



# Stocked and Loaded

## How to Score Big in the Hunting Category

**F**all is an exciting time of year. People pack away their summer clothes in exchange for new outfits, kids head back to school and football returns.

During this change in season, one pastime that has been around for thousands of years returns to prominence as well: hunting.

For Jon McGehee, manager of the sporting goods department at Reedsburg True Value in Reedsburg, Wisconsin, deer hunting season is a time he looks forward to for both work and play.

McGehee not only enjoys hunting in his free time, but he also makes his living helping other hunters who are just as passionate about the sport as he is.

As a hunter, McGehee has the advantage of knowing what is needed for a fruitful hunt. Whether helping customers prior to the hunt, during a hunting trip or after their hunt is complete, he understands that to be successful

in the category, it's important he has the right products, employee knowledge and appreciation for the sport.

Yet establishing a well-rounded hunting department is about much more than just selling a few guns and ammunition. To capture the hunter's business, you'll need to take hunting from a niche to a major department built around a hunter's lifestyle.

In this article, *Hardware Retailing* spoke with three retailers, including McGehee, who have established their businesses as places for hunters to feel right at home.

The following pages will provide you with an all-encompassing look at the hunting category, specifically regarding deer hunting. From the preparation a hunter takes before the season begins, to the skills they need and products they utilize during and after it is over, hunting is much more than a sport; it's a way of life.



Charlie's Hardware & Rental stocks a wide range of products, which feature scents and treats to create a pattern so deer return to a spot repeatedly.

## Before the Hunt

### Stock Up On Scents, Lures and Goods

To provide customers all of the items they'll need for their next hunting trip, McGehee dedicates 25 percent of Reedsburg True Value to the sporting goods department, featuring hunting gear like guns, archery equipment and accessories.

"Hunting faded out a few years ago, but now I'd say it's back almost in full force, as families and friends are getting back into the sport," McGehee says. "For first-time hunters and those looking for new weapons, we offer both guns and the products needed for archery aside from the bows."

Depending on the state and county you're in, the time leading up to deer hunting season is when hunters want to ensure the game is well-fed. Many hunters on private land set up equipment to film and track the animals, follow their patterns and have a clear picture of when and what time of day to look out for the animals they want to hunt. This technology can even allow hunters to play footage on their mobile phones.

At Walker County Ace Hardware in Huntsville, Texas, feeders and items for baiting animals are common, because unlike hunting laws in other states, hunters can purchase and set up equipment to feed and bait deer, store owner Jimmy Harding says.

"I have noticed the trend in the past few years that people are conscious about raising better deer. Feeding the deer all season, getting them protein to help with horn growth; all of this helps create a better quality of deer," Harding says.

Charlie's Hardware & Rental, located in Mosinee, Wisconsin, frequently has updated inventory in the sporting goods department for the various hunting seasons that take place, explains department manager Brad Nenstiel.

"We have over 100 to 150 firearms in stock at any time," Nenstiel says. "As far as accessories go, we carry eye and ear protection, ammunition, scope guards and archery supplies."

Another product you should make sure to stock is scents, whether its deer attractants or cover-up scents. When it comes to deer, smell is their strongest sense, so having a selection of these offerings is key.

### Help Customers Prepare for the Woods

For your customers' first visits leading up to the hunting season, it's important to hire and train employees to handle the influx of customers.

Nenstiel says customers at Charlie's Hardware & Rental have come to expect advice from employees.

"I have experience as a firearms instructor and can help them through the purchase of a new gun, as well as showing them proper form," Nenstiel says. "In our sporting goods department, Cindy is another expert who has been working here for

nearly 28 years and has lived in the area. She knows the best places to hunt in our area and can give out-of-towners advice.”

An important skill Nenstiel says he and his fellow employees in the sporting goods department need is providing the best customer service to assist each and every person, from hunting experts to families bringing their kids in to pick out their first weapon.

“The service we provide for different levels of hunting knowledge doesn’t change, but the questions we ask definitely does,” Nenstiel says. “You might have mom and dad bring in their son, so you’ll need to ask more questions, like what will you wear, stressing the safety that needs to be involved.”

Since hunting is a very regulated sport, McGehee recommends all of his customers stay on top of the laws and remain informed.

“I always recommend people carry at least two copies of the hunting guide with them,” McGehee says. “Every chance you can, page through it, because rules change, some quite rapidly. The whole point of educating yourself about the laws and rules is so you don’t infringe upon them, because you could take away the fun from hunting and wind up getting a huge fine.”

