

BUSINESS



Daily News Photo By SIG BOKALDERS

Richard Gray recently started selling food and other convenience items from his Palm Beach service station.

PB service station pampers clients

Richard Gray may be the only service station owner in Florida who drives his clients to board meetings and beauty shops while their cars are being fixed. But then again, he's one of the few who serves the residents of Palm Beach. Here, the owner of Gray's Mobil discusses his 14-year-old business and its recent changes.

— CYNTHIA WASHAM

As a college business major, you thought you might go into the sporting goods or clothing business. What made you decide to run a gas station with your father? Ever have any regrets?

We found ourselves in a situation that we just could not possibly pass up. We were not looking for a joint business venture. The station went up for sale, we knew the owner and we thought it would be a wise investment.

My biggest regret is that the management of the station consumes so much of my time and does not allow me to spend as much time with my wife and children as I would like.

You offer some special services to your customers while their cars are being repaired. Could you explain your unique service and why you provide it?

I offer the following special services: **Pick up and/or drop off** of clients and their cars, off-season car maintenance for clients who are out of town, and assistance with car registration.

I offer these services because my clients have been loyal to me and expect the same services I have offered to them.

You recently became the second business in Palm Beach to offer convenience items such as milk, bread and other necessities. How have your customers responded?

I have had an incredibly positive response. Not only are the island residents thrilled with the new convenience store, but employers that work on the island love it because I offer fresh deli sandwiches, chips and soft drinks at the lowest prices on the island.

I also offer extended hours and the store and station are open on Sundays.

When you switched from BP to Mobil several months ago, you said that Mobil was a better quality gasoline. What makes it better? How important is gas quality for the valuable luxury and sports cars many Palm Beachers drive?

Mobil gasoline is better because it has a fuel additive that keeps fuel injectors clean. It also has the highest octane level available. Gas quality is important because high performance cars need this type of gas to perform properly.

Recent data from the Palm Beach County Division of Consumer Affairs showed that the type of business that generates the most complaints is auto repairs. Why do you think so many customers are dissatisfied?

I think that people depend on their automobiles so heavily for transportation and their livelihood that they automatically blame any car problems on the last person that worked on the car. The majority of people who complain are the ones that do not properly maintain

their cars and do not have a reliable and trustworthy mechanic.

What do you do to keep your business out of the county's complaint file?

I do not have complaints because I stress to my clients that it is imperative that they perform preventative maintenance on their cars.

Self-service has replaced full service at many gas stations. You offer both. Do you think the market for full service will survive? Why or why not?

I think that full-service will definitely survive, particularly on the island of Palm Beach. My clients expect this service and I will always provide it.

In recent years, gas prices have gone up and down repeatedly. Where do you see them going in the next year?

It is impossible for me to predict future gasoline prices, due to the fact that we have a new president in office.

Ethanol is being used experimentally in motor vehicles. With pressure to clean up the environment, do you see ethanol, or other alternative fuels, replacing gasoline?

I do not see ethanol or other alternative fuels replacing gasoline because most high-performance cars can not function properly with these.

You work long days, including Saturdays. What do you do to relax?

My relaxation usually revolves around my wife, Carmen, and our children. We love to take weekend vacations at different spots around Florida. I also enjoy racquetball, golf and weekend barbecues with friends and family.