



Retailers Find Value in Relationships That Defy Expectations

Making friends as an adult can be challenging, and it's often intimidating to be the first to break the ice at industry events. Creating lasting friendships with people who are vastly older or younger than you and live hundreds of miles away is even more unlikely. But the value that comes from connecting with other retailers in the independent home improvement industry is worth the initial hurdle.

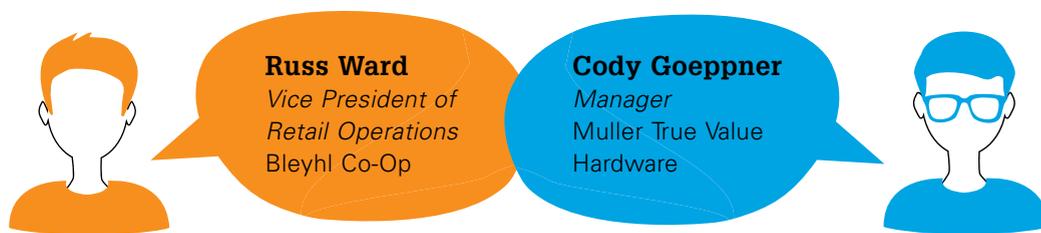
About 35,000 independent home improvement businesses are operating in the U.S. and Canada. The industry is full of people whose daily work looks a lot like yours, but there are a few differences.

In some areas, retailers may compete against each other, but it's important to note that the industry as a whole is stronger when independent business owners support each other and speak up together.

Throughout the industry, retailers like you have dozens of opportunities each year to meet their peers, whether at wholesaler buying markets, conferences and trade shows or working together in organizations like the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA). At these events, retailers can meet people they may never encounter otherwise. To learn more about the types of friendships that arise out of independents working together and learning from each other, *Hardware Retailing* spoke to four retailers whose friendships started in hardware and expanded into ongoing support systems.

These friendships are examples of the value that exists in developing relationships with other retailers who may have different outlooks based on their industry experience or their geography. For more about the value of developing industry relationships, visit TheRedT.com/industry-friends.

Celebrate Your Differences



Cody Goepfner and Russ Ward didn't realize how much they had in common when they met as classmates in the Spring 2017 session of NRHA's Retail Management Certification Program, an advanced retail management and leadership development program.

Cody's family had owned and operated Muller True Value Hardware in Ferdinand, Indiana, for 175 years, but he was fairly new to his managerial position in the company. Russ, vice president of retail operations for Bleyhl Co-Op in Grandview, Washington, enrolled in the NRHA program to get a better understanding of the hardware industry and its unique culture, business styles and products. Even though he had 25 years of management experience, he was new to hardware.

Cody says Russ's eagerness to learn was refreshing. "My first impression was that he was the old guy in the class and I was the baby," Cody says. "You wouldn't think we would click from an

age standpoint, but he was very fun and open to learning, and I was interested in what he had to share."

Russ noticed the age difference between himself and the other students, but he says because everyone was there for the same reasons, his experience proved valuable.

"Every person in that class taught me something," Russ says. "Cody and I hit it off from day one. He and all of the other students accepted me right away."

Russ says Cody is a bit more outgoing than he is, but they have a lot in common, which helped build a strong friendship.

"We both love to laugh and have a sense of humor in our jobs and lives," Russ says. "We both take that humor to work with us, having fun in life and work. I'm not as creative as he is, but we both love learning. With our shared passion for business and finding success, we became fast friends."



Cody Goepfner and **Russ Ward** met and became friends while participating in the Spring 2017 Retail Management Certification Program. Above, program graduates, including Goepfner and Ward, celebrate completing the program.

“As an independent retailer, it’s easy to feel like you’re alone, but when you connect with someone, you have so much to relate to.”

—Cody Goepfner,
Muller True Value Hardware

In addition to their similar personalities, Cody says their similar approaches to business helped form a strong basis for their friendship.

“Russ and I have a similar mindset of trying to do excellent work to succeed,” Cody says. “Plus, it’s always a bonus being able to talk to someone in the industry who understands the day-to-day job. As I got to know him, we both realized our job titles and responsibilities might be different, but we had a lot in common.”

Muller True Value Hardware is a single-store operation that serves mostly DIY customers. On the other hand, Bleyhl Co-Op is a regional operation in Washington that is owned by and serves farm and ranch growers. In addition to its headquarters, the company has 10 locations.

While their businesses differ, their commitments to customers and family are the same.

“As the seventh generation to work at my family business, it’s personal for me,” Cody says. “I see that same passion and family focus from Russ at Bleyhl Co-Op; even though they aren’t related by blood, they’re all family.”

The two continue to stay in touch, whether talking about business or just catching up. They recently connected at the True Value Fall Reunion in Chicago, and Cody says he’s planning a trip to the West Coast to see Russ’s business, visit wineries and spend time with Russ and his family.

“My friendship with Russ has showed me that no matter what level of your career you’re in, you can still enjoy what you’re doing,” Cody says. “I love what I’m doing. Growing up, I never would have thought I’d say that. My goal is to say that in 30 years my career is maturing like Russ’s. When you do something you love, you can avoid burnout. He proves it’s possible to do what you love and have fun.”

Russ says he has learned just as much from Cody along the way.

“Cody has a different perspective and a different audience in a different part of the country,” he says.



Russ Ward (left) and **Cody Goepfner** continued their friendship by reuniting at the True Value Fall Reunion in Chicago.

