

GRILLING

FOR SUCCESS

Echter's Garden Center gives an in-depth look at how it has implemented a successful grilling section.

By Gina Gorden-Rose



There is a difference between selling grills in a garden center and successfully selling grills in a garden center. You need to figure out what you have to offer, and you must not assume having a nice selection of grills and accessories will do. Here are some strategies we tried at Echter's, which seemed to help in our pursuit of being a successful, grill destination store.

WHAT YOU NEED

First, I would strongly recommend you start by visiting your nearest grill competitor and try to buy a grill. What do they offer, what are they lacking? Assess what their strong points are and what their weak points are. Your grill department will need to be 10 times better on both accounts. Does your competition carry replacement parts? Do they offer assembly and delivery? Use your competition to make you a better competitor.

If you have the space and money to invest in

inventory, it's best to be a one-stop grill shop. Do you have everything a customer needs to grill? Do you assemble grills? Do you deliver? Do you sell filled propane tanks? Do you sell cooking utensils? Do you have that irresistible steak marinade? We have become a society of instant gratification. Often you get customers who need the grill assembled and at their home 50 miles away for a very important event. If you meet all their needs, they will remember and tell their friends how fabulous you are.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

You should focus most on customer service when selling grills. Your staff should know the ins and outs of each grill because a customer can tell real product knowledge versus product wish-wash. As we see more often these days, most consumers are educated. They have been on the Internet, they've read *Consumer Reports* and they've talked to friends. So when that customer walks into your store and begins talking

to one of your sales associates, you only have so much time to impress them.

At our store we even came up against the problem of having an all female sales staff who were selling grills to male customers. Given certain circumstances, some people are more comfortable dealing with a man or a woman. But when that male customer asks for the "man" in the department, our female staff members had to try to not be offended and be trained well enough to impress him with their knowledge. Don't underestimate the power of sales staff training. If you don't already know, you can't fake product knowledge. Take the time and the money to train your staff well.

Personalize each customer when they walk into your grill department. Your staff needs to assess what the customer is and isn't looking for. What are their requirements for a grill? Many customers come in looking for a small grill. What is their definition of small? You never want your staff to just launch into "these are the grills we carry and these are their differences" until they have personalized the sale through questions. Start with the basic questions: What kind of grill do they really need? Do they have a budget? From there, go into what specifics they want. Do they want a rotisserie, a side burner, smoking chips, etc.? In answering these questions, the customer may learn some things they need in a grill or even change their mind in what they are looking for.

BEATING THE COMPETITION

Of course, the area you have the least amount of control over is price. You must be competitively priced to sell grills successfully. For us, our closest grill competitor is a big box store. We far exceed them in product selection, product knowledge, customer service and replacement parts, but they beat us on price. Even though we carry a completely different selection and quality level, people often comment on our higher pricing. We explain to them why our grills are more expensive. My philosophy, which I share with many customers, is that box stores tend to sell a grill that



Patio fireplace

The Patio Campfire has a light, portable design with a large log set to create a campfire atmosphere and uses clean burning gas. It is available in optional Mesa or Rock Ring bases or homeowners may create their own customized look by adding pavers, brick, rock or stone materials to an unfinished Fire Pit Builder Set (shown) or directly around the unit. Hearth & Home Technologies Inc. (888) 427-3973. **Write in 1437**

Furniture set

This folding bamboo table and chair set is suitable for use on a sun porch or in a garden. The table measures 27 x 27 x 26 inches, and the chairs measure 34½ x 18½ x 25 inches. This set is also available in black. Antique Reproductions, Inc. (877) 508-2897. **Write in 1427**



Hammock

This new line of vibrant colored hammocks features new color palettes and is constructed of all-solution-dyed acrylic. Five palettes are available containing identical products including fabric hammocks, colored rope hammocks, swings and decorative pillows. The Hammock Source. (800) 334-1078. **Write in 1435**



may last 1-3 years, where we sell grills that will last a lifetime. The difference in these two types of grills is always price. You have to educate your customer on the difference between those two types of grills and why the initial investment in a better quality grill makes the difference.

