

By Jesse Carleton, jcarleton@nrha.org

Operating in High Gear

Four Retailers Share Secrets of Selling Outdoor Power Equipment

To start the peak spring season, Roy Mason stocks 40 different models of riding mowers, 600 units of handheld equipment, and 40 feet of handheld and mower accessories at Race Brothers Farm and Home Supply in Carthage, Missouri. The outdoor power equipment department includes 4,000 square feet of showroom space and a full-service repair shop, with nine full-time and one part-time employees to run various aspects of the department. Not surprisingly, sales from one of his major vendors, Cub Cadet, ranks 13th in the nation.

But success in the category didn't happen overnight. After starting with just a few pieces of equipment, Mason has had the past 32 years to learn, through trial and error, about what it takes to be successful in the category.

While you may not operate a power equipment department the size and scale of Race Brothers, there is still plenty to learn from retailers like Mason. To find what it takes to put outdoor power equipment sales in high gear, *Hardware Retailing* spoke with Mason and three additional retailers,

all veterans in the category. They have all grown their outdoor power equipment sales in recent years, often by double digits. But like Mason, they've had years to hone their selling strategies and now lead their local markets in the category. Here, they share their experience so you, too, can pick up the pace in your outdoor power equipment sales.

Online Exclusives

To further help you sell this category, see two short training videos from NRHA: *Push Mower Selling Tips* and *Products Your Customers Need to Winterize Lawn Mowers*. You can find these training videos online at nrha.org/freetraining, along with other employee-focused training material. These short lessons are ideal for use during an employee meeting. Also at TheRedT.com/trends-ope, we have a rundown of some of the trends hitting the outdoor power equipment category today.

RACE BROTHERS FARM SUPPLY

Roy Mason

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As he gets ready for spring, **Ian McNaughton** hangs 250 string trimmers from the ceiling to make a strong statement to customers that he dominates the outdoor power equipment category.

Find the right vendor partners.

Perhaps the biggest learning curve for Mason was finding the right collection of brands. It took him several years and trying different vendors before he was able to assemble his brand dream team that fits his customers' preferences. Vendor support when selling outdoor power equipment is critical. When he looks for a vendor partner, Mason looks not only for a quality product, but also one with a strong program and support. Mason's vendors offer national advertising, merchandising programs and training, and they make it easy for him to get repair parts.

In addition to finding the right vendor partners, don't try to diversify into too many brands.

"It's important not to have too many lines," Mason says. "We now have Stihl, Husqvarna and Cub Cadet, and we can do a better job staying current with what those vendors have to offer."

Ron Gladieux, president of Gladieux Do it Best Home Center in Oregon, Ohio, uses the merchandising sets recommended by Stihl and says the results have been far better than he expected. A couple of years ago, he gave the category more space and

moved in Stihl's planograms. Last year, his outdoor power equipment sales doubled. While Mason and Gladieux have found the brands that work for them, it's important you research your market and what each vendor offers in order to find the best fit for your store.

Stand out with add-on services.

What does it mean to out-service your competition? Besides the easy answers of having friendly, knowledgeable staff, it means providing those add-on services big-box stores ignore.

"Don't sell mowers in a box," says Dan Stroinski, owner of D & J Farm and Home Hardware Hank in Thorp, Wisconsin. He fully assembles and preps each piece of equipment that goes out the door. He also fills out the warranty for the customer and submits them to the manufacturer. To make it more convenient for his do-it-yourself customers, he has a service tech on duty later in the evenings and on Saturdays, when most other shops have closed.

Always let the customer test-drive a piece of equipment before making the final purchase. "Any unit we have in stock is ready to drive," says Mason. This covers about 40 different models of riders as well as many handheld pieces. Customers may try the unit at the store or have it delivered to their home to try. "Trying it out at home almost assures a sale," he says, "and we deliver it in a trailer wrapped with our logo, so all the neighbors can see it, too." He also offers free local delivery on new items.

Before the customer takes a purchase home, make sure a service technician spends time with the customer to explain how to operate the piece of equipment and answer any questions.

Gladieux has a 17-point inspection sheet that a service tech must check off before sending a piece of equipment out the door. It is ready to use as soon as the customer arrives home with the new purchase.

Ian McNaughton, owner of Gravenhurst Home Hardware in Gravenhurst, Ontario, will even put a spool of string on a weed trimmer before he sends it home with a customer after a purchase.

"Customers have the choice where to shop, so we need to provide them every reason we can that they should shop with us," he says.

