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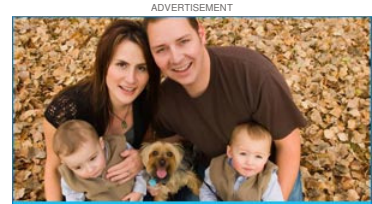
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By: LOUIS LLOVIO | Richmond Times-Dispatch Published: July 13, 2012

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The convenience store industry is getting tougher every day for the owners of mom-and-pop stores who are fighting an increasingly frustrating battle with large chains, grocery stores and major national retailers.

Independent convenience stores operators also must battle fast food chains that are getting more aggressive with coffee offerings and pricing on sodas, said Shiv Patel, vice president of business development for Star Express, which operates four area stores.

"Instead of coming to our location for a drink, (a customer) is going to McDonald's," Patel said. "The industry lines are blurring."

To help level the playing field, the Virginia Asian American Store Owners Association brought about 120 vendors together under one roof Thursday for the Mid-Atlantic C-Store Expo at the Richmond Raceway Complex in eastern Henrico County. The event drew about 2,000 people from across the mid-Atlantic.

Given the difficulties facing small shop owners, connecting vendors with store owners goes a long way toward helping to narrow the gap, said Minesh Patel, chairman of the local business organization that put on the expo.

"To unite everybody one day and try to negotiate better pricing for members, that's our whole goal," he said.

Minesh Patel knows firsthand the challenges facing owners. He has been in the industry for 22 years and owns Rams Petroleum, a Richmond-based 10-store chain.

"If I'm a gas-station owner, I have to fight with Kroger, Costco's, Sam's Club and any big boxes," he said.

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Bringing the large number of vendors together also benefits the merchants who get access to wholesalers they might not otherwise be able to talk to.

Sunny Patel, who owns four stores in Virginia Beach, said he's often ignored or forgotten by vendors.

"I come here (and) I get a look at a lot of new products," he said. "It's a good idea. We get to see all the vendors at

one time."

The daylong expo also allows the vendors to have one-on-one time

"This is a good opportunity for us. It helps us get a local market," said Imports, which distributes tobacco products to small and midsize re

Other vendors included national and regional fuel distributors, food franchisees and drink companies. The array of products ranged fro

"We got a lot of people coming by today," said Theresa McKinnell, Inc., a Pennsylvania-based meat products company.

She was giving away freshly made hotdogs to passers-by in the hc Kunzler products. "We always have a good reaction."



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