



JIM FISHER

is the founder and CEO of Houston-based IMST Corp., a retail location analysis firm serving the convenience store/petroleum industries. He can be reached at jfisher@imstcorp.com.

Challenging Winds of Change

I have experienced (either in it or too close to it) one devastating tornado, a Nor'easter, four minor earthquakes, one volcanic eruption, several tropical storms, three hurricanes and one major flood. After July 5, I added one haboob to these "special moments."

Probably the first thing you are saying to yourself is, "Find out where Fisher is at any given moment and stay the heck away from him." (This is the same position you should take with my success with professional sports—another column for another time.) Or maybe, "What was the experience like?"

The dictionary defines haboob as "an intense sand storm in arid regions." In Arabic it means "strong storm." For the first time in recorded history in Phoenix, a haboob moved across the valley in the early evening of July 5. I have to think most people were like me and had no idea they were in the middle of such a weather event. It

was not until later that evening, when all of the photographs and videos showed up, that it was verified the massive "wall" was more than 4,000 feet high and more than 70 miles wide, wielding extremely high winds and creating nearly zero visibility and more than 300 vehicle accidents.

The haboob's collateral damage included the entire metropolitan area being covered in a layer of dust/sand, condensers having to be cleaned, pools having to be serviced, golf courses having to be cleaned, and sidewalks, patios, etc., having to be scrubbed. The list goes on.

AN INDUSTRY HABOOB

A significant after-effect was the varied responses by members of the community. Cleanup began almost immediately for many businesses to ensure their customers were not inconvenienced. Members of our industry scrubbed forecourts, cleaned dispensers, swept interiors and overstaffed car washes to handle the onslaught of vehicles being "restored." Car washes played an important role: Due to the grittiness of the dust/sand,



cars could not be simply wiped off; they had to be washed to ensure that damage did not occur to the cars' surface.

Just as so many businesses quickly and positively responded to restore their facilities, it appeared that nearly an equal amount simply did nothing, assuming the position of, "It will eventually go away." Recognizing these two distinct attitudes formed a comparison of positions assumed when a competitive haboob occurs in our industry—that is, when folks figure out that a significant competitor is entering a new marketplace. We have witnessed such

announcements many times over the past couple of decades; the degree of difference in how existing retail operators respond is telling.

Usually, the first reaction is the feeling of concern, not panic or a sense of frustration. Strategies are developed, corporate decisions are made, "war rooms" are established, and an entirely new series of evaluation processes are initiated. In many cases, a deep (nearly soulful) searching begins to happen. Do we as a company commit the heightened level of capital investment required to compete on an expanded playing field, or do we exit the marketplace?

It is during such a challenging storm that a company must identify and analyze its strengths and weaknesses, establish its actual level of employee and customer awareness, and know how it is viewed by both groups. The established market player must study the new market penetrator, identify and analyze its strengths and weaknesses, profile its customers and learn its overall operational corporate philosophy. The established player must recognize the fact the penetrator is not only targeting the customers of the player, but also targeting the player's employees. It takes a complete, knowledgeable team to compete in a new marketplace; where better to gain the experience?

A sweeping storm brings many things with it. After it passes, it presents an opportunity for renewal and restoration. A new normal is created. And the marketplace always changes. ■