

FUELING SMARTER GROWTH

Orton Oil Company Partners with Cenex® to Drive ROI and Dealer Success



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fuel Operator Finds a Growth Partner in Cenex

Facing a fragmented image and increasing supply uncertainty, Orton Oil recognized the need for a stronger, more reliable partner to help modernize operations, grow volume and support retailers across Minnesota. After careful consideration and research, Orton Oil decided to partner with Cenex®, the energy brand of CHS Inc.®, due to its reliable supply chain, strong distribution infrastructure and convenient refinery locations. To date, this partnership has resulted in a strong return on investment (ROI) for Orton Oil Company, demonstrating that Cenex delivers more than just fuel—it's a partner for retail success.



BACKGROUND

A Legacy Company Ready for Change

Orton Oil Company, founded in 1950, is a family business led by Frank Orton, a fourth-generation operator. Located in Minnesota, Orton Oil currently operates 17 company-owned sites and supplies 10 dealer locations. The organization delivers home heating, fuel and resort gasoline to customers across Walker, Minnesota, and the surrounding region.

Orton Oil's varied branding history presented an opportunity to unify its image and enhance market presence. At the same time, fuel supply volatility left the company vulnerable to shortages. Supporting its independent operators was also challenging, as there was increasing competitive pressure from regional chains.

To improve market visibility and competitiveness, Orton Oil's dealers needed a partner with strong brand equity, modern technology and flexible tools. Operators wanted this visibility to be paired with autonomy—the freedom to make independent business decisions across key operational areas without strict oversight or requirements from a brand franchisor.

THE CENEX DECISION

A Strategic Choice: Brand + Supply + Support

Supply stability was a dealmaker for Orton Oil. With fuel sourced from CHS refineries, a Cenex partnership would streamline logistics for the company, as ensuring a reliable fuel supply is critical in remote regions where disruptions can be costly. The Cenex brand's strong distribution network was also an excellent match for Orton Oil's footprint and customer base.

A partnership would provide exclusive regional visibility under a nationally recognized fuel brand, differentiating its stations without cannibalizing business or confusing customers. Because Cenex is a branded fuel supply partnership—not a franchise—it provides operators and dealers the benefits of a nationally recognized brand while preserving local control, independence and decision-making power.

Aligning with Cenex offered the advantage of a relationship-driven partnership and the expertise of long-tenured Cenex representatives well-versed in the Minnesota region. The Cenex brand would enable Orton Oil to tap into high-value programs, including rebate incentives, marketing, financial assistance and much more—programs its dealer operators could also access.

"If you're going to look at a branded major oil company, there's way more to Cenex than any other one you're looking at. It's not just a fuel deal. Cenex helps you build a store that people want to come back to. They're local, they get our market and they've got people who have been there a long time. That builds trust."

— Frank Orton, CEO of Orton Oil Company

Improving Store Performance Through Upgrades

Orton Oil takes a measured approach to growth, prioritizing acquisitions and remodels over new builds. The economics of rural and small-town markets make ground-up construction difficult to justify, so the company looks for underperforming stores with solid locations and potential.

Supporting independent operators is central to Orton Oil's expansion models. The company has helped single-store owners transition from unbranded status or other fuel brands to Cenex. Dealers gain access to Cenex branding, financial tools and operational support.

These sites are then modernized through thoughtful investments in forecourt infrastructure and interior upgrades—supported by Cenex programs like LIFT, a low-interest financing program, to support lighting, image and facility upgrades. The result is a thriving dealer network and stronger Cenex representation in northern Minnesota.

“The LIFT program is one of the most valuable tools Cenex offers. It sets Cenex apart in the industry. We use it to help dealers remodel—it's huge for keeping them competitive.”

From Remodels to Results

Post-renovation performance improvements have been measurable for Orton Oil. Locations that underwent full remodeling—including interior overhauls, new equipment and Cenex rebranding—saw up to a 75% increase in inside sales, with notable gains in packaged beverages, foodservice and cold drinks.

Several small operators used LIFT to invest \$50,000–\$60,000 in site upgrades with low interest and partial loan forgiveness built in. One dealer increased fuel volume by 125–130% after the remodel.

Volume increases can be attributed to physical upgrades as well as an improved customer perception tied to the Cenex brand. According to the CEO, even modest updates, like new coffee stations or lighting, produced small but noticeable upticks in performance, while major overhauls routinely delivered payback within five years.

Orton Oil's team also saw soft ROI, including proactive site reviews, communication support and shared accountability, which reduced administrative burdens and improved store readiness. Without LIFT, many of these upgrades would not have moved forward.

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THE CENEX ADVANTAGE

More than a Fuel Brand

More than just a fuel supplier, Cenex is a strategic partner committed to the full store experience. For Orton Oil, the partnership has been a long-standing one, spanning nearly 10 years. Cenex brings local knowledge, long-tenured retail specialists and flexible financial tools that benefit both large operators and single-store dealers.

What sets Cenex apart is its ability to strike a balance between structure and autonomy. Unlike franchise models, Cenex allows retailers to maintain their independence while gaining access to national-scale tools. Through programs like LIFT, retail specialists and much more, Cenex equips independents to compete with regional chains while maintaining control of their businesses.

The key lesson for other retailers: with the right partner, independent retailers and large operators can scale, compete, and stay true to their local roots.

Cenex proves that even in a challenging environment, success comes from investing in the right tools, local relationships and brand support that respects independence while driving results.

“They're not just showing up for a contract—they want to help you succeed.”



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