

Petrol PLAZA

Interview with Jorge de Benito: “Spanish petrol stations need the Government’s help”

PetrolPlaza speaks to Jorge de Benito, President of a Spanish confederation with over 4,000 petrol stations. He discusses the key role that the sector is playing in the struggle against the coronavirus, the need for financial support from the Government, and basic recommendations for health and safety.



Jorge de Benito

Spain has the fourth highest number of coronavirus infections in the world and, after China and Italy, the third highest death rate. The country has close to 40,000 infected cases and just under 3,000 deaths. All businesses remain closed except for those considered to be essential, such as gas stations, supermarkets and pharmacies. We spoke to Jorge de Benito, President of the Spanish Confederation of Service Station Owners (CEEES), about how they are surviving the crisis.

Service stations are one of the few businesses that have remained open through the state of alarm. Over 98% of petrol stations are open nationwide. Could you describe why stations are so important in the context of the virus and isolation measures?

One hundred percent of the service stations that make up CEEES are open. We play an essential role at the moment. If products are being supplied to pharmacies and supermarkets, it is because there is a service station behind it that is providing fuel to those trucks and vans. The sites are also helping to cover the basic needs of drivers with toilets and, in many cases, showers. The same thing is happening with civil protection vehicles, ambulances, national police... All the services that are essential are moving because gas stations are open. We are the guarantors of mobility.

What measures are you suggesting from the Confederation for the operation of service stations?

Since the beginning of the crisis, the CEEES committee is working tirelessly. The first thing we have

tried is to organize the service stations based on the regulations we have. We have provided legal and safety advice. We have to be realistic – until 8 days ago nobody had facemasks or gloves. Not in petrol stations and not in any other businesses.

Both current regulations and common sense oblige us to continually disinfect toilets. The problem is we do not have the necessary means to disinfect. We've asked the Ministry of Health to tell us what to do and to give us the means. No response thus far.



Pumps and dispensers are being disinfected | © CEEES

Workers have shown great initiative in response to a lack of resources. Through WhatsApp we are sharing various initiatives such as how to make homemade protective screens. There are partners of ours who have taken advertising displays, cut them out, hung them from the ceiling, and now they are used as protective screens for customers and employees.

There are a large number of companies that are now manufacturing facemasks and screens. We are in contact with our partners to inform them about all kinds of initiatives as well as official sales. We still don't have enough gloves. Some workers have to reuse facemasks after disinfecting them.

What do you demand from the government to make the situation more bearable?

We ask for some kind of financial support. We are working to keep the country going and we are in a very difficult situation. Service stations have to open, we need to have staff there and we are not selling anything. This weekend the drop in sales has been of up to 99% at some sites. There are ongoing conversations with the Industry Administration and they have promised to help.

There have also been discussions with the Administration to guarantee minimum services in each

area but allowing some stations to shut down.

We need more safety equipment. And not just for the operators. We are a fantastic place for the delivery of masks to haulers and heavy-duty vehicle drivers. We put our network of stations at the service of the Government to help.

Has fuel distribution and logistics been affected?

There will be fuel. That won't be an issue. Our main suppliers have assured us they are committed to continue working. Spain has reserves to go 90 days with the country operating at maximum capacity. So in the current scenario in which we are operating at 10% of the usual, there is no danger of shortage.



Ambulances and police cars get free car washes | © CEEES

Many service stations are offering free services to professionals such as firefighters, police and ambulances.

The initiative started in Almería and is being implemented in many parts of the country. In Cantabria [a region in North Spain], all gas stations that are part of the association are giving free washes to essential vehicles (police, civil protection and ambulances). Cleanliness is key in this situation.

What kind of economic impact do these circumstances have on the sector?

Economically, the situation is unsustainable. We have to stay open because we are an essential service but our sales are extremely low and we have to pay our employees, social security and other expenses. So far there has been no help. The financial aid has focused on businesses that had to close down. We find ourselves in no man's land.

After China, South Korea and Iran, Spain has been among the first to impose a state of alarm and national quarantine. What recommendations can you give to site operators in other countries who may find themselves in a similar situation?

I would recommend that all stations go into self-service mode with the worker at the checkout. The worker should be protected by a screen. The screens can be ordered, if there is a company that can provide them. Otherwise, they will have to be made by someone on site. There must be a safety separation between the people who enter the store - if they must go in. We have put tape on the floor with a meter separation between each client. Bathrooms must be closed for the public, only open for the use of essential services. Toilets, floors and pumps should be disinfected as often as possible. Stations must be as clean as possible. Workers should wear a facemask and gloves in addition to the protective screen. These are not very scientific recommendations, but that's what we have.

Interview by Oscar Smith Diamante