

Hardware Is Tailgating

Whether your business is located in a college sporting hub like Bloomington or not, tailgating is intrinsically tied to hardware products. From outdoor entertaining to hardware essentials, there are plenty of things you carry to attract a tailgating diehard. The same equipment needed to power outdoor lights on a work site can keep the party leading up to a night game just as happy (well, probably happier than a nighttime work site).

“A huge factor in earning business in Bloomington, and this goes double for tailgaters, is being a knowledge base for customers,” Davison says. “Having employees who can help a freshman college student fix a hole in the wall for the first time or pick out the best grill in their price range is an invaluable resource to have in your store. That kind of service translates to tailgating since those customers are looking to get what they need and start enjoying themselves.”

Identify items that combine mobility and utility. For tailgaters and IU fans Darrell and Shelly Deem, their setup has developed over years of tailgating with family and friends into a truly luxurious spread designed to allow as much fun as possible while limiting the work necessary on the hosts’ part to throw the party. From the satellite dish and TV for entertainment to the

chafing dishes to keep everyone fed, the Deems don’t skimp on tailgate comforts.

To best impress the tailgate enthusiast, cross-merchandise items from different departments in a central location near the front of the store. While this display may not include a full-size couch (as the Deem family’s tailgate setup does), it can be a great way to inspire a tailgater.

Don’t break down your summer displays of portable grills and accessories too early. As fall sets in, these displays can be reimagined to focus on tailgate shoppers. Include coolers along with other cooking equipment you stock to give shoppers options on their meal prep. Storage containers and even toolboxes can be easily converted into cooking utensil holders and organization tools for mobile partiers.

Even more than the already-prepared products that make for a great tailgate, you can stand out as the go-to location for customers to buy equipment necessary for less obvious projects. Popular tailgating games, like beanbag toss and ladder golf, are also easy DIY projects. In addition to stocking pre-assembled sets, group together the necessary products (plywood, beanbags, PVC pipes) in a tailgating section for those customers who want to take on an extra challenge.



Bloomington Hardware in Bloomington, Indiana, merchandises grills outside the store to catch the attention of students returning for school and for football.

Setup Is Crucial

Every tailgate party is different. Some feature nothing more than a small charcoal grill and a cooler with enough cold drinks for two. Other parties include recreational vehicles full of people and equipment that make you wonder if anyone is actually going to leave in time for the game.

The Deems are no slouches in the comfort department, and their setup requires plenty of the equipment and tools found in a hardware store. They usually get to their regular parking spot about three hours before kickoff for home games at IU and begin setting up their base camp for the day.

The camp includes a full-size couch with the score of every Hoosiers win they've attended with the couch written on its back, as well as a flat-screen TV mounted to their SUV. While grills are often a common sight at tailgates, the Deems prefer the cook-ahead method, putting their meals together the day before then reheating items in slow-cookers on game day.



The back of the Deems' couch doubles as a place to keep track of the scores of their favorite team.

Putting together that type of spread needs the help of a hardware retailer, Shelly says. Items range from consumables and add-ons (drink koozies, folding tables, large coolers designed for catering multiple meals) to large-ticket items that are staples in many retail locations (grills, generators, heavy-duty extension cords and brackets to attach TV and satellite equipment to vehicles).

"Not everyone has the same setup, but we've built a pretty nice area over the years," she says. "It's often the unexpected project that we've used a hardware store for, the item we didn't know we needed."

Shelly and Darrell highlight needs like a flagpole holder that is held in place under a car's wheel as a go-to item from a hardware retailer. Flag poles made out of PVC piping and outdoor lighting are also items that may already be a part of your regular order.

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5 Must-Have Tailgate Items

1. Party Essentials

Every tailgate party needs the essentials, including plastic housewares and cutlery, disposable cups and cleaning products. Group these items with other necessities, like trash bags and aluminum foil rolls, to remind customers of items that can easily be forgotten but become a huge hassle when not on hand on game day. That kind of save can go a long way with customer loyalty.

