

Road Ranger Starts A New Kind Of Gas Card Cascade

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Road Ranger wants to card you.

But it'll give you a penny or a nickel off a gallon of gas if you play along.

The Rockford-based gas station chain is joining the ranks of companies offering consumer cards that give savings on fuel and other purchases.

But unlike most competitors' offerings, it isn't a credit card. It's a loyalty card that gives you instant savings — not a rebate check — and gives you more if you link it to a checking account and use it like a debit card.

"We know that over 60 percent of our business comes from 40 percent of our regular customers," said David Van Dreal, loyalty manager. "The thing we want to do is take care of those customers."

The free cards are available at only two locations now, but they can be used at any Road Ranger convenience store (although there are limitations on discounts outside of Illinois). The company's truck stops will go online later this year.

Once some glitches get worked out, cards will be available at all Rock River Valley locations.

While several local gas station chains offer credit cards with fuel rebates, only Hilander offers an instant savings on a non-credit card. Marathon offers discounts when you buy prepaid cards.

A few other chains around the country are trying the rewards card model, said Jeff Lenard, spokesman for the National Association of Convenience Stores.

"Customer loyalty usually is defined by your gas price. That means the customer's loyalty will only last until their next fill-up," he said. "Customers will do a lot to save a little at the pump."

With Road Ranger's program, users get an automatic 1-cent-a-gallon gasoline savings with the regular card. If they pay in cash or use the card as a debit card, they get a 5-cent-a-gallon saving.

Basically, the chain is passing along its savings by getting you to avoid using a credit card. Credit card companies typically charge 2.5 to 3 percent per transaction, which can be at least 10 cents a gallon when gas is at \$4.

Road Ranger is also offering discounts in the store, including 30 cents a gallon of milk, 1 percent on other items, and new coffee and slushie frequent-buyer programs.

That's indicative of another trend, Lenard said. Gas stations used to make most of their profits on gasoline, but with tight fuel margins the profit is now from selling large volumes of in-store merchandise.

Road Ranger will track customers' purchases so it knows what kinds of items customers buy during the same visit. For example, if you buy soda and chips each time, the store might sell the two items side-by-side. Van Dreal said customers' information will never be sold or given to other companies, and customers will be able to see their own purchase histories.

Road Ranger has 73 locations in seven states. The goal is to reach 100 stores by the end of the year or sometime in 2009.

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How to sign up

Ranger Rewards Cards are usable at all convenience stores, but for now are only available at two locations:

172 S. Bell School Road, Rockford

2406 Bell School Road, Cherry Valley

For more information, visit roadrangerusa.com/rewards/index.htm.