

Luring Them In

Retailers Provide Fishing Services and Products to Catch Community Interest

Fishing and outdoor enthusiasts are all about the experience. Whether it's the first rays of sunlight hitting a stream at dawn or the tug on the line that alerts an angler to a new catch, the small moments enrich the lives of dedicated hobbyists and professionals. Those memories keep a fisher motivated to get back out there and land another fish and form another memory.

Retailers are already part of that process, and they should believe that memories created during a trip into a store for fishing supplies will stick with an outdoorsman just as much as the trip out on a boat or hiking up an Alaskan stream. Getting the right gear before a trip can make all the difference for an angler, and when a retailer serves as a trusted partner for adventurous customers, they share in those customers' fishing successes.

Products designed for outdoor enthusiasts are nothing new to many home improvement retailers. The same independent drive and spirit to take on home improvement projects with their own hands is likely found in fishers looking to pull their own dinner out of a lake. However, there is more to catering to the fishing community than stocking a few rods among the camping gear and portable grills.

Hardware Retailing spoke to two retailers who have found a way to be a resource for standard hardware items and advocates for fishing hobbyists. Whether it's offering the best product selection, distributing permits or hooking prospective adventurers up with knowledgeable guides, there are multiple ways to snag a fisher's attention.

A retailer hoping to catch the attention of area enthusiasts should have employees on staff who know where to find the fish and what a customer should be looking to catch.

Knowing Your Waters

For Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing in Soldotna, Alaska, fishing isn't just a niche market. Soldotna is a major hub situated on the Kenai River and is the most popular sport fishing destination in Alaska. Every July, the sockeye and king salmon season comes to a peak as anglers from around the world rush to the town to catch a once-in-a-lifetime fish.

Scott Miller co-owns Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing with his brother Brian. The brothers have been involved in the hardware business along with their father ever since he opened the first location in 1986. However, it wasn't until 2007 that Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing fully embraced Soldotna's place as a fishing mecca and reestablished the business on a new property with a custom-designed salesfloor.

"We went from 6,800 square feet to 16,500 square feet in a new building on property we own. We still focus very much on dedicated hardware categories, but every summer we switch up the store and move our fishing products front and center," Miller says. "We have tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of fishers come into town each summer, and this location is a block away from the river. We're in the right spot to catch these customers and earn their repeat business."





Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing in Soldotna, Alaska, supplies an international cast of anglers each summer as the salmon season opens on the nearby Kenai River. The business also sponsors an ice fishing competition in the winter.

Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing's location means it can serve a dedicated fishing scene. In Truckee, California, Mountain Hardware & Sports serves various tourist hubs known for their outdoor offerings. The business has three locations, with the Truckee store supporting a healthy tourist community that welcomes visitors looking to enjoy the mountains or take a cruise on nearby Lake Tahoe.

The business was founded in 1977 as a general store providing whatever the community needed, says vice president Heather Svahn. That mission has grown to encompass a number of hardware and outdoors categories over the years, including a fishing department dedicated to supplying anglers in the Sierra Nevada mountain range.

"We've had a symbiotic relationship with Truckee as it grew up and became the community it is today. All of our departments, from outdoors and home decor as well as hardware, have developed to meet the area's needs," Svahn says. "We supply the everyday items our year-round residents need to maintain their homes as well as their hobbies, while also acting as a resource for the visiting family looking to have a week of fun."

Mountain Hardware & Sports and Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing have researched their fishing markets to feature products and knowledge that are useful for experienced anglers seeking a prize-winning catch as well as novice adventurers out for a fun afternoon. This attention to the surrounding area is key for a retailer hoping to attract a strong fishing following, Miller says.

"There are plenty of old sayings about how much fishers talk. You do want a reputation, but you want that reputation to be about the quality of your products, the assuredness of your service and the dedication you put into valuing a customer's time," he says. "We have repeat customers who have been coming to Alaska each season for decades. By proving to these customers how serious we are about this sport and making their trip a success, we're able to earn that business each season."

Catch the Big One With Stellar Service

Whether customers come into a fishing destination store looking for the latest battery-powered drill or a local fly designed to attract an Alaskan salmon isn't normally under a retailer's control. Convincing that customer to come back for another visit can be heavily credited to what a retailer offers in addition to the products the customer buys on their way to cast a line.

Services retailers can offer that attract members of the fishing community include issuing licenses and permits on-site, offering free line unwinding and winding with a rod wrapping machine, repair services and connections with area guides and tours.

On top of the on-site services, developing strong supply lines and planning ahead for common needs during strong fishing seasons can be great assets, Miller says. Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing has built relationships with manufacturers that allow it to order products at prices that encourage anglers to buy their supplies once they are in town rather than

before they make their trip to Alaska. This includes manufacturers of fishing accessories from national brands as well as local producers around Soldotna.

"We're competing with big-box outfitters in the Lower 48 as well as online retailers that can have supplies and equipment shipped ahead of time for anyone planning to fish during our prime seasons," Miller says. "We offer things the national chains can't offer, like rods specifically designed for our fisheries and our waterways. Those kinds of products offer incentive to shop for your gear once you get to Alaska and to Soldotna."

