on the passenger side, and room for a 500-gal. tank in between. It is also equipped with a crane, a liftgate, a staircase, an all-enclosed bed, and it rides on a 19,500 GVW chassis.

"Our clientele were looking for new-style functionality in a truck; they wanted a truck that can set a tank but also be used for HVAC and plumbing work," said Josh Budworth, director of sales and operations. "There are many uses for this truck."

"It has our E-track system all the way around the inside, as well as six additional 5000-pound tie downs in the bed floor, so they can strap things down securely," he added.

The new TX-4 joins two other crane trucks in the Fisk Tank Carrier lineup that are mainly used in the propane industry: the TX-1 knuckle boom and the TX-2 stick boom.

For more information, visit *www.fiskinc.net*.



White River Distributors is offering truck buyers several finance plans. The company had planned to discuss these plans with buyers while displaying a Kenworth with a 3400-gal. tank at the spring trade shows. Then, the pandemic began and made these terms even more valuable.

"The gloom and doom with COVID-19 has created a difficult situation," said Danny McElroy, executive vice president and general manager of White River Distributors Southwest Sales Center (Dallas). "So we can help customers out with these unique finance plans."

Same-day approval: "If you are in dire need, and you need a truck right now, we offer same-day approval," he explained.

Deferred payment financing: "We defer payments for three months. If business is slow for a customer during the summer, we offer deferred payments during those months, at no cost to the customer."

Terms out to 84 months. "Terms up to 84 months and no prepayment penalty with credit approval."

Finance tax, title, and delivery: "We add tax, title, and delivery all into the one note. To my knowledge, no one has ever done that before."

Reservations: "We also can hold a truck, build it, and deliver it when they are ready. The customer doesn't have to take it now or pay now; we will build it now and deliver it when they need it."

"We have chassis inventory to reserve today," McElroy added.

For more information, visit *www.lpgbobtails.com.*



Transwest Trailers' dealership locations throughout the U.S. offer the LPG Bobtail and the LP Crane Truck. Both are manufactured by Summit Truck Bodies, a sister company of Transwest that has manufactured more than 10,000 trucks.

"They come loaded with lots of features and also many options for customization to meet each customer's specific needs," said Shawn Kellen, tank specialist at Transwest Trailers.

On the LPG Bobtail, Hannay hose reels are available in a variety of materials, including aluminum, stainless steel, and carbon. A Guidemaster reel can be added so drivers don't have to manually hold the hose. All LPG bobtails include remote controls at the back; openings that are covered to keep debris out of the cabinet; and wiring to the cabinet that is covered. "A lot of the focus is on durability and ease of serviceability," Kellen added.

On the LP Crane Truck, features that come on every model include auto hook release on the crane; a capacity rating of 6000 pounds at 5 feet; a backup alarm; a reach of 29 feet; and remote engine start-stop.

Videos about the two trucks are available on YouTube: the LPG Bobtail is at *https://youtu.be/oPc_wUlVw7g* and the LP Crane Truck is at *https://youtu.be/ixFo8WnJcyE*. To see available inventory and specific dealership location information, visit *www.transwesttrailers.com*.



Kurtz Truck Equipment (Marathon, N.Y.) had planned to highlight the safety features of a bobtail that was going to be displayed at the spring trade shows. The bobtail is a Kenworth T370 with a 3499-gal. tank from Arrow.

Roger Smith, general manager and vice president of marketing, propane sales, highlighted two safety features on the bobtail. The first is the STAC hydraulic drive pumping system that eliminates the need of a power take-off (PTO) shaft. "There is a safety factor with a rotating PTO shaft, if someone crawls underneath the truck with the PTO engaged (which no one should ever do), which could result in serious injury or death," Smith explained. "With this system, there is no PTO shaft."

The other safety feature is a transmission interlock on the truck filler valve and the nozzle holder, which prohibits engagement of the transmission unless both are properly stowed away.

A second truck is a custom aluminum body crane truck specifically designed for the propane industry. This is mounted on a Ford F-550 chassis. It is equipped with a 6800-lb crane, hydraulic outriggers, a wireless crane remote, and a rear liftgate. "It also has many storage compartments, a heavy duty concrete block box, and underbody tool boxes; storage and more storage, that's what people want nowadays," Smith added.

For more information, visit *www.kurtztruckequipment.com.*

Alliance AutoGas has developed aftermarket autogas systems for two new engine platforms. Both are products that can benefit propane marketers' own fleets.

First is the 2021 Ford 7.3-liter V8. This engine is standard equipment in the F-450, F-550, new F-600, F-650, and F-750. The F-450, F-550, and F-600 may be used as tank



set and service trucks, while the F-650 and F-750 are used as cylinder delivery trucks and bobtails. "Our bi-fuel offering has already been chassis certified and we are beginning to ship now," says Ed Hoffman, president of Blossman Services (Swannanoa, N.C.), the distribution partner for Alliance AutoGas systems.

Second is GM's new 6.6-liter direct injection V8, the workhorse engine for the automaker's 2500-3500 truck line. "For marketers that enjoy GM platforms, this engine has increased torque and horsepower over the 6.0 V8 it replaces," Hoffman explains. "With the increases in performance of these engines, there is really no need to buy diesel for these Class 2-5 vehicles."

"The gasoline base can decrease upfront costs and maintenance, and the addition of our AutoGas systems allows marketers to use their own fuel," he concluded. "With today's wholesale prices and tax rebates, who wouldn't want to pay 50 cents a gallon (or less!) to fuel their fleet?"

For more information, visit *www.allianceautogas.com*.



Signature Truck Systems LLC (Clio, Mich.) has added a new crane truck and a new bobtail to its lineup.

The Linebacker crane truck features a 16.5-ft-long by 8-ft-wide heavy-duty Aluminum Linebacker body. "The longer aluminum bed—16.5 feet—allows hauling of two 1000-gal. tanks," said Mike VanDenBoom, president. This is mounted on a 2020 Chevrolet 6500 4x4 that has a GVW of 22,500

pounds to allow additional payload. The truck is also fitted with a new HT45KX Venturo crane with Venturo Logic Controls (VLC); a Theiman liftgate; a lightweight aluminum flip-down clam step that allows easy access to the bed area; and a remote stow alarm/indicator that prevents the operator from misplacing the remote control.

The second new vehicle, the Easy Load Bobtail, features an Easy Load system that incorporates an all-new lower deck design that lowers the hose reel, meter, and spray fill and vapor line for better ergonomics. The bobtail is also equipped with a spray fill pull away protection sensor; a vapor return pull away protection sensor; and a delivery nozzle stow sensor. Its air-operated Muncie Hot Shift PTO has a cab warning light wigwag feature that flashes when the PTO is engaged.

Both vehicles will be featured in the Virtual Propane Expo (*www.virtualpropaneexpo.com*), available starting May 28. Additional information is available at *www.signaturetruckllc*.



Lin's Propane Trucks (Dighton, Mass.) is known for using stainless steel rather than ordinary steel or aluminum to prevent corrosion and rust. The company was going to highlight this on a bobtail displayed at the spring trade shows.

"We've always built a stainless steel deck and offered stainless steel piping, but we have now been offering the complete stainless solution with a stainless steel engineered bumper system," explained Scott Swensen, sales. "Customers can now get a stainless steel lowered deck, piping, and valves complete with the stainless steel bumper system. When everything is stainless steel, corrosion is never an issue."

"We've been doing that for about a year," he added. "In New England, with the salt and chemicals they put on the roads, stainless steel is important for durability, to keep the bobtail looking good, and to lower maintenance costs."

Two trends Swensen reports seeing among truck buyers are a growing popularity of both disc brakes and heat exchangers. Today, more buyers spec disc brakes on bobtails, he said. More also add STAC heat exchangers, which use engine coolant to heat propane and add vapor pressure back to the tank, stabilizing the tank's pressure and giving the pump a constant rate of flow.

"People like what they get when they put these heat exchangers on—reduced cavitation, more gallons per minute, and a longer pump life." Swensen explained. "When they get it on one truck, they like it so much, they spec it on every truck."

For more information, visit *www.linspropanetrucks.com*.

Mississippi Tank Co. (Hattiesburg, Miss.) was going to display three transport trailers and a bobtail at the NPGA Expo. All are equipped with options that have been becoming increasingly popular, said Mike Pitts, vice president/sales.

The trailers included wide track axles for increased stability. "Wide base tires are also popular because only one tire at each end of the axle saves weight while improving stability," Pitts explained.

