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# Sports Fan to Store Fanatic

## Five Ways to Sell the Tailgate and Barbecue Category

**A**t the beginning of the school year, students, faculty and community members in college towns across the country gear up for the return of classes and university sporting events.

Bumper to bumper, trucks and mobile homes filter into town. Fans set up tents with rival team colors splashed across flags, portable chairs and grills. As fans gear up for the big game, the smell of barbecue wafts across the field and cheers from competitors playing cornhole and Frisbee fill the air. Family and friends gather to socialize, eat, drink and maybe even trash talk. Tailgating season has finally arrived!

While this is the scene most commonly associated with tailgating, the concept of tailgaters and a market for potential sales has emerged into a \$20 billion industry, with considerable room for growth. One of the reasons is that the traditional college game day tailgate isn't the only place this kind of activity takes place. In fact, tailgating products can be found everywhere, from a weekend beach barbecue to a local youth soccer tournament.

To understand how to capitalize on this growing industry phenomenon, *Hardware Retailing* turned to five retailers located at the epi-center

of tailgating—college towns across the country. From diehard fans to event-driven fun to community involvement and everything in between, no matter the location, each retailer we spoke with provided a unique perspective on how to successfully use the tailgate and barbecue category to boost sales and increase community involvement.

If you don't have a big university with a well-known football team nearby, don't worry: these tips can work for stores in any type of market.

To download the Tailgate Selling Guide, a handout that summarizes the following story that you can give to your sales staff, visit [hardwareretailing.com/sell-tailgate](http://hardwareretailing.com/sell-tailgate).

### Host a Store Tailgate Event

For McGuckin Hardware, being located in a college town has many benefits. With a boost in the population each fall as college kids head back to school and crowds of fans rolling in on University of Colorado gamedays, there are many reasons tailgating and barbecue has become a popular category for the retailer.

For the past two years, McGuckin Hardware, located less than a mile from the University of Colorado, has invited football fans and community



members to attend a tailgate event on a game day in the fall. The store tailgate is held in the parking lot and features tents with vendors promoting tailgate-related products. They've also had a live band and a local ice cream shop passing out samples.

The store has planned their fall tailgate event around the University of Colorado's home game schedule, says Louise Garrels, McGuckin's marketing manager. "We try to pick a game that has a later kickoff time, which allows for more locals to shop before game traffic starts. Those going to the game have time to browse through the store before walking to the stadium."

A successful event requires a few months of planning. Garrels and the staff decide on products to showcase and invite vendors to interact with the customers. In order to have vendors join the party, Garrels says they position the event as an opportunity to demonstrate or introduce new products that are tailgate-friendly.

To encourage shoppers and tailgaters to come out, Garrels says the store will try to offer a variety of promotions. They focus on products where there's room to give on margins, and if they have tailgate products they want to move, they may promotionally price items.

Garrels says the store tailgate event is a great way to showcase tailgate-related goods while showing support for the university.

To promote the event, Garrels says she and her staff advertise in print, online and via social media.



McGuckin Hardware hosts a tailgate party in its parking lot to interact with customers and feature the store's products.

#### CONSIDER THIS:

Retailers in any community can find a way to host a tailgate event at their stores, Garrels says.

Pick a day on the weekend where the weather is most likely to cooperate and community members will be sure to visit. Collaborate with your staff and consider the elements necessary to have a successful tailgate.

Find vendors and local businesses to partner up with in order to create more buzz for the tailgate and encourage customers to come by all day. Set up tents, barbecue on the grill and host a bag toss contest in the parking lot.

Leading up to the event, utilize social media, send out an email to your customers or consider creating fliers to share when they check out including the information about the upcoming event.

“I believe every retailer should get involved by showing as much community support as they are able to for their local teams,” Garrels says. “This sort of event can be as big or as small as you’d like.”

### Spread the Word

As customers walk through the doors at Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, they will see pops of gold and purple from their collection of Louisiana State University merchandise sure to please any Tigers fan.

Devoting over 2,000 square feet in the front of the store to LSU merchandise and another 2,000 square feet for tailgate and barbecue products, Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors has become a notable destination for community members and visitors looking to have the biggest and best tailgate around, says Vickie Boyd, buyer of LSU merchandise for the store.

“Goodwood Hardware is on the list for LSU local Tigers retailers, and we pride ourselves as being one of the largest, if not the largest, store for LSU products,” Boyd says. “Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors has become a destination for people from all over.”

With a 20-year history, the hard-working family business has been through many changes over the years, and its success selling its LSU and tailgating assortments can be attributed to taking risks. According to Boyd, when the staff first considered

carrying LSU products, there were some reservations, because they didn’t know how their customers would react to the items veering away from hardware. Ultimately, their university-gear products and tailgating items have paid off and become one of the many focal points of the store.

