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Plaid Pantry CEO Tells All About His EV Purchase

2 West Coast CEOs see profits in electric charging at c-stores

By *Ann Meyer (/profile/ann-meyer)* on Apr. 07, 2023



Image courtesy of Electric Era

The West Coast might be leading the nation in electric vehicles, but EV hasn't arrived in full force yet in Plaid Pantry's neck of the woods in Oregon, presenting an opportunity for the convenience-store chain to establish itself as a charging destination.

If there's a market for EV charging at convenience stores in Portland, Jonathan Polonsky, Plaid Pantry's chief executive officer, will have a leg up on the competition—or at least he will have done his homework. He has ordered a charging station due to be installed in June or July at a location near an airport.

“For me, it's an experiment just so I can understand the economics of it—just getting it installed and the barriers,” Polonsky said, “so I can learn what I don't know and what people won't tell you.”

- *For more insights into electric-vehicle charging and other new fuels and energy sources, read **The Future of Fuels 2023** (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/future-fuels-2023->*

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2023/future-fuels-2023-pick-lane) in the March
(<https://www.qgdigitalpublishing.com/publication/?m=20858&i=785066&p=2&ver=html5>) issue of CSP
magazine.

While some experts say convenience stores with fuel stations are obvious sites for **EV charging installations** (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/fuels/future-fuels-2023-retailers-ev-pov>), Polonsky took a different approach. He wanted to ensure his experiment had the best odds of success, so he chose the existing Plaid Pantry site most likely to attract EV drivers, even though it doesn't sell fuel. Only nine of the Portland-based convenience-store chain's 106 locations sell fuel, he said. Plaid Pantry is **No. 69** (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/top-202-convenience-stores-2022/plaid-pantry>) on **CSP's 2022 Top 202** (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/top-202-convenience-stores-2022>) ranking of convenience-stores by total number of company-owned retail outlets.

Test Site

The location Polonsky selected for the test is a high-traffic nonfuel site near Portland International Airport with a larger parking lot than some Plaid Pantry locations. It gets a lot of Prius ride-share drivers, rather than Tesla drivers. For EV, he said, "This store is as good as it gets. If it fails there, that will be the last charging station" for Plaid Pantry, he said. But he thinks the investment will pay for itself and generate profits over time.

Polonsky, who joined Plaid Pantry in 2012 as executive vice president and **became CEO** (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/company-news/plaid-pantry-names-new-ceo>) in 2018 after serving as chief operating officer and president, candidly acknowledged he doesn't own an electric vehicle and he hasn't jumped on the EV bandwagon yet, but he's not opposed to EV either. "It's coming," he said. He considers his purchase of EV chargers an experiment. "I drive by chargers all the time that aren't working," he said. But they aren't from Electric Era, the Seattle startup Polonsky chose to contract with.



Polonsky started researching chargers three years ago and estimated he has spent at least 80 to 100 hours looking at EV chargers and the companies behind them. He liked Electric Era's focus on helping the retailer achieve profitability with EV charging. He also liked the fact the startup led by CEO Quincy Lee was based in nearby Seattle. Electric Era's PowerNode charging station will cost \$160,000 installed, before a **one-time tax credit** (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/fuels/grant-program-means-new-competition-ev-charging-space>) of \$48,000 to help offset the investment, Polonsky said. The charging station will have the capability of charging two cars simultaneously. The price was less than other quotes he received, and Electric Era starts with the same SK Signet unit some competitors use, but incorporates its own technology for more benefits to the convenience retailer, Polonsky said.

The PowerNode charger's extra battery has more than one advantage. "Because you have that battery and you're not putting a huge demand all at once on the grid, you can have a lot more flexibility on where you can put it," Polonsky said.

Battery Power

The local power company might not be able to support a 480-volt fast-charging system because it would require more transformers, he learned. "That's why we went with the battery backup situation," which also doubles as a generator for the store if the power goes out, Polonsky said. A larger breaker box will be attached to the store, while the power is brought in from a power pole and goes underground to the PowerNode charger, Polonsky said.

During a power outage, one battery should generate enough power to keep the Plaid Pantry store running for eight hours. It also has the capacity to charge three Prius EVs for 300 miles each, Polonsky said. The battery also lowers the energy cost of charging.

Its PowerNode charging system uses artificial intelligence to tell the charger when to draw power from the grid and when to tap its heavy-duty battery, which kicks in when regular electricity is most costly, Lee said. This system reduces the overall cost to the convenience store owner, allowing them to make a larger profit, he said. Electric Era said a charging station installed costs about \$150,000 depending on options, and a second charger installed at the same location costs about \$40,000.

Plaid Pantry plans to charge 35 cents per kilowatt hour, which based on Polonsky's research is toward the higher end because he's offering a premium product. If the power the charger uses costs 8 cents per kilowatt hour, he'll be making money sooner than if had paid the higher going rate from the utility.

The PowerNode system has brought the amount of time required to fast-charge an EV like a Toyota Prius, similar in size to the Toyota Corolla, to about 15 minutes to 20 minutes, or so Polonsky hopes. Like most convenience-store owners, he wants people to go into the store when they stop to charge and spend \$15 to \$20. Then he should make a profit, he said.

The PowerNode charger also includes a 37-inch media screen for advertising that can be used to generate incremental revenue for the retailer, Lee said.

The PowerNode fast-charger is well suited to convenience stores because most c-store shoppers spend just a few minutes shopping in the store, said Lee, previously a SpaceX engineer who decided he could do more good in clean energy. He predicts some c-store shoppers will only charge for the 5 minutes to 7 minutes they're in the store, but it should be enough to get them where they're going locally and back, he said.

The faster the better for Polonsky, because parking spaces are limited at many Plaid Pantry locations. "I don't want people in my parking lot for hours. I want a very fast charger," Polonsky said. "I hope they come in and interact with my people and find they are super friendly and engaging, and then they come back and use my charging station instead of someone else's."

Fast Charging

Electric Era (<https://www.cspdailynews.com/future-fuels-2023-2023/manufacturer-input>) said the reliability and speed of its charging station will be the difference for consumers and retailers alike. "We designed our software system so we put the most amount of miles into a car in that first five to seven minutes (of charging), and that way they can leave with 100 to 150 miles of range, and the convenience store-owner can make the most

amount of money in that time,” Lee said. “We want to help our customers, convenience-store owners, make the most amount of money at their stores.”

While the EV chargers Plaid Pantry purchased are fast, the process of getting the site permitted and the equipment in place is anything but, Polonsky said. “I signed months ago. They think they’ll have it installed by June. It’s not going to happen by June,” he said, noting the City of Portland’s permitting process is “super slow” and the supply chain “is still pretty messed up,” so everything is taking longer than expected. He’s hoping for a July installation, he said.

While the startup phase for EV charging might come with fits and starts, Electric Era is growing its team to keep up with demand. “We do have a backlog,” Lee said. He believes convenience stores will become a primary charging destination because consumers think of c-store locations when they think of refueling. “I don’t know that behavior is going to change in the future. I think it’s going to stay the same,” Lee said.

If **Plaid Pantry's**

(<https://www.cspdailynews.com/beverages/jacksons-food-stores-plaid-pantry-stock-alkaline88>) experiment exceeds expectations, Polonsky said he will consider installing chargers at other locations. “I’m sure at this particular location, we’re going to make money and our return-on-investment is going to be very good,” he said.

Just how good another location would have to be to justify the investment is the next question Polonsky hopes to be able to answer in the not-so-distant future.

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