Other weight-saving options include alloy wheels and aluminum landing gear. "To get the big payloads, some customers will do everything that can be done to reduce the weight of the tractor and trailer," he reported. (Photo below.)

Also popular are options that prevent rock chips. These include Pro-Tex, which is a coating that is applied to the lower portion of the trailer, and a stainless steel rock guard that is mounted in front of the suspension.

A growing number of customers are selecting a hydraulic drive that replaces a power take-off (PTO). "We try to get customers to go with that," Pitts said. "The pump lasts a lot longer, and it's safer because there is no rotating shaft."

The bobtail Mississippi Tank planned to display features a printer mounted in the cab; a Guidemaster on the Hannay reel; and Betts LED lights. "These are very common in the industry now," Pitts said. "They have become an industry standard."

For more information about these and other options, visit *www.mstank.com*. ■





The IDEAL board of directors (from left): Rob Stenger, Simple Energy Partners LLC (West Lebanon, N.H.); Ryan Jackson, D.F. Richard Inc. (Dover, N.H.); Mark Saunders, White Mountain Oil & Propane Inc. (North Conway, N.H.); Kris Magnusson, IDEAL Energy Cooperative (N.H.); Mike Januario, Sunshine Fuels and Energy Services Inc. (Bristol, R.I.); and Chris Brennan, IDEAL Energy Cooperative (Mass.).

NEW COOPERATIVE AIMS TO HELP INDEPENDENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

STEVE RELYEA

Several years ago, Kris Magnusson ran into Ed, a family friend, who had started a flooring company more than 30 years earlier called Ed's Flooring. Magnusson noticed it was now named Ed's Flooring America.

Ed explained that he had become a member-owner of Flooring America, a purchasing cooperative. He added that he now had access to more products and marketing, his purchases were aggregated with other independently owned flooring companies, and they had better buying power collectively.

Magnusson, having grown up as the fourth generation of her family's energy business in southern New Hampshire, had witnessed consolidation within the industry firsthand. Two years after this chance meeting, she co-founded a member-owned cooperative of local energy distributors. Launched in October 2019, it is named IDEAL Energy Cooperative, with "IDEAL" standing for Independents Delivering Energy Aligned Locally.

Today, IDEAL has a member footprint throughout New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. All of the cooperative's members are privately held, and independently owned and operated. IDEAL is now inviting new members, suppliers, and vendors from across the country.

AGGREGATE, COMMUNICATE

IDEAL Energy Cooperative is 100% owned by its members. Each member has a vote and a voice in the direction of their cooperative. "As time goes on, it's up to the membership to decide how to define this cooperative," said Magnusson. "It's up to IDEAL's member-owners."

Last year alone, IDEAL's members purchased more than 179 million gallons in total of distillate and propane, purchased $79 million in business services, and had a business revenue of more than $506 million. Now, as members of IDEAL, they can aggregate their purchasing volume, thereby negotiating better buying power with their supplier and vendor partners. They also aggregate marketing resources and share best practices.

Because of benefits like these, purchasing cooperatives have flourished in many industries. Examples include Flooring America, ACE Hardware, True Value Hardware, Land O'Lakes, Agri-Mart (Cabot Cheese), Carpet 1, and Furniture First.

Membership in IDEAL is open to privately held, independently owned and operated energy distributors. An energy distributor includes any retail establishment that provides retail fuel delivery and/or services. Propane, fueloil, diesel fuel, and gasoline are the fuels currently represented by IDEAL's membership. Membership is open across the nation for energy retailers and supplier and vendor partners.

"Our members put competition aside when it comes to best practices and the bigger issues," said Chris Brennan, general manager and co-founder of IDEAL. "For example, we recently led a discussion about applying for the federal government's Paycheck Protection Program as well as what members are doing in response to COVID-19."

As for suppliers and vendors, any that have customers in the propane and energy space are welcome to become partners.

PRIMARY BENEFITS

In the seven months since the founding of the purchasing cooperative, the members of IDEAL have worked together to create three primary benefits.

"It's important that IDEAL is member-owned," said Ryan Jackson, chief operating officer of D.F. Richard, a family-owned energy distributor in Dover, N.H. He serves as board chair of IDEAL. "It provides more value than just purchasing; it increases communication and cooperation in all areas of business by leveraging benchmarking."

One primary benefit is the better buying power with supplier and vendor partners. IDEAL partners already include suppliers and vendors of fuel, business services, propane equipment, health insurance, 401Ks, business insurance, credit card processing, tanks, accounting, and bookkeeping. Members are not required to purchase from only designated suppliers and vendors; they can still choose their own vendors.

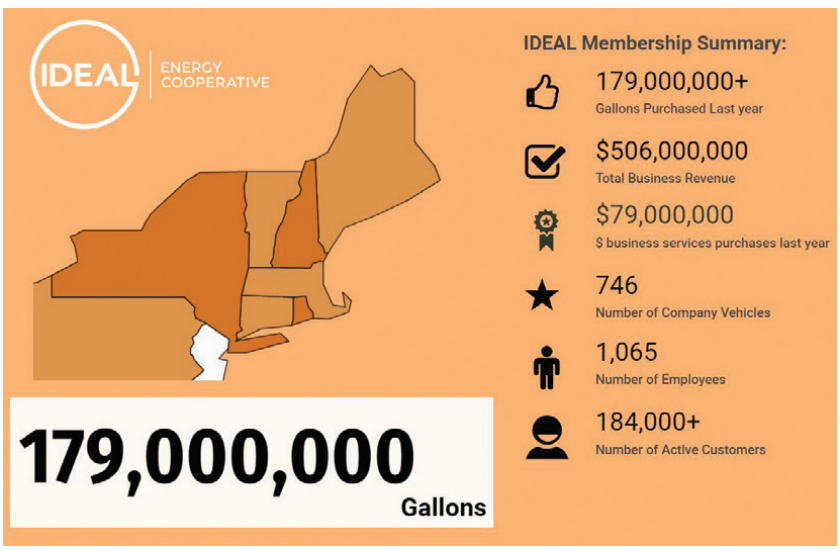
Another primary benefit is to aggregate marketing resources to promote a national brand called Fuel-Local. By using this in co-branding, members can provide a common voice while continuing their existing local marketing efforts. Similar to what "Eat Local" and "Farm Local" have done for other industries, Fuel-Local is intended to help members communicate to their customers the benefits of using local, independent providers. Jackson said D.F. Richard plans to use Fuel-Local alongside its own brand, adding, "It's important to get that message out."

The third primary benefit is a member community in which they share best practices and training. Here, activities include weekly webinars hosted by partner vendors and virtual roundtables that bring together member-owners. In a recent virtual forum, members discussed how to get back to work in the "new normal." They have also scheduled an annual meeting at the end of September where they hope to come together in person.

"Like all small businesses in every industry, it is getting harder and harder to compete with the highly capitalized multinational corporations," Magnusson said. "Now, with even more burdens and costs created by the pandemic, pooling resources is critical."

"Ironically," she added, "I think one of the positives of the COVID-19 pandemic is that consumers are being forced to re-prioritize what is important for their families and households. IDEAL members are essential service providers. What a perfect time to have a strong, common IDEAL voice to reinforce to customers that their energy providers have always had their best interests at heart, including safety, value, care for their families, and environment."

For more information about IDEAL, visit *IDEALenergycooperative.com*, or email Kris Magnusson at *krism@idealenergycooperative.com* or Ryan Jackson at *rjackson@dfrichard.com*. ■





PROPANE WITH A VILLAGE TOUCH

KAREN MASSMAN VanASDALE

From September to April, the best time to catch Steve Frey, owner of Frey's Propane in Stapleton, Neb., is from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m., Monday through Saturday. If you miss him, he's either filling up his 3000-gal. propane delivery truck at his 18,000-gal. bulk plant or making a delivery. Unless it's the noon hour, which means he and Cindy, his wife, business partner, and only other employee, will be religiously taking an hour break for lunch. Sunday is his day off.

As the number of family-owned propane marketers dwindles, Frey's Propane continues to serve the small village in mid-Nebraska and surrounding areas in the same way it has since 1979.

"I have very loyal customers. I haven't really had to change how I do business; for the most part it's the same," said Steve Frey. "I found out if you treat people decent, give them a good service, be honest, they stick with you."

There are 305 residents in Stapleton, which is coincidentally about the number customers Frey's Propane serves—actually almost 350 customers within a 50-mile radius. They include businesses, the school, residents, and farmers, many of whom, like the Freys, are natives of Stapleton.

