



## The Demise of Free Air Isn't a Result of Inflation

GASOLINE STATIONS ONCE HAD AUTO MECHANICS, FREE AIR PUMPS, AND A FEW DRINKS AND SNACKS.

NOW THEY OFFER FULL MEALS AND A WIDE VARIETY OF DRINKS, BUT NO FREE AIR — AT LEAST NOT

UNLESS YOU KNOW THE SECRET SIGN. THERE'S A MORAL FOR YOUR BUSINESS HERE.

Mechanics were the first to go because increasingly complex cars needed increasingly complex and expensive diagnostic machines that the corner gas station couldn't justify.

So the mechanics were replaced by shelves full of bread, milk, cereal, and other items that people might buy to avoid a trip to the supermarket.

When the mechanics and their air-powered tools were gone, the air compressor was gone, too. Many gas stations purchased standalone tire inflation devices and continued to provide free air. That began to change in the mid-2000s.

### Convenience Stores Take Over

INSTEAD OF MECHANICS, CONVENIENCE STORES THAT ALSO SOLD GASOLINE HAD CLERKS.

Shelves of sandwiches and pizza, stacks of snacks, coolers full of beer, and bins of batteries don't need air compressors. The National Association of Convenience Stores says that more than 80% of the nation's gas stations are also convenience stores.

Gasoline is a commodity and stations earn virtually no profits from fuel sales, so station owners rely on customers coming into the store to purchase items. Most of



**REMEMBER WHEN GAS STATIONS WERE CALLED "SERVICE STATIONS" BECAUSE THEY COULD PROVIDE AT LEAST BASIC SERVICE SUCH AS OIL CHANGES, AND SOME OFFERED FAR MORE EXTENSIVE SERVICES?**

the station's profits come from the sales of these convenience items. Most stations clear just two or three cents per gallon on fuel.

Perhaps a station manager thought charging for air would be a good idea.

The air pump, instead of being a cost center, could be a profit center. If the air pump and maintenance cost \$250 per year (and that figure is nothing but a wild guess), that was \$250 off the bottom line.

If 100 people per month would pay 50 cents to use the air pump, that \$250 cost would become a \$350 profit.

I wrote about this in 2006: "I needed gasoline and I'd noticed that one of my car's tires was low, so I drove to the service station near my house. It's a BP station with beer, sandwiches, and something new: Air pumps that work only if the user inserts 50 cents per hit. Wrong answer. I bought no gas there. And because I hadn't gotten out of my car, I didn't buy any sandwiches or beer, either."

### Somebody Had a Smart Idea

EVEN THOUGH MANY STATIONS HAD INSTALLED AIR PUMPS THAT CHARGED 50 CENTS, THERE WERE OPTIONS.



**TODAY'S GAS STATIONS ARE PRIMARILY CONVENIENCE STORES THAT ALSO HAPPEN TO SELL GASOLINE. YOU WON'T FIND A SERVICE BAY OR A MECHANIC, BUT YOU WILL FIND DIAPERS, SODA AND BEER, SANDWICHES, COFFEE, AND MORE.**

A United Dairy Farmers store near my home had gasoline, sandwiches, ice cream cones, beer, and free air. I filled the tires and bought some gasoline, then went inside and bought some beer. No sandwiches, though, or ice cream.

Fourteen years later, air pumps charge \$1.50 or more for four minutes worth of air, and there is no station with a free air pump near my home.

## It's Not the Money

WHEN PEOPLE SAY "IT'S NOT THE MONEY", IT OFTEN IS THE MONEY. BUT \$1.50 FOR AIR EVERY FEW MONTHS?

So it's really **not** the money. It's about a customer's perception of being valued. Air just seems like it should be free.

The BP station that introduced me to the concept of paid air is now a Duchess station and it has free air even though the pump shows

a price of \$1.50. Free air requires a Duchess Crown Card, a run-of-the-mill loyalty card that offers discounts to customers who come in frequently.

This is a clever way to convert something that annoys customers into a plus. Charging for air adds a bit to the bottom line of any gas station and loyalty cards reduce profits a bit, but what's the long-term value of customers who patronize one store instead of another simply because of the perceived value of the loyalty card?

The moral of this little story? *Keep non-marketers away from marketing decisions.*

Accountants are needed. They're the ones who tell management whether the business is making money or losing money. But "bean counters" aren't marketers and they shouldn't be allowed to make marketing decisions because their choices will almost always create short-term wins and long-term losses.

Leave marketing decisions to those with marketing expertise. Or common sense.

Common sense says annoying customers is bad business and common sense knows that there's no long-term benefit to be gained from lost customers even if you score a short-term win. 🚫

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# Good Website Hosting Services are Hard to Find

FINDING A HOSTING SERVICE WITH EXCELLENT SUPPORT HAS NEVER BEEN EASY, AND IT'S NOT GETTING ANY EASIER. FORTUNATELY, MOST ARE ADEQUATE MUCH OF THE TIME.

In mid November, a client reported that his marketing emails were not displaying images that should have been present. We use MailChimp to send the messages and images are sourced from the client's website. No images meant the website was inaccessible.

The hosting service had just migrated the site to a new server with enhanced features, so clearly something had gone wrong with the migration. Assuming this would be a quick, easy fix, I contacted the host's support team. Three days later, the site was still inaccessible.

The hosting service's explanation seemed incomplete and possibly incorrect. The level 1 technicians appeared not to understand domain name service settings any better than I did, so I asked the client's tech support service to get involved.

Level 1 technicians should have been able to resolve the problem, but they didn't. Neither did level 2 or level 3 technicians. After three days, the issue finally bubbled up to a manager who identified the problem and fixed it immediately. **Three days! More than 72 hours!**

Maybe the level 1 tech didn't have the necessary knowledge to see that an IP address had not been updated properly, but this is the kind of problem that second- and third-level techs should be able to find and resolve in their sleep. No manager should have been involved.

The underlying problem seems to be that first-level technicians are paid to close tickets even if the situation hasn't been fully resolved, and even if doing so loses customers occasionally. Hosting services care only about numbers: If they host 250,000 domains, losing one or two doesn't matter.

So the question you may be asking yourself is *which new hosting service have we selected?* The answer is that we're not moving. Most of the time, service is acceptable.

Most of my clients use the hosting service that I've carefully avoided naming. I use the service for my own sites. The hosting service is a standard economy operation, but paying more guarantees only that you'll spend more on hosting, not that you'll get better service. Additionally, hosting service owners know how difficult it is to move a site from one host to another.

***"THE HOSTING SERVICE'S EXPLANATION SEEMED INCOMPLETE AND POSSIBLY INCORRECT."***

The situation was worse in the 1990s, and I walked away from expensive prepaid hosting accounts at least twice. The unnamed hosting service has provided generally reliable service for more than a decade.

It started as an operation that was owned by an individual in Utah, and support was provided from Utah. This was the ideal situation, but growth happened. A mammoth hosting service acquired the company and many other independents.

Support suffered. Several years ago, the company dropped support tickets, so the only options were phone calls and online chat. Both calls and chat sessions involved waiting on hold for 30 to 90 minutes.

Following a flood of complaints, the management company moved support to India. Response time improved so that wait times for calls or chats were no more than five minutes and usually less.

The pandemic has undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on hosting services; frustration and even anger are understandable. Despite the anger and frustration, it's important to understand that making changes based on temporary annoyances is counterproductive.

So we're staying where we are, at least for now. 🚫