By staying informed yourself and keeping your customers and employees aware of the latest laws, you can protect your business and the customers you serve.

In addition, McGehee believes having employees who have experience hunting has done a lot to help their business; however, those who don’t hunt are still able to assist and learn.



At **Charlie's Hardware and Rental**, employees understand how to assist both experienced hunters and first-timers.



The hunting category stands out at **Walker County Ace Hardware**, with several mounted deer, turkey and other animals on display.

## **A Licensing Location and Product Assistance**

When a customer comes to Walker County Ace Hardware before hunting season begins, they can purchase their hunting accessories, as well as get their license and hunting tags.

According to Harding, the business is a Texas Parks and Wildlife licensing sales agent, so customers come to them to make sure they are certified to hunt.

The store even features mounted deer heads, hogs and even a bee hive on display in the hunting department.

At Charlie's Hardware & Rental, they no longer offer licensing, but that's because the state of Wisconsin has made the process easy to take care of online.

But the store helps hunters get their gear ready, specifically their optics.

"While most people come asking us where to find the deer, we are also asked for assistance in regards to finding the best cartridge to use and getting optics set," Nenstiel says. "We can keep them short and sweet, or we help a customer dial in how close to a mile they want to hunt."

## **During the Hunt**

### **Items a Customer Might Forget**

The first hunt of the season prompts hunters to make another trip to their local retailer. Since it is such a busy time, retailers should keep well stocked. During deer hunting season, hunters must plan what they will wear to blend in to their surroundings, how they will mask their human scent from deer and much more.

"I try to stress with people that the most important thing they should purchase in regards to scents are scent-eliminating products," McGehee says. "This starts with your clothing and gear; you should wash your clothes in scent-free laundry detergent. There is also soap, body lotion, deodorant and even lip balm that is scent-free and makes it nearly impossible for deer to smell you."

At Charlie's Hardware & Rental, the locals and returning hunters

from out of state know to visit for anything they may have forgotten.

“We try to be that one-stop service shop, but we make sure to keep the small-town feel,” Nenstiel says. “We have people who come from out of town and are excited to hunt but come in and maybe they need a new rifle or forgot something. We can usually get them what they need or at least order it and have it in the store in a few days, if they’ll be around.”

Apparel is another item to consider when getting into the hunting category.

Just as the accessories are seasonal, so is clothing. It is the first item a hunter will need depending on the weather and surroundings. So if your store offers the right type of clothing for warmer or colder weather, you’ll be able to help those passing through town to dress for the conditions.

### **Source Products, Provide Help for Hunters**

At Reedsburg True Value, McGehee says he sees many customers from out-of-state who visit the store before the gun season begins to get a refresher course on how to use their weapons, so having knowledgeable employees ensures these individuals get some solid tips and advice before going out.

“A lot of times, we have folks that come in from out of town or state who only pick up a gun once a year. We acclimate them with their weapons and tell them what kind of ammo they need,” McGehee says.

Having personal experience hunting is a huge plus for retailers who decide to invest in the category, Harding says. He and his son Sean, who both work at Walker County Ace Hardware, are hunters themselves, so when a customer comes in to talk about their latest hunting trip or ask for product advice, they can back up their suggestions.



To stand out against the competition, **Reedsburg True Value** has a team of employees, like sporting goods manager **Jon McGehee**, who can provide personal assistance in the department.



For **Jimmy Harding** (left), owner of **Walker County Ace Hardware**, hunting is a pastime he shares with his son **Sean** (right) and grandson **Colten** (center).

“My son and I are hunters and during the season, it’s all we eat, sleep and breathe,” Harding says. “Many of our employees are also hunters, so they have the knowledge to help customers as well. It helps our customers recognize that if they come in with a question or two, we can guide them and help them have the best hunting trip possible.”

### **Remember Paperwork is Key**

Retailers who sell weapons such as guns or crossbows cannot disregard attention to detail.

At Charlie’s Hardware & Rental, Nenstiel says he uses a system of checks and balances to ensure a weapon doesn’t get into the wrong hands.

“There are enough technical aspects to selling guns that you need to have someone who is able to fill out paperwork and not take it lightly,” Nenstiel says. “We do background checks, and I have turned people away before. The law states this is my right as a dealer to refuse service.”

Reedsburg True Value also sells weapons, and according to McGehee, for retailers considering jumping into the hunting category, it’s important to know that selling firearms comes with serious responsibilities.