"We know every single one of our customers, unless they are new to town," said Cindy Frey. "And they freak out when they learn we don't take credit cards; it's check or cash. I bill once a month. We've had credit cards before, and you get a lot of fees and all these hidden costs. I run on their good word.

"We just give them a good deal and they accept it," she added. "Some people get behind, but they figure it out. They don't get any more propane if they don't."

The Freys, who have been married 41 years, also run Frey's General Store; a bed-and-breakfast "minus the breakfast" that is attached to the store; and a storage unit. They have a few part-time employees for the store and their youngest daughter, Shawna, who has special needs, often rides with Steve in his truck and assists in delivering bills. "She is Stapleton's best hugger," Cindy said.

Lifelong community leaders, Cindy currently sits on the Stapleton Cooperative Market & Deli and Chamber of Commerce boards; Steve was a volunteer firefighter for more than 20 years; and both have been involved in the school and their church. The propane business, however, is what keeps them going.

Last year, the company sold more than 400,000 gallons of propane; it will probably do about the same this year, Steve predicts. In addition to delivering propane, he spends time keeping up with insurance, HAZMAT, and Department of Transportation requirements. However, his biggest challenge, he said, is keeping the truck running.

"I keep with the industry. I do what I need to do," he said. With no other employees, "doing what he needs to do" means dragging a hose 20 times a day. He had knee replacement 10 years ago, so he no longer digs trenches and has allowed some of the "younger boys" with another business to do some of the outside setup work.



Although there is competition in the area from other propane companies, including a co-op, Steve said he doesn't have to do much marketing; it's all word of mouth other than the company listing on the Stapleton Chamber of Commerce web page.

The billing is his wife's job. With the help of QuickBooks, bills are mailed out once a month. Winter contracts became a "bookkeeper's nightmare," he said, so they have been eliminated.

During the summer months, the couple has more free time even though their store remains open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. six days a week. For "relaxation," they have a giant garden with primarily asparagus, corn, and tomatoes. Right now, he also has 250 chickens.

"A lot of people say, 'How can you two work together and go home together?' I just tell them we can't think of anything else. It's always been that way," Steve said. ■

NPGA ADDS COVID-19 TO ITS PRIORITIES

PAT THORNTON

At the beginning of 2020, ***BPN*** spoke with the National Propane Gas Association's (NPGA) Jeff Petrash, vice president and general counsel, and deputy counsel regulatory affairs, Sarah Reboli, about the coming decade. Midwest supply issues had consumed their time in late 2019. "Electrification will be a big issue for a number of years ahead for NPGA," Petrash told ***BPN*** in January. Other issues discussed included a plan to go back to FERC in June to address how index pricing is set for liquids shipped on pipelines; natural gas expansion issues brewing in Utah and Iowa; and new requirements from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). With the spread of COVID-19, addressing the pandemic and its many challenges while still focusing on all other pressing issues became NPGA's new plan for 2020, with all NPGA staff members hands on deck, but from remote locations as all are teleworking due to Washington, D.C.'s stay-at-home order.

In mid-May Petrash and Reboli were joined by fellow NPGA staffers Sarah McLallen, vice president of communications and member services, and Lesley Garland, vice president of state affairs, in a discussion with ***BPN*** about new issues that arose since our discussion at the beginning of the year. "I returned from a trip in mid-March, went straight home, and have not been back to the office since," Petrash said. "The COVID-19 pandemic has all staff members working from home since March 15. Between the virus and all our existing issues, we've been busy the past couple of months!"

"We've been engaging with NPGA's Propane Supply and Logistics Committee," Petrash said. "With lower oil and gas prices, rig counts were down before the COVID-19 virus further slowed demand. Use of diesel fuel is down 20%, motor gas is down 30%, and jet fuel is down 60%. While we can't move the levers of the commercial marketplace, we can keep the industry informed about what is happening and what their options are."

With the infrastructure for exporting propane more developed than ever, there is more export capacity from the Gulf Coast as well as Marcus Hook in the Northeast. "Looking back at supply data over the past six years, when propane demand peaks in the U.S., exports drop," Reboli said.

Reboli noted that laws and appropriations related to COVID-19 have been passing in Congress faster than agencies can handle them. "All details related to small business, tax credits, and paycheck programs must be provided to the industry," she said. For Garland, there has been a surge of information to monitor with specific state requirements and recovery proposals. Some key questions have included whether employers can take employee temperatures; how companies can obtain face masks; and sharing with staff how best to handle existing requirements and COVID-19 requirements. Both Garland and Reboli acknowledged industry members are in uncharted territory following sometimes rapidly changing requirements while still taking care of customers.

An NPGA survey of industry members has aided the staff in focusing on members' needs and their various situations and concerns. Respondents, by sector, were intrastate marketers (38%), interstate marketers (25%), distributors

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JEFF PETRASH



SARAH REBOLI



SARAH McLALLEN



LESLEY GARLAND

10 FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE VALUE OF YOUR BUSINESS

TAMERA KOVACS AND COOPER WILBURN

There are many factors that go into a retail propane marketer's decision to sell their business but typically there is one key factor that propels them to act. That one deciding factor is unique to each marketer as to when the time is right. Today, retailers have another factor to consider, COVID-19. Should they proceed with their plans to sell or should they wait? That answer is not as straightforward as one might hope—the COVID-19 impact is just another factor that must be weighed into the decision-making process.

When considering the impact COVID-19 will have on the sale of propane businesses, most buyers will look at how it has impacted their business specifically. They will look at how it has impacted the factors that drive the exit multiple as well as the earnings of the company.

We recently surveyed retail propane marketers asking them to rank, in order of importance, 10 drivers that impact exit multiples. The survey results show the percentage of respondents who ranked each of the items within the top five. How do the retailers' rankings compare to what we consider to be the most important? Read on.



Tank Ownership—At fifty-three percent (53%), tank ownership received the majority of votes as being one of the top factors impacting exit multiples. Let's face it, it's about *control*. You want to control the gallons delivered to the customer and the profitability gained. It's also about controlling the safety of the tank and installation. Part two of tank ownership is having proper documentation to prove you own the tank. Make sure you have signed tank leases on file and in a system for easy access. Remember, buyers don't buy what they can't see. For customer-owned tanks, try to get a longer-term contract to maintain control of the tank.

Margin & Profitability Trends—Thirty-nine percent (39%) of responding retailers ranked margin and profitability trends as one of the top five factors. It is important to break down the gross margin by customer class so you and a potential buyer understand the margin trends by category. What do the trends look like? Have they trended up, down, or fluctuated year to year? Why? Understand the story behind the trends. Look at not only the total dollar amount but also the trends on a cents-per-gallon basis. The big question: Is it sustainable? Buyers buy sustainability over time, not on one great year. Margin and profitability trends are key to building value in your business.

Safety—Thirty-nine percent (39%) also ranked safety within the top five. Again, it's about control, consistency, and documentation. It is very important to regularly schedule (monthly) meetings to review and reinforce safety, policies for performing GAS Checks, and the proper documentation and filing of each. For underground tanks, documentation on cathodic protection is

also important. In the event of an accident, if a GAS Check isn't documented and signed, the eyes of the courts will say it didn't happen. Again, buyers don't buy what they can't see; we have seen buyers walk on deals because of a lack of safety documentation.

Quality of Staff—Twenty-five percent (25%) of the survey respondents felt quality of staff was one of the top five. A key differentiator from one business to another is *people*! Is the staff micromanaged or can they take on leadership roles? Can they help build a strong business? For a typical retail propane marketer, personnel expenses range between 40% and 60%. The staff's efficiency, customer compassion and relatability, and ability to make decisions are all critical. Employees can make or break your business.

Gallons Trends—Twenty-four percent (24%) ranked gallons trends in the top five. When looking at your gallons trends it is important to break out gallons-by-customer classification. What's happening and why? Gallons trends are a driver of gross margins, profitability, and an indicator of growth or decline. It is important to understand what is driving the trends.

Quality of Assets—Twenty-four percent (24%) ranked quality of assets in the top five. Quality of assets can be broken into three categories: rolling stock, bulk storage, and consumer tanks. The rolling stock is the category of assets that has a high churn rate in a company. The age of the fleet becomes important if the majority of the fleet is over 10 years old and will need to be replaced in short order. It's also a question of expense dollars-versus-capital dollars plus opportunity costs. Companies with an older fleet tend to have higher repair and maintenance costs. This can lead to a risk of a truck being out of service during peak season, resulting in the loss of an opportunity. Companies with a newer fleet have higher capital expense outlay but often see lower repair and maintenance costs. What is the timing for investing in new rolling stock? A continuous update of rolling stock is suggested to avoid becoming over-burdened within a short amount of time (one or two years). Currently there are tax incentives available for capital purchases. These incentives won't last forever, so take advantage of them while they are still available.