In addition to advertising in the newspaper and on Facebook, much of the store’s popularity and status in the community is rooted in a word-of-mouth approach.

“On gameday, when my husband and I tailgate before LSU games, I’ll hear people talk about coming to our store,” Boyd says.

While the university does not allow businesses to bring banners or signage to tailgates for advertising, Boyd and her husband, Trent, store operator and manager, bring items from the store that catch a lot of attention.

“We bring LSU tents, rugs, tablecloths, purple and gold burners, pots, an LSU Cajun microwave to smoke a pig on, LSU purple and gold coolers and much more to the tailgate,” Boyd says. “As the crowd gathers, we are asked over and over again where we got our items, and we are proud to say Goodwood Hardware.”

This word-of-mouth approach has worked, and Boyd says many customers come to the store asking about something they saw at the tailgate.

After growing their assortment of LSU merchandise as well as their tailgate and barbecue items, community members and many families of enrolled LSU students make the trip to Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors for all their tailgating needs, Boyd adds.



**Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors** has gained popularity with the LSU community. One way the family-owned business promotes its offerings is by attending tailgates with the store’s products and talking about the store and its offerings.



**Clemson Tri-County Ace** has an extensive line of Clemson products to outfit any tailgate.

“When the students’ moms and dads come to town, they come to us,” Boyd says. “If we don’t have it, ‘they’ don’t make it.”

**CONSIDER THIS:**

Becoming personal ambassadors of their store and the products they sell is how Boyd and other members of Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors grab potential customers’ attention.

For Boyd and her husband, when they bring their products to tailgates, the word-of-mouth approach encourages customers to visit the store.

Retailers wanting to spread the word about their product offerings should consider following Boyd’s lead. When attending events around town, like a local sporting event, pack up some of your favorite items from the store and set them up.

If you are looking for a quick way to spread the word about your product, social media may be another great resource. Goodwood Hardware & Outdoors has over 50,000 followers on Facebook, and Boyd says it has been a phenomenal resource to spread the word about their business and product offerings.

“As a retailer, you must work smarter, and we feel that technology has come so far that it is important to the business to use every avenue possible through social media to get the products to the consumer,” Boyd says.

**Offer the Latest Tailgate Products**

For community members in Clemson, South Carolina, and surrounding towns, Clemson University carries a lasting football tradition, and in turn, tailgating has become an extension of this excitement and unwavering team spirit.

“Tailgating is almost like a sport here. It continues to grow each year, not just in numbers, but in the buying power and the aggressiveness to have something bigger and better than your tailgating neighbor.”

—Gary Thrift, owner of **Clemson Tri-County Ace Hardware**

Clemson Tri-County Ace is one of five Ace Hardware stores owned by Gary Thrift in semi-rural South Carolina. Every year, as fans gear up for another football season, they also gear up for another tailgating season, Thrift explains.

“Tailgating is almost like a sport here,” Thrift says. “It continues to grow each year, not just in numbers, but in the buying power and the aggressiveness to have something bigger and better than your tailgating neighbor.”

Due to this growing buying power and the competitive spirit to host the best tailgate party in town, Clemson Tri-County Ace has made it a priority to find and stock the latest, unique items any diehard fan and tailgate party could want or need.

“We go to our distributor’s conventions each year and have a few vendors we talk to at those shows,” Thrift says. “We also go to a show twice a year in Atlanta that features many vendors, including collegiate vendors with licensed apparel and products.”



Portable chairs are a popular product for the tailgating crowd. They can feature university logos or school colors.

The largest-selling items in the tailgate and barbecue niche at Clemson Tri-County Ace include tents and chairs, often showcasing a new color scheme every year. Due to the extensive demand, Thrift says he typically needs to order these items eight to 10 months in advance so the store is fully stocked by the first football game.

In addition to Clemson-specific items, Thrift says Clemson Tri-County Ace has an extensive selection of grills and grill accessories, which customers pick up throughout the season. In addition, the store finds that novelty items, like Clemson-themed napkins, cups and coolers, are highly sought after.

#### CONSIDER THIS:

While tailgating is a huge draw in Clemson, Thrift believes there is university pride across the state. He believes the south is a great example of diehard fans, and most stores and convenient stores in that area capitalize on the fandom.

It's not just in the south, either. Retailers should take a look at the popular teams community members root for. Instead of stocking items for one university, consider offering products with the logos of a few different local universities.

"Gamedays are huge; it's what we live for in the south," Thrift says.

While retailers located in the south hone in on collegiate football, retailers across the country should consider if there is a popular professional team, a collegiate team or a local high school team to support. If high school sports in your town are celebrated, you can carry school-colored items, like chair or paper goods, without having a school logo attached.

#### Create Community Partnerships

In Carbondale, Illinois, the biggest employer for the city and surrounding communities is Southern Illinois University. The university and the community thrive off one another, and this is no exception for Murdale True Value.

