



DON RYAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

15511  
Cars line up for gasoline in Portland, Ore. The summer vacation season typically spawns gasoline-related promotions.

# Pain at fuel pump a boon for marketers

LAURA SMITHERMAN  
THE BALTIMORE SUN

When fuel prices rise, drivers grumble and politicians talk energy crisis.

Marketers see opportunity.

Koons car dealerships in Maryland and Virginia offer some buyers up to five years' worth of gasoline. **Consumer Club.com** is offering shoppers \$10 off their gasoline purchases when they buy \$100 of merchandise via its Web site. The American Red Cross is giving blood donors a chance to win \$100 gasoline cards.

The summer vacation season typically spawns gasoline-related promotions, and marketing experts say this year looks like a bonanza.

"When Americans are spending more than \$50 to fill their tanks, all of a sudden that reaches a threshold of pain they don't like to experience," said Britt Beemer, founder of America's Research Group, a consumer marketing company. "The longer gas prices stay up, the more it becomes a great marketing strategy."

Pain at the pump, it seems, can serve as a marketing tool. Not only are retailers advertising prepaid gasoline cards and rebates, but credit card companies that offer cash back on purchases are boosting those rebates when a card is used to pay for gasoline.

Hotels reward bookings for more than one night's stay, with discounts to help cover the cost of fuel. Amusement parks reduce admission for guests who show a gasoline receipt.

Marketers are hoping that by picking up the tab for a tank or two, they can ingratiate themselves or call attention to a product or cause.

For **ConsumerClub.com**, a rebate and comparison-shopping site that links to more than 700 retailers, the gasoline rebate was a first. President Bob Diener said the promotion is intended to drive home that it's cheaper to shop online.

Another Web site, **BedandBreakfast.com**, is promoting its "Tanks a Lot" program, in which hoteliers offer free gas and discounts to guests.

At Historic Inns in Rockland, Maine, the midweek discount for guests depends on their car; it's equal to 10 times the number of cylinders in the engine.

In recent years, credit card companies have offered rebates on everyday purchases such as gasoline and groceries to get consumers accustomed to using credit, as opposed to cash.

The idea, in industry parlance, is to get the company's card "top-of-wallet" status over other cards.

"When gas prices go up, sure there's a marketing opportunity for them to use that as a draw," said Brent Stratford, a vice president at Synovate, a market research company. "These type of hot-button issues for consumers are a good way to market to existing cardholders. They're saying, 'Take our card with you on vacation and we'll give you a rebate on the gas you used.'" ❖