The customer support doesn't end after the sale, either. Every piece of equipment will eventually need maintenance and repair, and customers may want accessories. McNaughton keeps a database of each customer's purchases. When they come into the store with a question about a piece of equipment they purchased or if they want an accessory, he can look up the exact make and model they purchased and provide the best answer.

Train tirelessly.

Any employee dedicated to the outdoor power equipment department in your store must be an expert on every product you sell. But just as important, know all about what your competition sells, too. “Customers are going to ask you a lot of questions, both on your equipment and on your competition’s equipment... especially your competition’s,” says Gladieux. With many consumers researching what they want to buy online before they come into your store, it’s important you know everything they know, and more. “Study what your competitors have so you can compare and show why your product is better.”

He also sends staff to vendor-specialized training during the slower winter months of the year. Sending service techs to yearly training not only keeps them current on new products, but it shows you are willing to invest in their careers.

McNaughton requires all store staff to have some cross-training in the outdoor power equipment department. There will always be dedicated staff in the department to answer technical questions, but he wants anyone to be able to answer basic questions and help customers shopping that area during a busy time of the day.

Keep service techs energized and happy.

Where the big boxes may only be interested in pushing product out the front door, successful power equipment dealers know customers eventually need service on the products they buy. A repair shop run by a knowledgeable and efficient service technician will be your competitive advantage. Like any quality employee, a quality service tech can be hard to find, so when you find one, hang on to them.

“Keep your service staff happy and energized,” says McNaughton. “Feedback and communication are key. When you are in the fast repair season, make sure your staff isn’t getting overburdened and burnt out. Make sure they know you appreciate them.”

Also, provide techs the tools and working environment they need to get their jobs done. Mason provides a shop with heating and air conditioning, lifts for the equipment, and tools that are up to date and in good working condition.

“We try to provide a fantastic shop for them to work in,” he says, “Anything we can do to make them happy and comfortable.”

Track down missing billable hours.

Keeping quality service technicians also means providing a competitive wage, and it's important to regulate billable hours carefully. "I discovered my techs usually undercharge for the work they do," says Stroinski. Until recently, he let each tech set prices for certain repairs. Now, he's moving to a standardized list of specific prices for specific repairs. It was a collaborative effort, he says, as he worked with each tech to come up with an appropriate charge for each service. Usually, the billable cost they settled on was much higher than what the tech had been charging.

"In a few instances, when I knew our price was too low, I even took a machine to another shop to get it serviced, then brought the bill back to my tech so we could look at what we were charging compared to what others were charging," he says.

In addition to a list of set prices for certain projects, Mason changed the pay structure to encourage efficiency among his service techs. Each tech receives a base wage plus a percentage of billed labor, so the more jobs they complete, the more money they get. "It's a shared incentive that benefits both the company and the employee," he says.

Free estimates may cost you; make sure your tech isn't spending too much time giving an estimate to a customer who decides not to have the equipment repaired. McNaughton recently instituted a flat rate for estimates on repairs to any equipment that comes to his shop. Customers who have the equipment repaired at the shop can take the cost of the estimate off of the final bill. "In years past, we were spending a lot of time estimating how to fix pieces of



Ron Gladieux (right), president of **Gladieux Home Center**, and **Brandon Ziegelhofer**, vice president, send their staff to vendor-specific training each year so they have access to the best and latest product knowledge.

“If you’re going to be successful, you have to look the part. We spend a lot of time cleaning and straightening the equipment.”

—Ron Gladieux, *Gladieux Do it Best Home Center*

old equipment, and many times customers end up not fixing them,” he says. “We weren’t recovering our mechanics’ lost labor time.”

Beware the communication gap.

Another big change Mason made to his service tech staff in recent years was to add a service writer to handle all of the paperwork, such as writing orders and making warranty determinations. Probably the most important thing the service writer does is handle all communication with the customer. “The service writer helps bridge the communication gap between the technician and the customer,” Mason says. It’s important to use terminology the customer can understand when talking about what needs to be fixed on a machine.

And careful wording is especially important when dealing with warranty repairs. If damage to a machine is because of user abuse, then it’s likely not covered by the manufacturer’s warranty. How you communicate can make all the difference in keeping a loyal customer. “When trying to decide between the failure or the abuse of a machine, it’s easy to put the customer on the defensive,” Mason says. “For example, there’s a difference between saying to the customer, ‘It looks like you backed this mower into a tree,’ and ‘Do you have any idea how this could have happened?’ The first way puts the customer on the defensive.”

The service writer is trained to keep the conversation non-confrontational and work with the customer to figure out what caused the damage.

Make the showroom sparkle.