All tanks, whether bulk storage or consumer tanks, must have a legible data plate to be in service. For bulk storage tanks, it is also important to have the U1A Certificate. Buyers will look at your tanks; they do not want to buy a bunch of pitted tanks or tanks in violation of codes. Consumer tanks generally are the most valuable asset a retailer has. It is important to continuously keep them cleaned, painted, and within code.

Customer Growth—Twenty-one percent (21%) ranked customer growth within the top five. Customer growth can be thought of in two ways: net customer growth and burner tip growth. Track gain and loss numbers for both company-owned and customer-owned tanks. While customer-

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SURVEY RESULTS—RANKED TOP 5

Drivers Impacting Exit Multiples	% of Total Respondents
Tank Ownership	53%
Margin & Profitability Trends	39%
Safety	39%
Quality of Staff	25%
Gallons Trends	24%
Quality of Assets	24%
Customer Growth	21%
Market Segment	15%
% of Gallons with Top Accounts	15%
Operational Efficiencies	12%





VIRTUAL CONFERENCE MAXIMIZES EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS

PAT THORNTON

What do you do when a virus pandemic cancels your premier industry event of the year? As an industry, we faced that challenge with the cancellation of the annual NPGA (National Propane Gas Association) Expo scheduled for April 6-8 in Nashville. Chris Brablc, senior director of marketing for Tank Utility (Boston), didn't have to think too long for a solution. He reached out to Brian Weit, manager of marketing at Cargas Energy (Lancaster, Pa.), among others, to see if there was interest in helping to put together a virtual conference. "As it turned out, others were thinking the same thing," Brablc said. "We were moving in that direction," Weit told ***BPN***. "Chris was just a few days ahead of us."

Brablc and Weit discussed with ***BPN*** how they and others pulled together to put on a virtual conference in less than three weeks. This ingenuity culminated in the Energize 2020 program that included a virtual trade expo complete with ways to set up live discussions with vendors. In addition, the full-day program ended with a virtual happy hour with all participants visible on the computer screen and able to have a group discussion.

"It was important to us to make this happen during what would have been the NPGA Expo in Nashville," Brablc said. "The NPGA Expo is the premier event of the year where customers and technology companies can talk about the latest innovations that benefit the industry. While we knew we couldn't fully replicate the event, we wanted to bring marketers a small part of the educational sessions virtually."

"We also decided to raise funds to support NPGA as part of the virtual conference," Brablc explained. "We're excited that NPGA was supportive of us and that other companies as well as retail marketers came together to help put on the webinars. Energize doesn't happen without them." Additional company sponsors included Cetane Associates (Kent, Conn.), P3 Propane Safety (Portsmouth, N.H.), and Qualpay (San Mateo, Calif.). A week after the virtual conference, more than $11,000 had already been raised to benefit NPGA from attendees and sponsors.

"It was amazing how fast this all came together," said Adam Shantzer, CFO at Gastec Enterprises (Ivyland, Pa.). "Looking at my phone records, Chris called me March 23 to see if I would be interested in presenting. We had another discussion about details March 27, which led to a test run on April 1. On April 8, I was one of many presenting to hundreds of people." Shantzer said it was great to still be able to connect with so many people he'd usually see at the NPGA Expo. "It is always good to have these discussions, which I feel lead to 'sparks of insanity' that cause people to think of things in different ways and refine those thoughts into something useful."

"The NPGA Expo is certainly the gold standard of propane events," said Jim Townsend, CEO of Townsend Energy (Danvers, Mass.), who also presented during Energize 2020. "All key contacts and new products can be found at this event every year. With the cancellation, it was great that the virtual conference came together so fast. The sponsors and presenters did an excellent job." Townsend said he feels the experiences of 2020 may change forever how information is shared. "I think conferences will still be held, but more people will have had new experiences with learning and gaining information via technology. People will understand more how they best want to receive information and learning. I suspect more will be in a better position to gravitate toward the learning methods that work best for them."

"We had over 600 register to participate with over half attending for at least part of the day," Brablc said. "The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive from attendees. We had registrations from 48 states in the U.S. and we had at least one from five additional countries."

BPN will share details of the Energize 2020 Virtual Conference in this issue and upcoming issues. Other experts originally slated to speak at the NPGA Expo in Nashville have also been presented virtually recently or will be doing so in the upcoming weeks. ***BPN*** will provide details of some of these presentations as well in upcoming issues.

Session recordings are available at no cost from Energize at *energize.tankutility.com*. ■

THE STATE OF THE DELIVERED FUELS INDUSTRY

PAT THORNTON

Kicking off the Energize 2020 Digital Conference, Steven Abbate, president of Cetane Associates (Kent, Conn.), provided an overview of the state of the propane industry amid the deadly coronavirus pandemic. “The propane industry is luckier than many industries,” Abbate said, noting that the gambling industry was taking a $261-billion per year hit on sports betting alone. Airlines, cruise ships, hotels, movie theaters, and live sports were also industries noted for the many billions being lost and massive job losses and likely bankruptcies to follow.

Abbate shared data showing propane sales so far this year close to even with the previous year, despite COVID-19 losses throughout the economy. “The demand for stay-at-home services is up,” Abbate noted.

As further evidence of interest in stay-at-home services, Abbate shared data from Warm Thoughts Communications, a business serving many home heating companies, including many retail propane marketers. Their data shows organic traffic to digital clients’ websites is up 14%; pay-per-click campaigns for fueloil, propane, and HVAC are up 18% and the click through rate is up 13%; and total leads are up 10%. Warm Thoughts said that one of its campaigns for propane tankless water heaters had its best response ever the day after the governor of the state issued shelter-in-place directions.

As for business sales, a major focus of Cetane Associates, he noted two sales his company is overseeing are postponed and six more sales that were about to come into the market were delayed due to the coronavirus. “Reasons for selling have nothing to do with the virus at this point,” he explained. “All reasons involve the usual situations for most companies: owners are retiring without a succession plan within the company; the company couldn’t find enough drivers/service people; or owners sometimes want to go into another business.” Asked if sellers should hold off due to the virus, Abbate felt that in most cases they should move ahead if they are prepared to sell. “In a couple of cases, we’ve seen some potential buyers back out due to concerns about being able to close, but we’ve still completed some deals with very healthy sale prices.”

“Buyers may have more reasons to hold off on a company purchase. They should definitely take a closer look at the customer base of the retail company. Are there a lot of commercial accounts in the hospitality or entertainment business? How do you think overall receivables will be affected?”

Asked about multiples of EBITDA (earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization) companies are selling for, Abbate reminded his audience that many factors go into determining multiples, but said that smaller companies are typically getting four to five times adjusted EBITDA, while larger companies that typically sell 5 million gallons or more are getting eight to nine times adjusted EBIDTA.

When questioned whether a decrease in gallons due to weather would affect company values, Abbate said that his company adjusts weather to a 10-year average and that some companies adjust to a 30-year average. He reminded participants that gallons don’t necessarily increase value; gross margin does. “Smarter marketers need to increase margin with fewer gallons.” ■



VPE VIRTUAL PROPANE EXPO
CONNECT. LEARN. TRANSACT.

INDUSTRY VETERANS BAND TOGETHER TO PRESENT VIRTUAL PROPANE EXPO

PAT THORNTON

As the coronavirus shuttered all possibilities for industry members to physically attend the popular annual trade shows and expos this spring, industry members banded together with alternative ideas to address the situation.

On what would have been the final day of the NPGA Expo in Nashville, a group of industry veterans announced plans for a day of virtual expo activities on April 29. Similar to the Energize 2020 Conference, a full day of seminars that was held earlier in the month, the Virtual Propane Expo (VPE) included the day of webinars with a virtual trade show added to the mix. A website at *www.virtualpropaneexpo.com* is now the hub of VPE. The group plans to host a similar event monthly near the end of the month.

Led by Bill Stomp of Tankspotter.com, a board was assembled to oversee VPE that includes Peter Gilman, currently interim executive director of Virtual Propane Expo, past senior vice president of LP Transportation, a board member of the New Jersey Propane Gas Association, and past vice president of Eastern Propane; Shane Sweet, a consultant with experience as an executive director of several energy associations including the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association, the Northeast Fuel Institute, and the New York Propane Gas Association; Mike Digiorgio, president of Propane University, founder of Silverback Consulting, and president of the Propane Gas Defense Association; and Stuart Flatow, a former vice president of the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC).