There is always the exception to these strategies. No matter how you explain the difference in quality to a customer, some will base their purchase solely on price. As successful grill retailers you just have to make sure you offer a good selection of grills and that the potential customer has been educated to the best of your ability and understands their options.

Realize you have to constantly evaluate your inventory and strategies as well as your competition. Last spring our neighborhood box store introduced a fairly large, all stainless steel grill with several deluxe features for \$599. Wow! What a deal. We had nothing in all stainless steel for that price or that even came close. So I went down to the box store to take a look. The grill looked impressive. It was a good size, lots of stainless steel and accessories for a low price. When I asked a sales associate some questions on the grill he had to call someone else over who knew about the grill.

Several minutes later a young man approached to help with questions. I asked what type of warranty came with the grill. He explained the grill came with a 60-day warranty. My first warning bell went off. Most grill companies we carry offer a limited lifetime warranty. I then asked about replacement parts and how easy they were to order. I used the example of the grill rotisserie motor going out. The sales associate said I could probably call the company, and they could order those for me. (I never like to hear the word probably; it's almost like saying I really don't know.) A second warning bell went off. I then asked if they sold a cover that would fit the grill. The sales associate said, no. Have you ever had the pleasure of trying to buy a generic grill cover for a specific grill? Not fun or easy. A third warning bell went off.

Later that week, I called the grill manufacturer — a company I had never heard of — to verify

ordering replacement parts and was told that the grill was imported from China, and no replacement parts were available. The final warning bell went off. It's like the old adage, "if something looks to be too good, it probably is." Now knowing the grill was an import I understood its low, low price. But imagine the frustration for all those consumers when their beautiful stainless steel \$599 grill needs a new rotating igniter switch and none are available.

SHOW THEM HOW TO USE IT

Never forget the power of grill demonstrations. During our busiest months we do grill demos. Demos are great because a customer will walk up when they hear the sizzling sounds of outdoor cooking. We like to demo items people may not typically think to cook on a gas grill, like pizza, turkey on a rotisserie, Cornish game hens, etc. Some of our customers' most impulsive buys were motivated by their stomachs.

And finally, I would recommend a clean, open format to sell your grills in. Have room for

people to shop, look and compare all the products. Have room to take a grill apart to show the customer the burner shape and how it is ported. Hands-on selling for you and the customer is crucial to successfully selling grills.

Remember, there is no one way to sell grills successfully. If there were, there'd be more people in the business. Each situation has variables that constantly change and influence the market. The more you can stay educated on products and trends to pass onto the customer the better. Don't be afraid to be honest with your customers, they appreciate that more than you may realize. Be sincere, and most customers will realize you are looking out for their best interest, whereas other retailers are merely trying to make a sale. I even recommend to customers who have just begun to look, to shop around. Good luck and happy grilling. 🍴

Gina Gorden-Rose, Echter's Garden Center, Arvada, Colo., can be reached by phone at (303) 424-7979 or E-mail at grose@echters.com.



Outdoor grill

The Freestanding Gourmet Grill is available in two sizes: 30 and 42 inches. The units can be configured for natural gas or liquid propane and field conversion kits are also available. The 30-inch grill has a 554-sq.-inch grilling area, and the 40-inch has 800 sq. inches of grilling area. Both units feature heavy-duty stainless steel grates, variable-location high-capacity smoker, rotisserie motor assembly, integrated flush-mounted thermometer and cordless electronic 1.5-v battery ignition. Jade Products Co. (800) 884-5233. **Write in 1438**

Bench

The Chadwick Garden Bench is available in 48- and 60-inch lengths. It is made of shorea, requires no finishing and will not rot when left outdoors. It will weather to a soft warm shade of gray. Oxford Garden Designs. (877) 866-3331. **Write in 1441** ▶