2. Cooking Needs

Think mobility and packing with these products. If you feature full-service grill options in your lawn and garden category, have smaller grills available. However, larger-than-normal coolers are the go-to for many tailgaters, as one cooler for a large amount of food is easier to pack into a vehicle than multiple smaller coolers.

3. Shelter

The weather isn't always ideal, but the game must go on. Offer items like large, open-sided tents and canopies to keep tailgaters out of the sun or rain, depending on the conditions. Outdoor heaters can also become must-have

items for tailgaters in areas prone to harsh winters. Stock small hand warmers and ponchos in your impulse area to catch tailgaters on their way out the door.

4. Smaller Necessities

Darrell and Shelly Deem say the small items they need from hardware stores are critical, including the ever-present need for duct tape. They also emphasize extension cords for anything electric, elastic bands to keep items together and zip ties to safely secure equipment in transit.

5. Project Items

Tailgaters are a crafty bunch, and having a few common items readily available can help serve their assembly needs. Common hardware departments like plumbing and lumber may provide materials customers need to build their own games, like lifesize Jenga. Often a tailgater will be inspired by another person's setup and will come to you for advice on how to make their own. Be sure your employees knowledgeable about these projects so they are ready to assist customers looking for direction.



A parked car doubles as a weight for a flagpole at a tailgating party.

Retailer Know-How



A comprehensive grill category should include a range of grill sizes, including portable grills most often used by tailgaters and a variety of grilling and cookout accessories.

Sometimes it takes tearing things down to build them better. Davison's and Hill's decision to remodel the interior of Bloomington Hardware led to rearranging the aisles and shelving displays. That change made the entry area for Bloomington Hardware more inviting, Davison says, and that has played well into the business's plans for tailgating.

"We have this great area now for customers when they first walk in. It's led to unexpected combinations, like using the wider aisles to feature large storage bins that have been a hit with tailgaters for packing up their equipment," she says.

Bloomington Hardware has established two priorities for meeting tailgating customers' needs: consumables and unique items. Products like one-time use charcoal bags, small gas containers for grills, lighters and lighter fluid and cleaning chemicals and wipes have helped build the store's reputation for being a tailgating destination, Hill says, citing an endcap display for paper towels that has quickly sold out in past tailgating seasons.

"A grill might be a one-time purchase for a customer, but consumables are items that keep them coming back"

—Kristina Temple Hill, payroll clerk and buyer, Bloomington Hardware

The endcap display highlights how simple items, when displayed prominently and priced right, can garner sales from tailgaters who are in a rush because they forgot items at home or who simply expected to pick them up near their tailgating site.

"A grill might be a one-time purchase for a customer, but consumables are items that keep them coming back," Hill says. "We don't sell beanbag boards, but we sell the bags themselves. Those things get tossed around and get lost all the time, so we need to have those kinds of items on hand."

Bloomington Hardware's unique items that do well include standard products that feature small details to set them apart. For her business, Davison says having grills and other equipment in the appropriate colors for IU fans is a big factor.

"Here in Bloomington, everything is red," Davison says. The official colors of IU athletics are crimson and cream. "That carries over into accessories and add-ons for us."

When outfitting your tailgating display, consider items branded for local teams. A customer who already has a folding table might consider another with their team's logo, and if your location is closely associated with a tailgating hotspot, the products aren't likely to languish on the salesfloor.

For tailgaters and retailers alike, the primary goal is simplicity and access. As football season heats up and the temperature outside cools, consider these tips in your store to keep area tailgaters happy. Stock common consumables in prominent areas of your stores and make sure your employees are ready with useful tips and items for anyone looking for their next tailgating projects. And don't forget to enjoy the game, too. ➔



Stocking products in colors and logos of popular teams will draw in a crowd of enthusiastic shoppers ready for game day.