WORKING EFFICIENTLY

"Early in my career I was driving the newest aircraft carrier in Operation Desert Storm during the Gulf War," Stomp said. "After that I was worked for a propane co-op that was soon bought out by Suburban Propane, and this led to an opportunity to ultimately run operations at 53 locations for this multistate company. From my experience in Desert Storm with the latest technology the military had to offer, I always sought to have the latest technology available to get things done efficiently. Sometimes our biggest competitor is the clock, and if we can't have everyone working efficiently, we are losing to the clock."

Stomp took this approach to his next role creating software and technology that would organize safety, service, sales, and training information. "Things get lost too eas-



Bill Stomp



Shane Sweet



Peter Gilman

ily when on paper or filed improperly." Recently, Stomp's Tankspotter software was entered in a world tech competition at the World LPG Forum and won the top prize in its category.

"As a vendor, I am conscious of vendors' concerns," Stomp said. "Several of us have talked about creating an online expo experience complete with online learning opportunities and a chance to virtually visit many booths of vendors. In March, with COVID-19 starting to cancel several industry trade shows, we went ahead and pulled the trigger on launching the Virtual Propane Expo. With a number of vendors working on commission, it was critical that they have a forum to still attract customers despite almost all 2020 shows cancelling for the year and stay-at-home orders forcing an end to traveling to customer locations."

BRINGING THE INDUSTRY TOGETHER

Initial plans came to fruition with a day-long series of webinars on April 29, complete with an online trade show at no charge for exhibitors as well as free for retail propane marketers, to give them a chance to look through the booths and hear one-minute and five-minute sales pitches. "The sales pitches are in the booths," Sweet explained. "We are not wanting sales pitches in the educational sessions."

The VPE board is still listening to the industry and deciding how this takes shape long-term, Sweet said. "The only thing certain is uncertainty in this environment during the COVID-19 pandemic." So far, he notes that industry members he knows are enjoying the benefits. "I had a guy tell me he joined a webinar he wanted to see during the lunch hour and got a lot out of it. Others have been too busy during the actual event but are able to check out recorded programs later. Vendors are getting leads from the online trade show."

Gilman recalls meeting with Stomp a year ago, and described how Stomp was so interested in launching a virtual expo and trade show that he had reserved several website addresses for the project. "Fast forward a year later and I get a call from Bill asking me to join the team to get the Virtual Propane Expo off the ground," said Gilman. "My initial thought was, at a time when COVID-19 was pulling business and industries apart, a virtual site provided a solution to bring us together. That was two months ago and we hit the ground sprinting. The VPE is attracting top industry speakers who can reach and interact with the entire industry all at once. It is a state-of-the-art, high-tech site, but easy to navigate and use."

A question many have asked is if VPE is going to become a for-profit endeavor. "Right now, I just want to get a few sponsors who will cover the cost of my employees' time in setting up the educational programs and booth space information in the site," Stomp explained. "While attending is free for all and the trade show is free for vendors associated with the propane industry, we are providing extra banner advertising to some key sponsors willing to` pay for a sponsorship." ■



VPE VIRTUAL PROPANE EXPO
CONNECT. LEARN. TRANSACT.

THE THREE KEY PROPANE SAFETY FACTORS

ANDREA YOUNG

Although propane professionals are well trained to know what to do regarding safety, they sometimes can become distracted, Stuart Flatow warned participants in recent webinar. Flatow served as the Propane Education & Research Council's (PERC) vice president, safety and training, from 2000 to 2019, and is currently offering cost-effective safety management services to the propane industry. In his session presented during the first Virtual Propane Expo (VPE), "Listening to Idiots Can be Hazardous to Your Health," Flatow identified three crucial areas that propane marketers must be mindful of in order to guard against an undesirable safety situation: giving in to peer pressure; listening to those in authority; and caught "in the moment."

PEER PRESSURE

Don't ever give in to peer pressure when it comes to taking safety shortcuts. Citing the quote of Rear Adm. Grace Murray, naval officer and one of the early computer pioneers, "'The most dangerous phrase in the English language is, 'We've always done it this way.'"

Indeed. So why do it differently? Flatow used the example of checking for gas leaks. It's been known to happen that a technician just smelled for gas. Or, checked for leaks with a lit match. They do so because someone senior to them showed them that shortcut. Most do not do this, but there are still some that do because of poor mentoring. Note: No shortcuts.



AUTHORITY

He stressed that propane technicians will listen to those in authority. Flatow emphasized a warning from Paula Laney, director of safety and training at Energy Distribution Partners (EDP), and former safety director for the Oklahoma Propane Gas Association, that has always stuck with him: "Doing things the old way isn't always the safe way. We have to change our thinking about how adults work, and be cautious about whom we let help with on the job training." You do not want to teach bad habits or have them continue.

CAUGHT UP IN THE MOMENT

"Being in the moment" refers to becoming so focused on the situation at hand that one forgets obvious safety rules. Getting lost in a daydream, performing services under stress or while ill, a family situation, there are a million ways people get lost in thought or act automatically without thinking because they're "lost in the moment."

Flatow referenced a 2007 propane explosion in Ghent, W.V., at the Little General convenience store. A senior service tech had decided it was appropriate to have a junior technician perform a tank-to-tank transfer, one of the riskiest operations in propane. This resulted in an uncontrolled release of gas that filled the convenience store and the area around the tanks.

However, the technician did not evacuate the store. Instead, four employees remained inside the convenience store and even hung a sign in the window that read, "Store Closed Due to Gas Leak." Eventually, the senior propane technician and the fire department responded to the leak. But no one in authority ordered the store closed or the area evacuated.

"They got caught up in the moment and were not thinking clearly," said Flatow. When the propane cloud inside the store exploded, the two technicians and two first responders who were all standing next to the propane tank were killed. The four employees who remained inside the store were all seriously injured, and the building was completely leveled.

He warned against letting one's guard down when it comes to safety just because everything seems to be going fine. "Just because the number of safety incidents or accidents might be down, don't assume the attitude that it's unnecessary to invest in safety anymore, a refrain commonly heard from propane professionals during safety meetings; and words that are often later said with regret." ■

NPGA COVID-19

Continued from **Page 31**

(20%), service providers (9%), and manufacturers (6%). Some highlights of the survey include:

- 77% of survey respondents indicated the level of business operations in April 2020 was the same (31%) or slightly reduced (46%) from April 2019 operations; 10% saw increased activity and 13% reported severely reduced activity.
- 95% of respondents reported employment levels in April 2020 were similar or only slightly lower than a month earlier on March 1. None reported significantly lower employment levels.
- 85% reported that projects, deliveries (gallons), and purchase orders had not been delayed at all (38%) or that less than 25% had been delayed (47%).
- 61% of respondents reported that they had no cancellations of existing projects and gallons delivered, while 36% reported they had some (less than 25%) cancellations.
- 43% of the respondents applied for federal aid through the Paycheck Protection Program.

COVID-19 will not always dominate our conversation. Garland and the state affairs team continue to watch state governments, some of which are holding committee meetings and votes virtually. "There are nearly 200 bills regarding decarbonization and electrification right now," Garland explained. "There have been attempts to ban natural gas installations in local construction in some states, including Massachusetts, where some suburbs of Boston have passed city ordinances. In other states, such as Arizona and Tennessee, we have passed bills that prohibit local governments banning natural gas or propane." ■

SELLING YOUR BUSINESS

Continued from **Page 33**

owned tank growth is good, the value placed on customer-owned growth isn't as high as company-owned growth. An increase in burner tips within existing customers' homes will help increase gallons growth trends and can lead to increased profitability.

Market Segment—Fifteen percent (15%) ranked market segment in the top five. Understanding the market segments you serve as in number of customers, percentage of gallons sold to each segment, and impact of the gross margin trends, are all key components to impacting the exit multiple and earnings of the company. We tend to see buyers pay higher multiples for bulk residential businesses versus large agricultural or commercial businesses.

Percent of Gallons with Top Accounts—Fifteen percent (15%) ranked percentage of gallons with top accounts in the top five. This driver of exit multiples typically doesn't get much attention unless a company sells a large percentage of their gallons to a few accounts. If the majority of your gallons are sold to residential accounts, losing one or two won't be a material impact to your business. However, losing one or two accounts that contribute to a significant number of gallons sold by your business could be very detrimental.