“Paperwork is paramount; it’s the key to keeping your license,” McGehee says. “It’s not rocket science, but it is really important. As a retailer, you are the last line of defense between someone who should or should not have a weapon.”

## **After the Hunt**

### **Gather and Take Home the Prize**

It’s also important to consider the products a customer will need after an animal has been killed.

Reedsburg True Value employees know that half of what hunting is about happens after a successful hunting trip. The store sells items to help after the hunt, like “deer drags,” which are canvas drags that go over hunters’ shoulders and help them slide the animal to an area where

they can field dress it. McGehee says the store stocks products to make the end of a customer's hunting trip a success.

"We sell products like skinning knives, capping knives and knives you can use to butcher and field dress the animal," McGehee says. "Then, we have the products our customers need to ensure their meat is well-preserved and ready to be processed."

The products your hunting customers will look for include vacuum sealers to seal the venison, beef jerky makers, sausage making kits and much more. To keep meat cool and free from bacteria, many hunters find it vitally important to invest in quality coolers.

While Nenstiel says there are many people in the community surrounding Charlie's Hardware & Rental who can process deer meat for hunters, he knows many customers want to do it themselves.

"There are great folks you can pay to process your meat for you," Nenstiel says. "I have been processing my own deer for many years. At the store, we sell hydrators, jerky cannons and other odds and ends."

### **A Hub for Hunters to Gather**

To keep your customers happy as hunting season comes to an end, educating your staff and those

who shop the store will establish your employees as local experts.

Walker County Ace Hardware is always bustling with activity when it comes to the hunting category. As the season is close to



At **Reedsburg True Value**, filling out paperwork for the weapons sold is very important and accuracy is key.



Once a hunt is complete, hunters may need a wide range of products to process their meat and to preserve it, like meat grinders and sausage-making kits.

wrapping up, however, they still have the information to help and intrigue customers.

“We have a bulletin board at the service counter that a lot of people come in to look at,” Harding says. “We feature photos of the deer and other animals hunters in the area have harvested, allowing them a place to show off their hunt.”

According to Harding, one of the most exciting things about the sport is that at the end of the day, it’s often just a game of luck.

“With deer hunting, anybody can be lucky when they go hunting,” Harding says. “You can spend a lot of money and prepare, yet someone else can go out and stumble in the national forest and shoot a monster. Hunting is not limited to somebody with a bunch of money.”

At Reedsburg True Value, McGehee says after a hunt, they have many customers who return to brag about their hunt and talk with others.

“We encourage our customers to bring in photos after the hunt and we put it up on our brag board,” McGehee says. “I always joke about how our gun and ammo counter starts to look like a checkout line at Walmart, because people are piled up and down the aisles, all talking and excitedly sharing stories.”

## Events Bring the Hunters Back

When the hunting season comes to a close, many avid hunters are not ready to let go of the fun quite yet. To keep their loyal customers happy and engaged even after the season ends, retailers who create a haven for hunters will stay busy.

Walker County Ace Hardware has found a way to keep customers competitive and encourage them to return by hosting the Big Buck Contest for Walker County, which has become a tradition.

“Years and years ago, my dad hosted the Big Buck Contest at our store, and eventually it got dropped,” Harding says. “However, about 15 years ago, we started hosting it again. We usually give away three main prizes.”

The contest encourages both kids and adults to participate, and what Harding says is so cool about hunting is that it brings families together. During the hunting season, people come to the store with their animal tagged so that it can be judged for the Big Buck Contest.

“Hunting has become a true family pastime,” Harding says. “Everybody gets together and has a good time; you can even take the kids. I enjoy going out hunting with my son and grandson.

If they have a good hunt, I enjoy watching as much as if I was the one to do it.”

For hunters who shop and are loyal customers of Reedsburg True Value, although they no longer need to bring their game to the store after a hunt, many still do to show off what they got and tell stories, McGehee says.

“After a hunt is over, people often come to our store, and it’s honestly like a parking lot party,” he says. “People tell stories, check out people’s deer and hang out. It’s a lot of fun.” ❏

## Q&A With a Hunter

Are you looking for a consumer’s insights into the hunting category? Then read this in-depth Q&A with Bob Cutter, an avid hunter and NRHA’s vice president of sales, by visiting [TheRedT.com/hunting-qa](https://www.redt.com/hunting-qa). Bob reveals the products he won’t go on a hunting trip without, what he has learned from hunting, what elements he thinks are most important for retailers to be aware of if they want to find success in the category, and much more.