



## Loyalty and the future forecourt

**Where is the future of loyalty heading in the forecourt industry? Paula Thomas, Chief Content Officer at Liquid Barcodes and an independent loyalty consultant, writes about what is next for forecourt loyalty.**

It's not often enough that we stand back from our everyday working lives and wonder what's truly possible to achieve. Beyond the busy responsibilities of everyday tasks to manage our loyalty programmes and drive our businesses forward, how often do we take the time to imagine exciting new possibilities to inspire ourselves and create something new and extra-ordinary?

As a [loyalty marketing consultant](#), writing extensively about [driving loyalty in convenience retail](#), this article is giving me a chance to do exactly that. Beyond the limitations of any one project brief, brand guidelines or legacy system limitations, join me in imagining how we can (and will!) enhance loyalty on our forecourts as time and technology evolve.

Firstly a definition - "loyalty" is not a programme, it's an emotion, so this article will discuss both principles and innovative technology applications that are driving customer loyalty in exciting ways. As loyalty marketers, our job is to move customers beyond the transaction-led programmes and mindset of the past, to the compelling concepts and true customer connections of the future.

### **Principles of Loyalty**

Before we explore the ways to drive loyal behaviour in the future, there are some critical principles that are today already defined as loyalty best practice today, but aren't always followed. Let's recap these basics before we leap into our future vision:

#### **1) Simplicity**

The essential approach for loyalty on the forecourt is simplicity. Demands for consumer's attention are increasing to the point of overwhelm, so brands that cut through with simple, clear concepts will automatically delight customers.

The latest technologies that simplify life for customers include payment-linked loyalty, where customers are recognised and rewarded simply from their payment card, and also subscription programmes, where customers get a bundled pricing model for unlimited access to the products they buy everyday anyway.

So the most innovative loyalty programmes of the future will not only include the ability to order, pay,

play, share treats, claim offers and earn rewards as most currently do, but also incorporate these latest payment models for customers like me for whom excessive till time on a busy day feels like the ultimate inconvenience. Let's relieve customers of the need to present either a plastic or even a digital loyalty card for their shopping, and save them the hassle of daily payments for daily purchases when they could more easily pay us once in advance.

## 2) Trust and Transparency

The [Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019](#) leads with the headline "trust reaches troubling low levels", so no brand can expect to survive as a business or earn any customer loyalty without first establishing trust. Brands like [Starbucks](#) in the US and Hema Supermarkets (part of the Alibaba Group of companies) in China are already building "trace-ability" in to their apps.

Customers simply scan QR codes and can access a product's origins and processing history. The information includes audits such as pictures of the distributor's operating permits and food safety certificates - part of a movement [described as](#) "extreme digitalization".

This attention to detail is an exciting example how any retailers' loyalty app can host content about its products that goes way beyond the minimum space available on the product's packaging - earning trust (and loyalty) over time with consumers who will increasingly expect to have access this information.

## 3) Sustainability

The [number one concern](#) for the number one consumer group in the world is the environment. More than half of the world's population are concerned about this "unprecedented global emergency" and are actively choosing to support brands that stand for sustainability. Ideas that allow fuel forecourts and their customers to offset their carbon emissions are an essential step towards addressing consumer concerns around how we individually and collectively behave.

I recently attended the [NACS Europe Convenience Summit](#) and was left in no doubt that we as an industry have huge challenges ahead as we face up our environmental responsibilities, whether by supporting new solutions such as electric vehicles, or finding ways to use less plastic.

Loyal customers will demand a more sustainable model - *loyalty to the planet* perhaps becoming a real opportunity to differentiate.

### So What's Next For Forecourt Loyalty?

So this is the fun part. While there are dramatic retail technology trends in Asian markets in particular, for those of us in the Western world, I personally don't see them arriving in our forecourts anytime soon. Technologies such as facial recognition, artificial intelligence and augmented reality, as well as robots replacing human staff could bring more complexity than benefits, as regulation around GDPR and other cultural issues first need to be addressed.

So here I will instead showcase ideas that are truly exciting and relevant and I expect will emerge on to our forecourts in the next five years. These ideas indicate the near-term future of loyalty, as I see it at least.

### **Wish One - Voice Assisted Ordering**

For me, the elusive magic happens when clever technology extends beyond early adopters to mainstream use.

We've mentioned above how most fuel retail apps offer the ability to pre-order and pre-pay along with helping us track our points and rewards. However most convenience programmes are based on tapping - tap to order, tap to pay etc - and this makes perfect sense in many situations - but not when I'm driving!

If I had a magic wand for an overnight evolution that would drive my forecourt loyalty, it would be for Alexa and Siri (my preferred voice assistants) to understand my favourite coffee order, and place that order for me at the nearest branch of my preferred fuel station. As I already use their loyalty application, my payment details are stored, and the voice assistant offers the perfect solution instead of waiting to park in order to tap my phone.

I would happily use the same voice assistant ahead of time to pre-order and pre-pay my snacks and treats, ready for collection at either a drive-thru window or at a designated pick-up point in store. With payment already made, this ensures no queues or delays. Instead I rely on my loyalty app to order my favourite products at my command, ensuring I receive all of my rewards and eliminating the friction along the way.

While it's not clear yet how many customers are using voice assistants, the 2019 Annual Internet trends Report just released by Mary Meeker (dubbed the "[Queen of the Internet](#)") confirms over 47 million Amazon Echo devices in use globally, reflecting changing behaviour and a marked move to voice assistants - an emerging trend we will undoubtedly see incorporated in the loyalty programmes of the future.

### **Wish Two - Cheaper and Easier Ways to Pay**

It's not just consumers that want cheaper and easier ways to pay - the costs of credit card payments is borne by retailers, many of whom may be excited at this weeks announcement of "Libra" - the new global cryptocurrency backed by stable assets and run by an independent finance organisation who will manage the interests of 28 digital giants when it launches in 2020.

While the public has become [increasingly wary](#) of Facebook's behaviour in recent years, there's no doubt that in theory at least, this global digital currency does offer an interesting alternative to traditional payment methods of either cash or cards.

Already some forecourt retailers are embracing cryptocurrencies, with [Circle K in the USA already adding some Bitcoin ATM's to their network](#), so the forecourt of the future will certainly need to pay

close attention to what currencies digital customers want to pay with, in order to earn their respect and loyalty.

### **Wish Three - Enjoyable Experiences**

While it's certainly true that gas stations "are among the least celebrated works of architecture", there's no doubt that the exact same audience driving the growth of the \$600 billion "grab and go" convenience business, is the same audience demanding ever-better experiences from retailers.

The future forecourt retailer will need to cater to longer dwell times as electric vehicles re-charge, and in my view this will demand an increasingly premium experience in order to become the destination of choice with loyal customers. Even in this digital era, ["the most efficient and effective marketing is one's own product, plus happy customers, plus recommendations"](#).

I believe that the forecourt of the future will embrace a "surprise and delight" approach to creating increasingly enjoyable in-store experiences and embrace the best that technology can deliver to ensure their brand delivers equally delightful digital experiences.

*With over twenty-five years marketing experience, **Paula Thomas** specialises in loyalty marketing consulting, managing consumer loyalty propositions, strategy and operations. **Liquid Barcodes** is a leading global loyalty and digital marketing technology company specialised for the convenience store and foodservice industries.*