



OUTSIDE
THE *Vines*

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

All About Community

By Ana Olvera

River Sports Outfitters (RSO), in Knoxville, Tennessee, has become a staple in its community as a resource and social gathering place.

RSO began as an outdoor boating store in 1983 but quickly grew into a diverse outdoor specialty store, says owner Ed McAllister. The store has grown to feature a coffee shop, bar, climbing center and several satellite rental locations. RSO's offsite rental locations are open five months out of the year, offering rentals for paddleboards, boats, bikes, kayaks and more.

The store has been active in the community since day one. As an independent retailer, its important "to engage the customer and get them interested in what you're doing, and be sincere about it," McAllister says.

Engaging Customers

To engage customers, RSO hosts three to five instructional classes per week — sometimes two classes will be hosted in one day. A monthly Ladies' Night takes place at the River Sports Climbing Center and RSO also provides public and one-on-one demonstrations of its canoes.

McAllister says he won't pitch an item to a customer just to make a sale if he knows it isn't going to work for them. The store's demonstrations give customers the opportunity to really try an item before they buy.

"That gives the customer a good chance to try out various things that they're looking to

buy," he says. "A lot of people will change their mind after trying something out. The more you can let the customer try and use the product, the better."

"Some people will say [classes and demonstrations] are consuming on resources, time and expenses — and that's true. But are you better off to do an event that's \$300 in staff time or a newspaper ad that'll cost you \$700?"

McAllister says he doesn't know the answer, but getting to interact with customers is worth it.

"We're able to engage the customer," he says.

Giving Back

RSO gives back to its community by hosting Pint Night, a monthly social night for its customers. RSO partners with a local vendor to supply food and beverages and picks a local charity to benefit. Customers give a donation, with the first 200 attendees receiving a collector pint glass and one free fill up of beer, if they so choose.

All proceeds go to that month's charity partner, which range from trails and parks to foundations for outdoor recreation. In return, RSO strengthens ties with its community.

"We have a list of vendors and charities wanting to partner with us," McAllister says. "It brings the community out in a non-selling way."

Every year Patagonia, one of RSO's vendors, gives the store a grant from its environmental funds and the store partners with a local charity to build a project.

In 2015, RSO used the grant money to build a climbing center at a nature center in Knoxville. All projects completed through this grant have an environmental theme, McAllister says.

"The biggest thing is to enjoy your business and have fun," McAllister says. "Yes it is a job, but not many people can say they're as happy as people who work at an outdoor specialty retailer."

Work to Not Fail

"Most of these [additions] all kind of stem from pretty much the same attitude," McAllister says. "If you work to not fail, you will succeed. If you work to succeed, you may not always succeed."

"We're a single storefront, mom-and-pop store. I've tried new things and I'm willing to invest in new things. If you're honest with customers, not always trying to make the sale, [and] being fair, you will succeed."

When McAllister decided to open an outdoor sports store, he was able to buy the building the store is located at in full.

"The only real smart decision I made was buying the store the way I did when I did," McAllister says. "If things get really bad, I can survive because I don't have to pay a landlord. I hope it never gets to that point; but if I have to, I can."

Using his "work to not fail" motto, McAllister has made RSO more than just another retail store.

"I didn't really know what I was doing at the time," he says, "But I've made it a destination store." **LGR**