Operational Efficiencies—Twelve percent (12%) ranked operational efficiencies in the top five. Operational efficiencies are one of the most difficult to track and see direct impact, yet, is very important. Most changes to operational efficiencies take time to see the financial benefit to the business. While operational efficiencies are important, they fall more to the earnings side of the business versus the multiples side. If you have better operational efficiencies, you will have increased earnings and will get paid for these efficiencies, as your earnings are higher.

The above factors (among others) play a key role when assessing the value of your business. Adding to this is COVID-19's impace on your business. The shutdown this spring could pose a significant impact on a company's value and marketability through lost volumes and lost customers. The shutdown can also possibly affect the ability of customers to pay. As industrial, commercial, and residential customers come back online and return to work post-COVID-19, it will be critical to understand the long-term economic impact to the propane business serving those accounts.

The big question: If you were considering selling, is now a good time? Buyers are continuing to acquire companies. And in the past several years multiples have trended up. In the last few years, buyers have been more aggressive with multiples on good quality companies and weaker companies benefitted from those stronger multiples. For strong companies, multiples will likely remain high. Where we may see a decline in multiples is with companies that have problem areas—they may not benefit from the stronger multiples as they have in the past.

COVID-19 caused a shock to markets and many experts say this will send us into a recession. The retail propane industry is a fairly recession-resistant industry; people still need to heat their homes, cook their food, and heat their water. This should cause new buyers to continue to come into the market and help keep multiples elevated.

Depending on your situation, now is definitely a good time to sell. Buyers continue to have access to cheap money and look to continue growing. Historically, factors causing multiples to weaken have been an increase in interest rates, inflation, and availability of investment dollars. We don't know the timing of this impact but at some point, we will have to pay back the money that is being printed. The kind of debt that is being added will generally cause an inflationary period that is stopped or slowed with rising interest rates. We have helped numerous companies buy and sell businesses over the years; each company has their own unique situation and reasons for buying or selling. Most people only get one shot at selling their business; make sure you get the deal that makes the most sense for your specific situation.

Tamera Kovacs and Cooper Wilburn of Propane Resources assist retail propane marketers with valuations, business reviews focusing on increasing value and helping companies buy and/or sell businesses.

DATA HELPS MARKETER MAKE IMPROVEMENTS, ACHIEVE GOALS

PAT THORNTON

What key numbers should retail propane marketers be reviewing? What is the importance of tracking key numbers in running a retail propane business? As discussed in the January issue of ***BPN***, for each marketer, the key numbers will be different depending on the goals and objectives of the business.

Recently ***BPN*** followed up with Chris Caywood, president of Caywood Propane Gas Inc. (Albion, Coldwater, and Hudson, Mich.), who has updated his list of key numbers he tracks based on the continued refining of goals and objectives for his business. "If it is an important area of the business, we want to measure our progress. We measure and evaluate strategic and business data," Caywood said. "All of it helps us identify and prioritize opportunities for improvement and make faster decisions to achieve our goals."

Return on capital is a strategic measure for Caywood as well as most businesses. "I can invest in my own business, someone else's business, or private or public markets," he said. "In the long run, the stock market will provide a 10% return and it's both highly liquid and diversified. My own business is neither highly liquid nor diversified, so we need to be compensated for that with a risk premium which we measure as return on capital." He calculates return on capital as return on invested capital (ROIC) minus weighted average of cost of capital (WACC).



Comparing ROIC to WACC reveals whether invested capital is yielding an appropriate risk premium. The rule of thumb is that a company creates value if its ROIC exceeds WACC by 2%. Caywood (along with everybody else in the industry) also looks at EBITDA, which stands for earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization. Operating cash flow and the company owned-tank base are also key factors.

Business-level metrics include market share. "We calculate our residential share by county as a percentage of the total number of homes using propane as a heat source using Census Bureau data," Caywood explained. "Degree-day adjusted growth takes into account gallons today versus gallons in a previous period without the noise that can be introduced by weather fluctuations."

"New customer growth is simple. How many customers do we have now versus in a previous period," Caywood said. "Retention is based on the percentage of customers that stay with us from period to period."

In the area of operations, Caywood tracks key numbers that many retail propane marketers track. "Like most, we want to know the gallons we pump per hour, per mile driven, and per stop. We like to know our auto-fill run-outs. It also is very important from a customer service standpoint to take care of a delivery in less than 10 days."

"Service data is very important to us because we want to improve customer retention," Caywood added. "So on-time arrival rates for service calls and call-back rates are important metrics." In the office, telephone call performance is measured using traditional call center metrics like average call volume, answer rates, speed to answer, hold rates, average hold time, abandoned calls, and first call resolution.

"In addition, we use discounts to encourage our customers to interact with us digitally so we can measure our progress using metrics like percentage of customers with email addresses, the percentage of customers who receive e-statements and e-invoices, the percentage of will-call customers who place online or smartphone orders, and percentage of auto-fill customers who use a digital auto-pay feature."

"Safety also is a very important area that can often be neglected," Caywood said. "We track any safety violations or reportable events. We document safety meetings and attendance, and we measure and reward employees with safety certificates and continuing training." ■

WHAT KEY NUMBERS DO YOU LOOK AT REGULARLY IN MAKING BUSINESS DECISIONS?

Key Numbers Monitored at Caywood Propane Gas Inc.

BIG PICTURE

- Return on capital = ROIC – WACC (return on investment capital – weighted average of cost of capital)
- EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization)
- Operating cash flow
- Company-owned tank base

MEDIUM PICTURE

- Market share
- Degree-Day adjusted growth
- New customer growth
- Customer retention

OPERATIONS

Delivery:

- Gallons/hour
- Gallons/mile
- Gallons/stop
- Cost/mile
- Auto-Fill run-outs
- Will-Call run-outs
- Average days to delivery completion
- Delivery completions in excess of 10 business days

Service:

- On-time arrival
- Reschedule percentage
- Call-back rate

Office:

Call performance:

- Average call volume
- Call answer percentage
- Speed to answer
- First call resolution
- Hold rate
- Abandon rate
- Voice-mail rate

Customer Digital Migration:

- % with email addresses
- E-statement %
- E-invoice %
- Web account %
- Auto-Pay %
- Auto-Fill %
- Digital payment %
- Digital order %

Safety:

- Safety violations
- Reportable events
- Safety meetings/attendance
- Safety documentation
- Employee certifications and continuing training









INSURANCE

Continued from **Page 21**

when they called their agent. “What right did that idiot have to change my classifications? It’s not fair. I can’t afford that huge increase. What can be done to fix this outrage?”

First of all, to fix the dilemma, we need to look at what the National Council on Compensation (NCCI) says in the National Scopes Manual regarding how to classify employees.

NCCI is a rulemaking body whose principles are closely followed by the Administrative Rules of States that are not members of NCCI, and those states that are members. These rules require a marketer to report wages under the highest classification applicable, so let’s look at code 8350.

> “Code 8350 is applied to dealers engaged in the distribution of Liquefied Petroleum Gas by means other than mains or pipelines. It applies to ALL operations of such insureds and includes store employees, drivers, and the installation, service or repair of their customer’s equipment and appliances. The classification contemplates the unloading of the Liquefied Petroleum Gas from railroad tank cars, subsequent storage in tanks on their premises, the filling of bottled gas cylinders or tank trucks and the retail or wholesale delivery of the Liquefied Petroleum Gas.”

Many times propane marketers have employees that routinely go back and forth from one job classification to another during the workday. For instance, in the case of the office employees who were reclassified from office clerical to propane, they were needed when necessary to leave the office and go outside to the dispenser to fill a bottle for a customer.

To place their entire payroll in the higher rated classification does not seem fair, but is what the description requires. Especially since we would argue that there are other classifications that might apply, such as code 8810 Clerical Office personnel and code 8742 Outside Sales, that would reduce the marketer’s workers compensation premiums. So how can these other classifications be utilized properly to avoid the auditor’s discretionary movement of the payroll to the highest classification?

The answer, for both scenarios, is to keep Verifiable Time Records. In the case of office personnel going outside to fill a customer’s bottle, a daily log shou-ld be developed, showing the date and time when the clerical person went outside to fill the bottle and when they returned. The log would allow the auditor to utilize the lower WC code of 8810 for the majority of the employee’s payroll. Utilizing Verifiable Time Records are also useful when companies have employees that work part time in HVAC and are also bobtail drivers.

Frank B. Thompson is a chartered property and casualty underwriter based in Phoenix. He is the owner of PT Risk Management, an independent insurance company specializing in writing propane and petroleum risk policies throughout the U.S.