Some of these unique products include locally designed flies from an area manufacturer that have been proven to attract the most sought-after fish in Alaskan waters. Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing also purchases bulk lead that is then converted by a local manufacturer into custom weights. These weights allow anglers to have an advantage in areas around Soldotna, as the weights help fishers reach optimal depths for the Kenai River.

"We have products specific to the needs of fishers in our area, and we have a lot of supply of these items," Miller says. "We choose to focus on products that can't be found in other stores, and we maintain a high inventory of these items. In categories like fishing, it's very easy to bring in a lot of inventory and scatter those products across to large part of the market. We keep our products focused on the Kenai River and the fisheries we service."

Permitting Exploration

Both Mountain Hardware & Sports and Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing issue permits at their locations, allowing anglers to not only stock up on supplies but gain licenses for the multiple fisheries, locations and types of fishing allowed in their areas.

"We're lucky that California has completed a changeover to an online system for selling fishing permits, but no matter your system, the people issuing the licenses need to be the same people who can offer the best advice on what a customer needs and where they should head for the type of fishing they want to try," Svahn says.

Up-to-date knowledge of a state's rules and regulations surrounding permits is also crucial to enhance customer satisfaction and build a reputation as a resource for anglers of any experience level, Miller says. Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing has multiple staffers trained on issuing permits, which during peak season can be a full-time task. The operation also has two employees who are familiar with the most current regulations in order to answer customer questions quickly and correctly.

"Alaska has crazy-complicated regulations when it comes to fishing, and just in our river, there are open sections, closed sections, places where you can and can't drive a boat and many other stipulations," Miller says. "We want our customers coming in, getting supplies and the permits they need, and back out having a great time on the water."

If You'll Permit Me

Permits and licenses are necessary for a number of outdoor activities, from weekend camping trips to major excursions on the open water. For retailers looking to expand their offerings for outdoor enthusiasts, here are two tips on how to best train employees on issuing licenses and some key red flags to watch out for. Visit TheRedT.com/fishing-permits for more.



- As a fishing destination, retailers focusing on the outdoor life are likely already knowledgeable about fishing opportunities in their area. This knowledge should extend to the regulations laid out by a state's governing authority, such as when certain species can be harvested or what areas allow boats. Associate who can readily answer these questions for customers without referencing a guide make for a strong team and reputation in the fishing community.
- If someone is coming in looking for fishing gear, they're likely intending to use it sooner rather than later. At Mountain Hardware & Sports, the process of receiving a permit is part of the larger plan of selecting a piece of equipment for a customer. If the customer already knows what kind of fish they are looking for, one employee can start the issuing a permit while another associated educates the customer on the best fly to use and whether they need a guide on the water.



Mountain Hardware & Sports, in Truckee, California, serves fishing enthusiasts in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

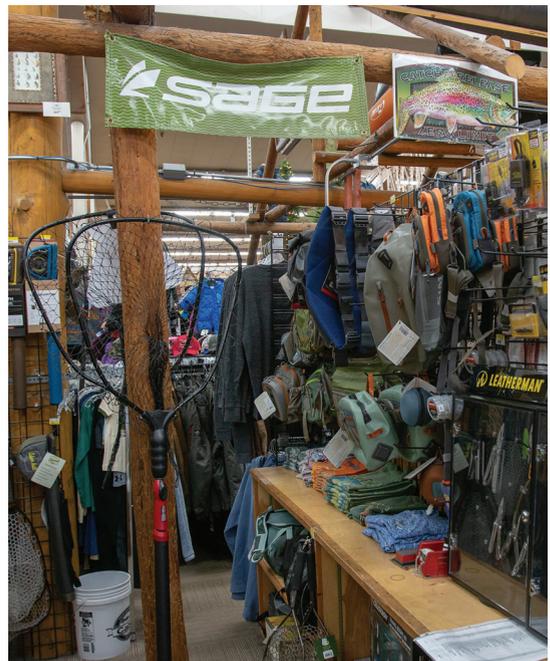
Reel-Good Guides

While demonstrating staff knowledge and offering up-to-date information on allowable catches and when a season will open and close are excellent services a retailer can offer, sometimes having connections outside a business is the real key to becoming an integral part of the fishing community. Trustworthy Hardware & Fishing and Mountain Hardware & Sports have developed strong relationships with area guides and charter companies that are available to offer their expertise on specific fishing seasons and styles.

For Mountain Hardware & Sports, the sheer diversity of the natural landscape means there are several options for visitors depending on whether they're looking to fly-fish a mountain stream or troll a deep lake. By maintaining relationships with multiple guides and having employees who can speak professionally about local fishing opportunities, the business is able to assist customers in a unique way.

"We know our area experts well, and we can recommend a guide who is great with families looking to enjoy a fishing trip with their kids as well as a guide who can handle an experienced angler," Svahn says.

Retailers testing the waters of the fishing category can stay afloat knowing that dedicated fishers are often enthusiastic in their support for the sport as well as the gear involved. A strong reputation and the knowledge to back it up can be a great niche for hardware stores in the right areas.



With the proper research for what local fisheries are looking for in products and services, retailers can become major players in the outdoor category.

"It's all about finding the right match for your market. If you're ready to make a commitment to the fishing category, it's because you saw an opportunity to serve that market in your area," Svahn says. "You had reason to believe it would work, so don't be quick to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Keep looking for the right kind of demand that you can supply, and you can find loyal customers for the long term." →