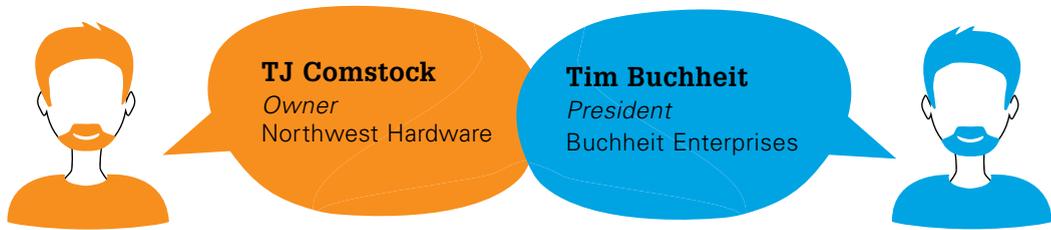
“Even though Cody is half my age, I count him as a mentor for me because he is full of fresh ideas.”

Networking and becoming friends with other retailers in the industry is something all retailers should do, Cody says.

“As an independent retailer, it’s easy to feel like you’re alone, but when you connect with someone, you have so much to relate to,” he says. “Being willing to listen to others, ask questions and learn how others do business makes a big difference. Our industry is so unique because we can be independent but have the same purpose for why we do what we do, beyond wholesaler lines. Everybody has a unique perspective to share.”

Russ says all retailers should build relationships with their peers. “Going to NRHA gatherings and regional meetings is so important,” Russ says. “There are so many fabulous independent business owners out there. Don’t be afraid to talk to and meet new people. To last and ultimately succeed in the future, we all need to come together. As a collective group, we’re much larger than any big-box store.”

Get Another Perspective



When Tim Buchheit speaks up at meetings, TJ Comstock listens. And when Tim decides to go on a 3 a.m. drive to get fresh doughnuts, TJ goes along for the ride.

Tim operates Buchheit Enterprises in Missouri, and TJ owns Northwest Hardware in Montana. The two retailers, who oversee very different home improvement businesses, don't share distributors or geography. Yet, they have swapped retailing stories and advice and have become close friends while traveling across the world together.

The pair met about five years ago while serving on the NRHA board of directors. TJ is now the incoming board chairman, and Tim has

left association leadership, but remains heavily involved with NRHA. In the beginning, they networked and talked business, starting off where many association members and leaders do.

Meeting other retailers in the industry from various distributors and market types is helpful, TJ says. "I think the attraction is that we're all on the same mission, but we don't always interact across distributors," he says. "We can talk about things that are affecting everyone."

Friendship is a bonus. Tim and TJ discovered they share mutual enthusiasm for live blues music, motorcycles and adventure. When the two of them met up in Missouri for an industry

CEO roundtable event, Tim took TJ up in his helicopter and buzzed the Mississippi River.

“He’s hysterical,” TJ says. “There’s an age difference that doesn’t seem to matter at all. Tim’s pretty young at heart. He’s a lot of fun to be with.”

Tim is also gifted at finding and making new friends everywhere he goes, which opens the door to many unique and memorable adventures, TJ says. “He has very few inhibitions, and it is amazing how many people he meets,” TJ says. “He talks to everyone.”

Most recently, Tim suggested a trip to Sweden for a custom motorbike show. The two friends went in June, and Tim’s networking talents got the pair exclusive access into a Swedish motorcycle club and bikes to borrow for a day.

“It was pretty wild,” TJ says. “As far as I know, we were the only two Americans.”

They looked at hundreds of custom motorcycles at the show and admired the motorcycle club’s clubhouse, where members were building or working on bikes.

Business, though, is still an important part of the retailers’ friendship. For Tim, the trip to Sweden gave him a glimpse into TJ’s strengths as a retail leader.



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—TJ Comstock, Northwest Hardware

“TJ has the ability to see the big picture and then go down into the weeds to see the details, which is something an entrepreneur has to have,” Tim says.

The pair also had the opportunity to learn from each other on the trip because while they are independent retailers, their businesses do differ.

“I have a larger operation than TJ, so I give him that perspective,” Tim says. “But there’s a lot we can learn from each other. TJ thinks outside the box, and he’s in a very rural market, which I think forces him to be really creative.”

TJ enjoys listening to Tim speak, whether at an industry event or on their bikes at a stoplight. “Tim doesn’t always say much, but when he does, he’s really interesting,” TJ says. “I think Tim is very

TJ Comstock (left) and **Tim Buchheit** (right) recently traveled to Sweden to visit European hardware operations and to travel the open road on motorcycles.



forward-thinking in how he looks at profitability. His work is very data driven.”

Retailers who live and work in different parts of the country and stock their businesses through different distributors have a great deal to offer each other, TJ says. The camaraderie and friendship that develops out of communicating with other retailers provide insight on business topics, such as hiring and retaining employees, which many independent business owners struggle with no matter the location.

“The most important thing is to have someone outside your circle who you can bounce ideas off of,” TJ says.

Tim recommends retailers reach out to one another to forge new relationships and to strengthen their business operations. He also recommends attending NRHA events for new opportunities to meet up across the country. He says the association sets itself apart by uniting business owners from all wholesale affiliations, giving retailers a level playing field to share best practices and learn from one another.

“You have so much in common,” Tim says about independent home improvement store owners. “There are so many reasons we have to network with one another.” ➡

Hardware Retailing staffers Renee Changnon, Kate Klein, Melanie Moul and Todd Taber contributed to this article.