MICHEL BRIDEAU
Otodata



FRANCISCO CASTILLO
Otodata



AMANDA BACON
Savvi Strategies

Michel Brideau has joined **Otodata** (Montreal, Que.) as its production manager. With his extensive experience in the field of production and logistics, the company believes he will be key in putting several new initiatives in place as well as process improvements.

Another new addition to the Otodata team is **Francisco Castillo**. As product integrator, he will serve as a liaison between the Otodata sales team, R&D, production, and marketing departments to develop and launch new products. Castillo will also work with customers to plan proof of concept and initial deployments, ensuring flawless integration and a positive customer experience.

After spending more than 15 years in the energy industry, **Amanda Bacon** has launched **Savvi Strategies**, a consulting firm helping small and middle market businesses improve their marketing and public relations activities. Bacon is well-known in the propane industry for helping several companies achieve award-winning success. She has led entire organizations, as well as sales, marketing, and public relations teams. A new service that Bacon is bringing to the industry focuses on modernizing a company's culture. She has been active in the Propane Gas Association of New England (PGANE), working as the co-chair of the Workforce Development Committee, and in Women in Propane.

Blue Cow Software (Lynnfield, Mass.) added four new members to its staff during the first quarter of 2020. **Perry Bailes**, **Janice Trombetto**, and **Luziane Cavalcanti** joined Blue Cow as Implementation Specialists. This position trains and supports any new users of the firm's Ignite software suite of products.

Bailes is a veteran and a software aficionado. Trombetto joined Blue Cow Software after being in healthcare administration for more than 30 years.

Cavalcanti formerly was in the hospitality industry and has 20 years of service experience. She has managed seven different hotels over the years and has worked with all four major brands in the industry. Training and development are part of her skillset.

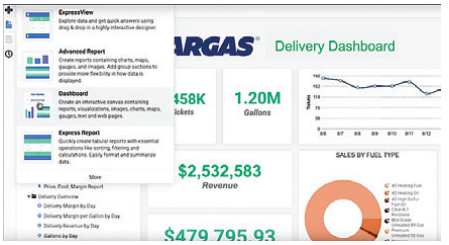
Richard Jesionowski was hired by Blue Cow as a software developer. He has more than 30 years of experience developing enterprise level applications. Jesionowski has a passion for utilizing modern technologies and brings valuable skills to the Blue Cow Software team

The company notes it has moved its 2020 software installations to remote training and that its new installation staff is now utilizing this way of training customers on how to use the Ignite suite of software products.





LOW-PRESSURE REGULATOR. The LV5503BD series of dielectric low-pressure second-stage regulators, standard settings, are available from **RegO**. The large regulators for second-stage use are offered with 1/2-in. and 3/4-in. inlets and 3/4-in. and 1-in. outlets, for more volume at burner pressures of 11-in. w.c. It provides protection with dielectric isolation for copper tubing, and the only 10-year warranty. The regulators are made in the USA. *regoproducts.com*



DASHBOARD MODULE. **Cargas Energy** has introduced its new Advanced Reporting & Dashboard module. The reporting tool, embedded directly in Cargas Energy, allows users to get needed insights without leaving the software. The Advanced Reporting & Dashboards helps fuel dealers understand their business performance, spot trends or anomalies, and quickly respond to changes. The module includes ready-to-use reports and sample dashboards, with a drag-and-drop interface that makes it easy for users to build their own, and built-in graphs, charts, and visuals, interactive filters, and automated report emails. *cargasenergy.com/reporting*



GAS LOGS. The Real Fyre Rural Oak Rumford Collection from **R.H. Peterson** features a vertically arranged log set crafted specifically to accommodate the tall opening designs of the company's Rumford or Kiva style fireplaces. The logs feature intricate bark detail and wood fire realism. The Rural Oak Rumford Collection is available in three log styles including Rural Oak, Rural Aged Oak, and Rural Split Oak, two sizes (18/24-in. and 24/30-in.), with many control options available. *realfyre.com rhpeterson.com*





INDUSTRY CALENDAR

All events are subject to cancellation. Before making plans to attend an event, please contact the organizer.

2020

June 15— National Propane Gas Association (NPGA) Marketers Meeting via webinar, 11:00 a.m.-noon EDT

NPGA Board of Directors Meeting via webinar, 1 p.m.-3 p.m. EDT

Contact NPGA for information (202) 466-7200; *npga.org*

July 12-15—Virginia Propane Gas Association Summer Meeting, Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront, Virginia Beach. (804) 648-6299, ext. 1004; *propaneva.com/newsroom/events/2020-vapga-summer-meeting/*

July 16-17—National Propane Gas Association Summer Benchmarking Council Meeting, Sheraton Inner Harbor, Baltimore. (202) 466-7200, ext. 335; *npga.org/organization/npga-events/*

July 21-22—PERC Council Meeting, Park Hyatt Beaver Creek, Beaver Creek, Colo. (202) 452-8975; *propane.com/newsroom/events/perc-council-meeting-3/*

July 23-25—2020 Crossroads Propane Expo & Conference, Fairmont Hotel, Austin, Texas. (800) 325-7427; *txpropane.com/event-details/2020-crossroads-propane-expo-conference*

July 28-30— Great Lakes Propane Convention, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio Propane Gas Associations' Joint Summer Convention, JW Marriott Hotel, Grand Rapids, Mich. (317) 655-4444; *indianapropane.com/newsroom/events/great-lakes-propane-convention/*

Aug. 2020—2020 Eastern Energy Expo, available on demand. *easternenergyexpo.com*

Aug. 3-5—2020 Kentucky Propane Gas Association Summer Convention, Dale Hollow State Resort Park, Burkesville, (502) 875-2686; *kypropane.org*

Aug. 5-7—Pacific Propane Gas Association Annual Conference & Membership Meeting, Sunriver Resort, Sunriver, Ore. (844) 585-4940; *pacificpropane.org/newsroom/events/2020-annual-conference-membership-meeting/*

Aug. 12-13—Northeast Propane Show, DCU Center, Worcester, Mass. *leslie@pgane.org; northeastpropaneshow.com*

Aug. 13-15—Oil & Gas Africa, Sarit Expo Centre, Nairobi, Kenya. *feedback@expogr.com; expogr.com/kenyaoil/*

Sept. 8-10—Gastech Exhibition & Conference, Singapore EXPO, Singapore. *customerservices@gastechevent.com; gastechevent.com*

Sept. 13-15—National Propane Gas Association Fall TS&S Committee Meeting, Westin Cincinnati, Cincinnati. (202) 466-7200, ext. 335; *npga.org/organization/npga-events/*

Sept. 16—Michigan Propane Gas Association Propane Safety Awareness Day, Michigan State Capitol Lawn, Lansing. (517) 487-2021; *mipga.org/training-events/propane-safety-awareness-day*

Sept. 27-29—National Propane Gas Association Fall Board of Directors Meeting, Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort & Spa, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (202) 466-7200; *npga.org/organization/npga-events/*

Sept. 30-Oct. 1—ACI European Bulk Liquid Storage Summit, location tba, Cartagena, Spain. *pxavier@acieu.net; wplgroup.com/aci/event/european-bulk-liquid-storage/*

Oct. 4-6—Manufactured Housing Institute 2020 Annual Meeting, Grand Hyatt Denver, Denver, Colo. *info@mfghome.org; manufacturedhousing.org/conferences-meetings/*

Oct. 7-9—Pennsylvania Propane Gas Association 2020 Annual Membership Meeting, The Hotel Hershey, Hershey, Pa., (717) 441-6040; *papropane.com/meetings/annual-membership-meeting/*

Oct. 14-15—Propane Gas Association of New England Annual Fall Meeting, AC Marriott, Portsmouth, N.H. (888) 445-1075; *pgane.org/newsroom/events/2020-summer-meeting/*

Nov. 2-4—33rd World LPG Forum, Dubai World Trade Center, Dubai. *association@wlpga.org; worldlpgforum2020.com*

Nov. 5-6—National Propane Gas Association Fall Benchmarking Council Meeting, Embassy Suites Scottsdale Resort, Scottsdale, Ariz. (202) 466-7200, ext. 335; *npga.org/organization/npga-events/*

Nov. 10-11—PERC Council Meeting, The Henderson, Destin, Fla. (202) 452-8975; *propane.com/newsroom/events/perc-council-meeting-4/*