Gladieux says he competes against eight other outdoor power equipment dealers within just a few miles of his store. He’s found that a good way to differentiate himself is to provide quality service and a professional showroom. “I’ve visited a lot of other retailers, and many of them don’t keep their showrooms clean,” he says. “But if you’re going to be successful,

you have to look the part. We spend a lot of time cleaning and straightening the equipment.” Don’t miss the details, like putting prices on each piece of equipment and keeping displays neat and orderly.

Indoor showrooms are best, too. While setting a few pieces of equipment outside is great for attracting attention, the most successful retailers complement that display with an indoor showroom where shoppers can see clean equipment.

Display early and out of the weather.

When Stroinski created a 4,000-square-foot indoor showroom for his outdoor power equipment category, not only was it easier to keep equipment clean and maintained, but he was also able to display equipment earlier in the season; that has already been paying dividends.

“We brought in a large stock of mowers in December. We sold out of that stock by February, when people start getting their tax returns,” he says. That accounted for a 650-percent increase over a three-month period compared to the previous year.

This year, to encourage earlier sales, he also offered customers a down payment option: a \$100 down payment would hold their purchase until spring. Most of his customers took him up on the offer.

Don’t be afraid to get a jump start on spring equipment sales. Whether they are spending their tax returns or are just anxious for spring, shoppers may be ready to buy lawn mowers well before the snow has melted.

Go deep in stock.

During the spring and summer, between his handheld, walk behind and riding equipment, McNaughton will have more than 400 units in stock. Displaying as much stock as possible on the showfloor sends the message that he is the leader in the category.



The showroom at **Gladiex Home Center** is clean and organized, which distinguishes it from its competitors.



A new showroom allows **Dan Stroinski** to display outdoor power equipment in December, which wasn't too early for customers to start buying for the coming season.

“You have to give customers confidence that you are not dabbling in the category, but that you have a part or product if they need it,” he says.

Just-in-time delivery offered by some vendors can help alleviate the cash flow and space issues created by large equipment. But it's important to be able to accommodate during high-demand times, such as a weather emergency.

Take pride in the brand.

As it is with many categories throughout your store, outdoor power equipment accessories carry high margins. In addition to standard accessories like chain oil and safety gear, take advantage of the branded items.

“Our customers take pride in the brands they have, and they wear those with pride,” says McNaughton. He sells items such as jackets and T-shirts branded with his key vendors, and he says they sell well and carry high margins.

Survive the slow months.

The repair business can be boom or bust, with service shops full to overflowing during the spring and summer and nearly empty in the winter. Successful operators look for ways to even out the cycle.

The slowest time of the year for Gladieux's repair shop is December through February. He offers customers a pre-season tune-up special. Anyone who brings equipment in for a spring tune-up during that time gets a 10-percent discount. “Anything we can do to get customers in here early helps ease the rush during the busy spring,” he says.

In addition, for every new equipment purchase, Gladieux offers a coupon for 50 percent off the first tune-up, if used by the end of the year.

That gives customers an incentive to bring the equipment back before the end of the year so he can service it during the slower season. But it also starts a cycle of the customer bringing it back to the shop year after year for regular maintenance. In addition, it offers him the opportunity to talk about the repair shop to customers who may not realize the store has one.

Gladieux also started using the slower months of the year to strengthen his communication with crucial customers. This past winter, he took a few key customers to lunch. "I wanted to thank them for their business and ask them what we've done well, and how we can improve," he says. For example, he learned that when they have to drop off a machine for a repair, they are usually pressed for time and don't want to go in the store and wait for someone to write up a ticket. In response, Gladieux changed the process to get customers on their way faster. "You can find out a lot when you just sit down and talk with your customers," he says. "We have a lot

of competition, so we have to make sure we take care of the customer or they can easily take their business somewhere else."

Get creative with promotions.

In addition to the marketing tools available from major outdoor power equipment vendors, the category is a perfect fit for creative promotions. Mason recently hosted a Cub Cadet test drive event. He set up an obstacle course for customers to test out his riding mowers and gave away T-shirts and hats. In another instance, he sold a lawn mower at cost to the local Optimist club, which they used in a fundraising raffle. "That gave us brand exposure in channels that might not normally see us," he says.

To increase his average transaction size, Mason recently started bundling products together. This year, he plans to combine a lawn mower and string trimmer or blower and sell as a unit at a better price than if they were purchased separately. He's also bundling accessories on some items and showing them on the overall price. He includes the accessories on the floor models so customers can see them installed and bring them closer to a decision to buy. ➡
