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MAKE THE MOST OF SUMMER

Convenience store operators and suppliers coast to coast share tips and timing for getting your c-store ready for the lucrative summer months

BY MARK CARDWELL

Peggy's Cove is a must-see attraction for visitors to Nova Scotia.

In summer, tourists flock to the picturesque fishing village an hour's drive southwest of Halifax to see its famous lighthouse and walk on barren rocks that jut out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Almost everyone passes by The Whale's Back, a country store in neighbouring Indian Harbour.

Located on scenic Route 333—the only road to Peggy's Cove—it is also the closest convenience store to the provincially-protected inlet.

Open daily year-round, it sells everything from groceries, baked goods, tobacco and alcohol to suntan lotion, ice cream, fireworks and souvenirs.

"We cater to everyone—locals and tourists alike," says store manager Marcy Graves. "But from late May to early October we serve mostly tourists. And we can get awfully busy."

From top right: Summer treats; Whale's Bay Country Store near Peggy's Cove, N.S.; Fireworks set the tone for summer; Local gift items appeal to Nova Scotia tourists; A stroll through the forest inspired the murals painted by artist Tom Hutchings on the wall outside of Honeymoon Bay General Store on Vancouver Island (store front above); summer accessories; Duggers Variety in Midland, Ont. stocks visitors' preferred cigarettes



Winter is prep time

For Graves, success at the store in summer both starts with and depends on the plans and actions she and her team take during the quieter winter months.

They include visits to gift shows in search of merchandise for The Whale's Back and its sister property—the Sou'Wester Restaurant and Gift Shop next to the lighthouse in Peggy's Cove—and doing annual spring maintenance.

"We put out some picnic tables and spruce things up by cleaning and painting," says Graves, who has been with the business 25 years. "Then we start looking at orders for things like fireworks, ice cream and saltwater toffee. Fortunately, we have a great list of suppliers, most of them local—and people love local products. The trick is to be ready when you see the uptick in business in late May."

That's a common refrain among c-store owners, operators and suppliers of all sizes and stripes in a country as cold as Canada. For many, the food, gas and supplies that cottagers, campers and road trippers buy in their stores during the summer months is crucial to their bottom line.

"Things are dead here until the May 24th weekend then—boom!—they go crazy until Labour Day," says Laura Fevez, who owns and runs the Honeymoon Bay Food & General Store in Honeymoon Bay on Vancouver Island, an hour's drive north of Victoria.

It is the only c-store in the village, which is nestled in pristine wilderness on Lake Cowichan, a popular summertime destination for campers, hikers, cyclists, boaters and anglers.

Since buying the business in the early summer of 2022 and going through what she calls "my baptism of fire" in the c-store trade, Fevez said she spends the slow winter months making physical changes to the store and expanding its product lines to make the most of the summer rush.

"You have to put in a lot of time and effort to think about things and to shop and order items you hope will find favour with your customers," says Fevez. "It takes a lot of schlepping."

In addition to expanding her store's kitchen to make more food items, like breakfast sandwiches, pizza and samosas, which the previous owner introduced, she rearranged aisles and displays to improve the flow of traffic and give the business what she calls "more of a general store look where people can breathe and relax."

Boost curb appeal

Fevez also cleaned up outside the store and added planter boxes, picnic tables and a bike rack "to make it more inviting for people, both locals and tourists, to come and sit and enjoy themselves."

She also commissioned a local artist to create four nature-themed murals that were installed on the outside walls of the store on the Victoria Day weekend in 2023.

"It's easy to drive by a place that has nothing of interest," says Fevez. "But if you add atmosphere to it, like these four murals do, people will drop in. Like the old saying goes, you gotta make hay when the sun shines."

Ensure the right product mix

"We call it the 'Hundred Days of Summer,'" says Leena Halim, director of marketing for SRP Companies Canada, which supplies some 20,000 Canadian retail stores—including major gas stations, c-store chains and independents—with affordable eyewear, mobile electronic devices, travel comfort accessories and toys. "It's a key season



Matt and Brandi Bialek

"As of January 2, we have been officially taking orders for Victoria Day and Canada Day," says Matt Bialek, the second-generation owner of Manitoba-based Blast-Off Fireworks

for many of our clients."

According to Halim, orders start to arrive in March, as winter gives way to spring and c-store operators in touristy areas take advantage of the many

motions her company offers for summertime merchandise. "It's big business for us and them," she says. "On beautiful summer days people don't want to wait in line for 20 minutes at a box store when they can get what they want in a convenience store in two."

Ray Leviste agrees. As the owner of Sunrayzz Imports, one of the biggest online B2B wholesalers of imported eyewear in Canada, he says sales of sunglasses pop in May, when his company registers its biggest monthly volume in sales.

"We start getting orders in February, but things really pick up when it starts getting nice outside and people are on the move," says Leviste, who sells directly online to c-stores and other retailers like pharmacies and gift shops across Canada. "It takes us about a week to ship and we go hard from May until September when sales go down along with the temperature."

Though fireworks are less weather dependent—thanks to personal and public celebrations like birthdays, anniversaries, New Year's Eve and the Indian festival of Diwali—they too are a must-have item for many c-stores during the summer months.

"As of January 2, we have been officially taking orders for Victoria Day and Canada Day," says Matt Bialek, the second-generation owner of Manitoba-based Blast-Off Fireworks, a fireworks importer, distributor and educator that supplies more than 4,500 retailers across Canada's with everything from Roman candles and sound shells to fountains and family packs.

According to Bialek, demand for fireworks is "steady and broad" in both urban areas and cottage country in summer, when large public events and family gatherings generate the lion's share of industry sales.

"Our collection of family packs, which are almost fireworks displays in a box, are by far our most popular items," he says. "They are big ticket items with good margins and low risk of theft."

Anticipate customers' needs

For his part, Claude Beausoleil, who owns and operates Duggers Variety, a small c-store near the waterfront in the Ontario port town of Midland, 150 kms north of Toronto on Georgian Bay and a major gateway to the world-famous 30,000 Islands, summer begins in March when he starts placing orders for cigarettes and pop.

"I add a few brands like Belmont and Benson & Hedges that people from Toronto smoke, but the locals here don't," says Beausoleil, who has run the store, which he is now trying to sell, for 27 years. "And I'll add a third Crush product and maybe some Brisk or other drinks that I see the tourists like. It's all about experience, knowing what your customers want and planning ahead so you have those items when they come into your store." **CSNC**