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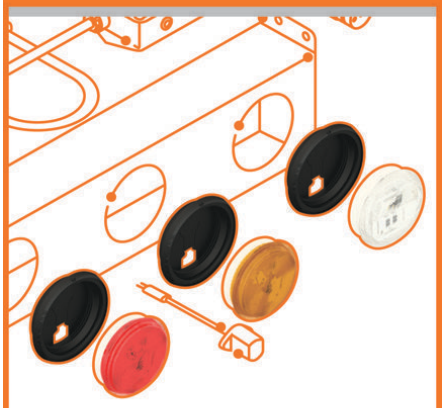

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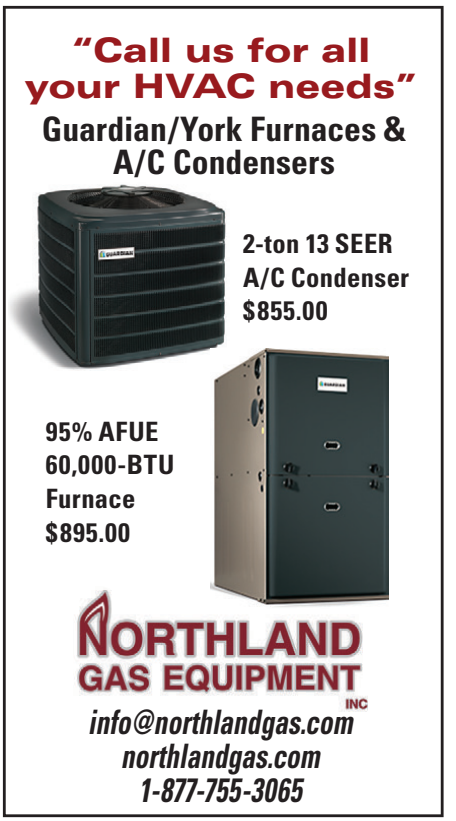



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MARKETING—WHO IS YOUR CUSTOMER?

ANDREA YOUNG

You know your customers—you talk with them every day. You understand their values, wants, and needs. Right?

Perhaps you are a second- or third-generation family business with a core group of customers you've been calling on and selling propane to for many years. So, why invest money to touch, inform, or educate folks who've been with you for years?

The reason is simple: you're assuming. Your business is too valuable for this type of casual approach. Assuming doesn't help you know what customers want or need. It also relies on the belief that nothing changes. And, that is a false assumption. We all know the only constant is change. People change, times change, markets change, styles change, seasons change, customers change…and we've certainly seen methods of communication change.

DETERMINING THEIR NEEDS

Do you know why customers buy from you? What they value, what they need and want, and how you can serve them better? What do (can) you offer that could help increase your delivery load? What areas of the business are most profitable to focus on? What goals need to be set? Do you know? If you don't, you're gambling. And, the stakes are high.

Stop assuming and determine who your most valuable customers are and why. Will they continue to be your most valuable customers in five years? If not, who will? Where does the majority of your profit come from? Is there a way you can grow that segment and increase revenue?

Communicating with your customers in a consistent manner (rather than just an invoice or occasional statement) allows you to address their wants and needs. When you find out what they truly value, want, and need, you can use that information to grow your business by reinforcing the benefits they'll receive from doing business with your company. Let customers know (and often) why choosing your company, and propane, is a wise choice. Invest in your customers; you'll have made a solid investment that helps to achieve your business goals.

CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE

In today's marketplace, a comprehensive media mix is necessary to achieve growth. People like to communicate in a variety of ways, so it's important to get your message out there in ways people prefer to communicate. There are many ways to "push" your messages out to your audience, and "pull" customers in to learn more about your business. How are you creating the repetition or consistency needed to motivate a specific action? Knowing who your customers are, why they buy from you, and how they like to get their information, will help you craft the message, determine how best to disseminate it, and include your customers as part of the business development team.

Times change. People change. Don't assume your customers' wants or perspectives will remain the same or are the same as yours. Communicating with customers benefits you! Use the full spectrum of communication tools to ensure you are not allowing a whole customer segment to fall through the cracks. If you are not communicating with customers, it's a sure bet someone else will! ■

READER'S SERVICE PAGE

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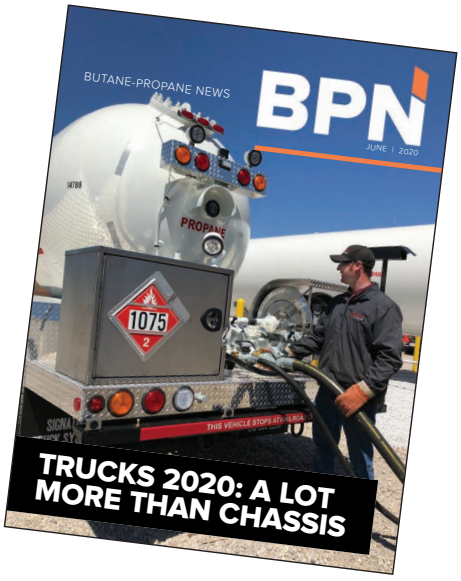

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EARLY LIFE LESSONS HAVE LED TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

KAREN MASSMAN VanASDALE

Glenda Christian, senior vice president and chief operating officer for Blue Ridge Energy LLC, admits she has never been accused of being an underachiever.

"My father told me, 'if someone thinks enough of you to hire you for a job, make sure you never give them a reason to regret it.' That's always stuck with me," Christian said. "He taught me the value of working hard and being committed to whatever you do. My father lost his battle with cancer in 1998, but his influences are always with me. A goal of mine has always been to work hard and treat others in a manner that would make my father proud…I hope he is."

A compass of hard work and compassion has led to Christian's successful career in the propane industry, which began in the oil industry in 1986 with a customer service role at Lee-Moore Oil Co. in Sanford, N.C. In 1994, she moved to Lenoir, N.C., as fleet fueling director for Beall Oil Co. and, in 1997, she transitioned to its propane operations.

"The plan was for me to stay around my hometown, but other opportunities opened up for me," she said. Accepting the position in Lenoir meant moving three hours away from home. A single mother of one, she quickly made friends and established herself as a leader within the company. When Blue Ridge Energy acquired Beall in 1998, she had to re-establish herself and is grateful for the opportunities provided.

"In any position, when you go above and beyond, it's going to be noticed," Christian said. "I continued to take classes and attend seminars that kept me growing in both knowledge and skills. I also benefited from having great mentors."

As COO since 2005, she provides primary leadership and oversight of Blue Ridge Energy's operations and serves as part of the senior leadership team for its parent company. Blue Ridge Energy provides propane, heating fuels, and gas products and appliances from showrooms and offices primarily in northwest North Carolina. Its parent company, also doing business as Blue Ridge Energy, is a member-owned electric cooperative serving approximately 76,000 members.

"I am also very involved in business development and marketing as we strive to blend those efforts with the ever changing and beneficial uses of technology that ultimately help us better serve our customers and operate more efficiently."



Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, she regularly visited Blue Ridge Energy's offices. "I think it's very important I'm not just in the corporate office. Employees need to know they are heard and they matter, and the best way to do that is face-to-face," she added.

"If someone needs me after-hours or on weekends, they know they can call me anytime, and I will be glad to help. That's true for an employee or a customer," she said. "I have always had a passion for people and helping others which influences me greatly both professionally and personally."

Christian has been involved in several organizations, including serving on the boards of a local Home Builder's Association and Little League Association. At Blue Ridge Energy, she has been instrumental in implementing the Pink Truck program, which has donated more than $85,000 to local breast cancer-related organizations since 2013 and recently, the "RED—Remember Everyone Deployed" program, an initiative near and dear to her heart since her son, Gavin, served in the Marine Corps.

Putting family first and managing her time effectively make it possible for her to be a great mother and have a great career, she said. "It is also important to take vacation time to disconnect from work (if possible). Until several years ago, I never took more than a few days off at a time. However, once I started taking at least one week of vacation at a time, I realized the importance of giving yourself time away to refocus and relax."

When she is not working, Christian can be found on nearby scenic trails and in the mountains—her vacation is usually to the beach. She also enjoys time with family (son, siblings, and mother), friends, and two dogs.

"In general, my goal is to keep improving…as a person and a leader. Do all I can to help other employees achieve their goals and be successful in life. Never stop working toward reaching new heights, no matter how long it could take or how challenging it might be. Be flexible when times and circumstances change. Be an encourager and supporter, always." ■

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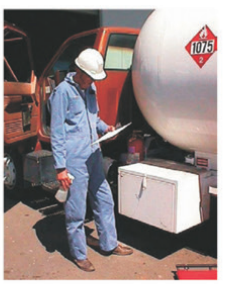





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