SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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Thank you for taking submissions on this important issue.

I worked with Mobil (Quix) during 2004-2007 as a console operator in Upwey, where we were one of the only 24 hour businesses in the hills (Mt. Dandenong and surrounds).

During this time, drive-offs were an on-going issue. We had a written black list of number plates that we kept at our console in order to deny fuel to those who were driving a vehicle that had multiple drive-offs or "IOUs"

One of the biggest issues we faced was not direct drive-offs, but people coming in to the store and claiming that they could not pay for petrol. There were many people who worked out that they could use the naivety or kind nature of the staff against the business in order to get free petrol. The business had a policy to avoid this and I believe that particular problem is best dealt with through company policy - But when we did disagree with people or had them come back for multiple IOUs without paying, we were never able to sort out debt collection. Again, this may have been better done through private debt collection services than government intervention.

Many of those who did this also did drive-offs too. We would not authorise the sale of petrol to those with black-listed number plates, which created an incentive for people to steal numberplates in and around the hills - which then created an incentive for us to detail model and car features. As you can imagine, especially during busy times, this becomes a debilitating process to add to the many other duties that a strained console operator usually has to fulfill.

We were always told that there was a new camera system just on the horizon which would read number plates and create a registry. I'm guessing that considering this inquiry is happening, this technology is still not widely used.

Some services stations (including the one I worked at) used pre-pay technology during certain hours, but that was not well implemented and it often frustrated customers who were unaware of the procedure.

My understanding is that during the time since I worked there, the numberplate recognition
technology has been improved upon and should be available commercially. Perhaps the best way to implement such technology would be to set up a government agency that administers the technology, to which private companies sign up to.

A government agency with an appropriately administered Act could overcome privacy issues that could arise from storing and tracking numberplate data, while also allowing competitive businesses to collaborate on a common issue.

The agency could track numberplates and also any drive offs, making it possible to block certain numberplates from receiving petrol from all participating businesses and also providing a debt-collection service / fine service. I don't imagine criminal penalties would be appropriate for most offenses. Civil penalties alongside being barred from getting petrol would likely deter those who steal petrol.

An appeal process would also be important, in order to cover for any issues (stolen car, stolen number plate etc).

For-profit models should be absolutely avoided in these situations. The intention should always be to recuperate lost funds and provide disincentives for future criminal behaviour of the sort.

Those who steal number plates make it much more difficult to deal with the problem. If a surveillance system was reading number plates, it would also presumably be able to take good pictures of offending vehicles. If this data could be made instantly available to staff and then they could call local police, this would assist them in catching the criminal.

A centrally administered and shared database with the proper oversights, transparency and a not-for-profit model is, in my opinion, the ideal way to deal with this issue.

Thank you for accepting submissions and I hope that you find a solution to this frustrating problem.

Kind regards,

-Nicholas Bran Wallis