The Waiting (for EMV Fuel Dispensers) is the Hardest Part

Tom Petty, the legendary singer and songwriter, had a way with words. He might as well have been referring to upgrading EMV dispensers when he sang, “The waiting is the hardest part.”

As much as I’m an optimist who sees the good in people, I also accept some hard truths. One of those is that crime is as certain as death and taxes. When I see a criminal, I can’t help but feel disappointment. Beyond the damage they do to C-stores and society at large, I see wasted potential. Because criminals are smart, everyone would be so much better off if they used their intellect for good instead of evil.

The number of criminals out there doesn’t change much. It’s only their targets that change. Think of it this way: if most homeowners added security systems, the odds of those without security systems being burglarized would skyrocket. Why? Because “smart” criminals find the easier targets.

As more and more C-stores become EMV compliant, the number of criminals doesn’t shrink. As a result, those who aren’t EMV complaint might as well have a big bullseye on their dispensers saying, “Criminals welcome.” Laura Townsend, senior vice president of the Merchant Advisory Group, said, “…we know fraudsters will find the weakest link.”

This doesn’t make me happy. What does make me happy is that technology is beating the criminals. More than 3.7 million merchants--or 80 percent of U.S. storefronts--currently accept chip cards. Since 2015, according to Visa, the amount of money merchants lost to counterfeit fraud has declined by 62 percent.

It’s wonderful that the industry has a solution. I also empathize with the expense required for C-stores to become compliant. According to a 2019 Connexus study, almost 70 percent of respondents said they haven’t upgraded any outside pumps to the EMV technology. Connexus also reported that:

- Fuel retailers that don’t upgrade could face costs of as much as $201,000 per store over the next seven years.
- The fuel industry will suffer $451 million of card fraud in 2020 alone.

It’s now a race to get compliant and not be the weakest link. With better physical security, new dispensers will reduce the risk of fuel theft and meter tampering. The benefits go beyond reducing fraud. New pumps include entertainment and promotional offers to help drive customers’ in-store purchases and reduce the monotony of fueling. Improvements in displays, graphics and other pump elements also enhance the store’s image.
The Merchant Advisory Group recently requested that Visa Inc. and Mastercard Inc. postpone the liability shifts for another two years, but the networks said no. According to a Connexus report, the top challenge for not 100 percent EMV-ready was lack of available software. We’re also seeing an increase in the time it takes for dispensers to be installed. Nearly everyone feels both stretched and stressed.

I understand the challenges that the October 2020 deadline has created for everyone in this industry. Though becoming EMV complaint will prove to be a worthwhile investment, right now it feels like a burden to many C-store owners. Due to the cost of waiting, now, more than ever, is time to heed the words of Tom Petty, who also sang, “Don’t let ‘em get to you. Don’t let this go too far.”

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