George Sheffer, president and co-owner of the store, says it has a positive relationship with the university that is beneficial for both parties.

"Due to the size of our town, we need SIU, but SIU needs this community, too," Sheffer says. "We work together for success."

In order to fully participate and be part of the community, Sheffer has made many steps to bridge the gap between his business, the university and the community.

One way he has accomplished this is by helping take SIU tailgating to new levels. When the football team gained momentum in the mid-2000s, it brought new life to its fan base, and tailgating grew with it as well.

Sheffer says with encouragement from the football team's previous coach, the store began renting tents and grills. Today, Murdale True Value has about 18 tents varying in size that they rent out and set up prior to gameday. They also rent tables, chairs and inflatable bouncy houses to entertain kids.

"The coach came to us and challenged us to create bigger tailgate parties," Sheffer says. "I got into tents and grills. We went out to the tailgate when we first started and handed out free hot dogs to build the atmosphere. Our tailgate rentals have continued to grow, and we had to come up with a system for transporting all of our items for gamedays."

In addition to renting gear for tailgates and selling tailgate and barbecue items in the store, Sheffer says the store supports the university in several ways.

Sheffer says the store has worked with the university to bring a sense of university pride to the streets. He negotiated a deal to paint paw prints, which represent the team mascot, a Saluki, on some of the roads in town.

In order to cover the cost of paint for the paw prints, the store sold the tailgate game called bags, also known as cornhole, with SIU logos painted on the boards. The proceeds from the sale of this popular game covered the entire cost of the project.

Whether helping boost tailgating through expanding their rental side of the business, creating promotional materials to boost Saluki pride or employing SIU students in the store, Sheffer has made it a point for Murdale True Value to build a strong relationship with the university and the entire community.

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“This is my community, I like being able to know a lot of the people in the town, and I can only help out because people are doing business with me. We involve ourselves with SIU and the community and try to make a difference.”

—George Sheffer, president and co-owner of Murdale True Value

only help out because people are doing business with me,” Sheffer says. “We involve ourselves with SIU and the community and try to make a difference.”

#### CONSIDER THIS:

Retailers without a university nearby should consider ways their businesses can become involved with the community through tailgating. A local high school football game may be a great way to get fans excited about tailgating and your product selection.

Set up a tent at the parking lot by the football field and let your followers on social media know about your tailgate. Use this as an opportunity to showcase your products; have a portable grill, bring foldable chairs, hand, bring paper goods in the team colors. You can even follow the advice of Murdale True Value and hand out free hot dogs and promotional material with your store information on it to parents and students attending the game.

Another way to get involved with the high school would be to consider advertising in their program. The funds will support the team and show fans you are an active fan and member of the community.

Sheffer says supporting your community can help a business grow.

“I think any local business needs to try to tie into the town and what’s going on as much as possible,” Sheffer says.



Murdale True Value helps support Southern Illinois University by renting out tents for football game days.

## Make Product Displays Stand Out

When the summer season comes to a close, Gemmen's Home & Hardware transitions its outdoor furniture department to attract fans from universities both near and far.

Andrew Gemmen, owner of the Gemmen's Home & Hardware, says about three or four years ago he learned more about selling tailgate products from a discussion with his distributor, and he decided to run with it. Gemmen says he has many ideas he wants to try with merchandising this section in the future.

"We have tasked our housewares and sporting goods employees to get something put together for our tailgate display in the fall," Gemmen says. "Eventually, our goal is to find a truck bed. We want to get a tailgate from an old truck for our display."

While the potential to create a tailgate display with a real tailgate is in the back of his mind, Gemmen says the store sets up a display to grab customers' attention during football season and to make some noise during the annual back-to-school frenzy.

"We set up a little faux tailgating area," Gemmen says. "The main focal point is a canopy tent. Then we take a grill and put fake food on it and spread out some pop bottles and an empty pizza box."

We merchandise all our items that cross into the tailgate and barbecue category."

Gemmen explains that the display does a great job at boosting sales of the tailgating items they carry. Some of the top sellers are chairs, tents and tables, which are portable and can be packed up.

In order to maintain a fresh and exciting display, Gemmen emphasizes updating it each week. The store pays attention to what games are going on, whether it's Grand Valley State University, just a town away, in-state rivals Michigan and Michigan State or a matchup between local high schools. Gemmen says the staff will hang flags or put up signs to get customers excited.

### CONSIDER THIS:

Gemmen's Home & Hardware is located in an area near a university and surrounded by several others, but Gemmen emphasizes retailers in any location can usually find a local team to support.

For retailers considering expanding on this category, set up a display and feature items like tents, tables and portable grills. Gemmen says these items are great for not only sporting events, but also for camping outings and trips to the beach. →



**Gemmen's Home & Hardware** is located in an area with fans of universities across the state. Employees at the store merchandise rival school products during a matchup.