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Mathieu Robillard, VP, operations, retail network and cardlock, Harnois Énergies

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PROUD OF THE PAST, FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

QUEBEC-BASED HARNOIS ÉNERGIES

PROUD OF THE PAST, FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

As a Quebec-based family-owned business, Harnois Énergies is showing its customers they deserve the very best, by investing in technology, foodservice and a reimagined convenience offering at its nearly 500 sites

BY TOM VENETIS

PORTRAIT BY CHANTALE LECOURS





Harnois is reimagining the retail experience, with customer-centric renovations, including at this site in Lavaltrie, Que.

HARNOIS ÉNERGIES IS proud of its Quebec roots and family history.

Started in 1958 by Claude Harnois as a home heating oil distribution business under the B/A brand, it has since grown to become a significant player in Canada's gasoline and convenience industry. Today it operates close to 500 locations in nine provinces, primarily in Eastern Canada, representing the Esso brand across several Quebec regions and operating gas stations under its own Harnois name.

Its vast network includes full-service and self-service gas stations, car washes and fast-food restaurants, as well as its Proxi convenience stores.

The well-known Proxi convenience store operation came about when the company combined several of its retail banners under the single Proxi banner, and then expanded the Proxi convenience store offering outside of Quebec.

Targeting growth

Mathieu Robillard, vice-president, operations, retail network and cardlock with Harnois Énergies says the company has been able to

Mathieu Robillard, VP, operations, retail network and cardlock, Harnois Énergies



Foodservice is a key component of the Harnois offering, providing customers a wide selection of ready-made options



There is no one-size-fits-all solution, instead Harnois caters its retail offering, including this mobile store, to the community it serves



Many Harnois sties also include a QSR offering, designed to meet the needs of the local communities

grow successfully over these 67 years because it has focused on organic growth, as well as several strategic and notable acquisitions, including the 2023 purchase of 52 former Wilsons sites in Atlantic Canada from Alimentation Couche-Tard.

One way it has gone about that is by reinforcing its Canadian, and most certainly, the company's deep Quebec roots. The company is justly proud of its history and how it has grown by partnering with other established Canadian-based firms and suppliers.

Robillard adds Harnois always makes sure to let its many fuel and convenience customers, and its partners, know of the company's Canadian and Quebec roots, and work with local partners and businesses. This is important, especially now, as Canadians look to support Canadian companies and products in the wake of the tariff threats coming from the United States, which will impact Canadian businesses and consumers.

In May of last year, for example, Harnois Énergies and Michaud Petroleum entered into an agreement that would see the companies form an entity to distribute fuel, lubricants and specialty products, and operate three service stations and six oil depots.

It has even been at the forefront of decarbonization, with the announcement of the company introducing the first hydrogen-powered truck to Quebec in collaboration with the Nikola Corporation and ITD Industries, showcasing both the viability of this technology for heavy-transport—an important industry in Quebec—and how non-traditional fuels will have a place in the company's energy portfolio offerings. In addition, Harnois currently has 15 locations that provide electric vehicle charging, supporting the province's push to have more electric vehicles on its roads.

Focusing on convenience

Robillard says Harnois' Proxi convenience store offering is a customer-centric space, "where a customer can come in and they will find everything they need in a single location."

The Proxi network currently consists of 187 stores across six provinces: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, PEI and Newfoundland. Starting in 2023, Harnois began redesigning its locations to better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Taking a flexible approach

Robillard describes the approach as "modern and warm, with a physical design that differentiates us from other c-store operators. And it is a design that is adaptable to the market where the store is to operate."

Robillard explains that the store is not a fixed concept, a single design template that will be repeated across all locations. "We will try to adapt the design to the location and the customer demographic, to match the customer's need," he adds.

"There are a number of different things we look at, but when we look at a location to operate in, we look at can the location be adapted to what we need to offer to the customers in that market," he says. "We take a flexible approach to each location. There is no 'one-size-fits-all'. Instead, we look at each location and we will adapt our store footprint and offerings to what is best for that location and for the customers in that area."

He points to the renovation that was completed in 2023 of the Proxi location in Lavaltrie, Que., outside of Montreal. The site was expanded to over 2,000 sq. ft., taking over an empty storefront next door. Harnois redesigned the space to be more than a simple convenience store. Instead, it resembles a small but very well-appointed grocery store, offering a wide variety of essential and local products, as well as an expanded foodservice offering.



Harnois is positioning itself as a gourmet coffee destination, featuring state-of-the-art machines for specialty beverages

Going full out on foodservice

Robillard says the reason for that is the community where it is located lacked a grocery store, and the expansion and renovation of the Proxi store offered an opportunity to meet that community need, and to showcase what Proxi means to customers, which he says can be summed up by the phrase "you deserve it." That is, you as a customer deserve fresh and well-prepared foods and other grocery items, and a friendly and supportive staff.

The Lavaltrie stores showcases a diverse selection of foodservices, including, Robillard says, a wide selection of traditional drinks found in all convenience stores and a healthy selection of alcoholic seltzers, red wine and white wine, which can be paired with the curated selection of cheese and meats, all from Quebec.

There is an onsite kitchen where cooks create an assortment of ready-to-eat meals, including both cold plates (sandwich salad, pita, snacks, prepared meals) and hot meals (pizza, fries, breakfast offers, soups and rotisserie chicken), and a range of baked-in-store and pre-packaged bakery products available in single or bulk options. The frozen food selection again matches what one can find in a grocery store, with meats sourced from local butchers, which can be paired with fresh fruits and vegetables, cheese and fine cheese, charcuterie, fresh pasta, sauces and salads.

"It is very much a place you can come in and get something for work, for your lunch and for dinner for your family," Robillard adds. "The menu is expanding as well. We are adding more healthy meals, vegan and vegetarian options, so you will find everything there that meets your needs."

For those who crave gourmet coffee, the Lavaltrie café features a state-of-the-art coffee machine offering lattes, cappuccinos and espressos.

Investing in technology

Robillard says Harnois has also invested in back-office systems to help better identify customer trends.

For instance, technology will help improve customer service by tying it into Harnois' Proxi Extra loyalty program to provide a better and more personal shopping experience.

This, says Robillard, is how the Quebec-based family business will continue to grow its Harnois, Proxi and related banners: by knowing who their customers are, what they need and being there for them. OCTANE