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CONTENTS

May 2023 • Vol. 19, No. 5

RV MANUFACTURERS

16 The Grand Popularity of Fifth Wheels
Customers are seeking out Solitude and Reflection – in more ways than one.

22 Flexible Fifth Wheels
Sabre – a division of Forest River – serves up options bursting with features and a close collaboration with its dealer partners.

26 A Home Away From Home Built to Last
The all-aluminum ATC Plā 4319 Fifth Wheel Toy Hauler is designed to last generations with appeal to a wide demographic of today's RVers.

RV DEALERS

30 Forging Her Own Path
With Stacey Robinson as one of the principals of Great Canadian RV Ltd. today, new peaks are on the horizon.

SUPPLIER FOCUS

36 Enjoying the Shade
Stepping into the awning market, Velarium kicks off its business with a standout product.







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RV PRO

CONTENTS

RV AFTERMARKET

40 Get Hitched
GEN-Y Hitch capitalizes on popularity of RVing and looks to open 80,000-square-foot facility in Indiana this month.

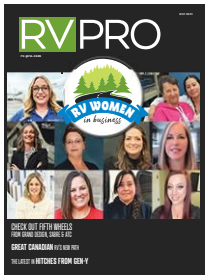
72 Special Product Focus
Hitches and Towing

RV INSIGHT

84 Defining 'WIMIN'
The acronym – which stands for What Inventory Management Is Needed – takes a deep dive on inventory management methods.

87 Successful Emotional and Sensory Merchandising
Appealing to customers' emotions and the five senses can lead to positive memories of a shopping experience – meaning a higher bottom line.

90 Empower Your Team by Making Coaching Your Default Management Style



ABOUT THE COVER

Learn more about the women featured on the cover starting on pg. 44.

RV WOMEN in business

Women in Business 2023

44 10 Women, nominated by their peers, who are shining a bright light in the RV industry.

50 Rising Up Together
Four women at Thetford tell us how the company has supported their growth, and why they're determined to help bring up generations of women behind them.

56 Veronica Helms: Never Stop Learning
Education director for the Florida RV Trade Association, Veronica Helms credits her rapid professional growth to seeking knowledge, being the best at her job and letting life be the teacher.

60 Tending the Flame
Ember RV is stoking the fires of the RV industry and poised to strike when the iron gets hot again.

64 PRVCA Director Welcomes Diversity
Heather Leach says women may still be a minority in the industry, but representation is improving.

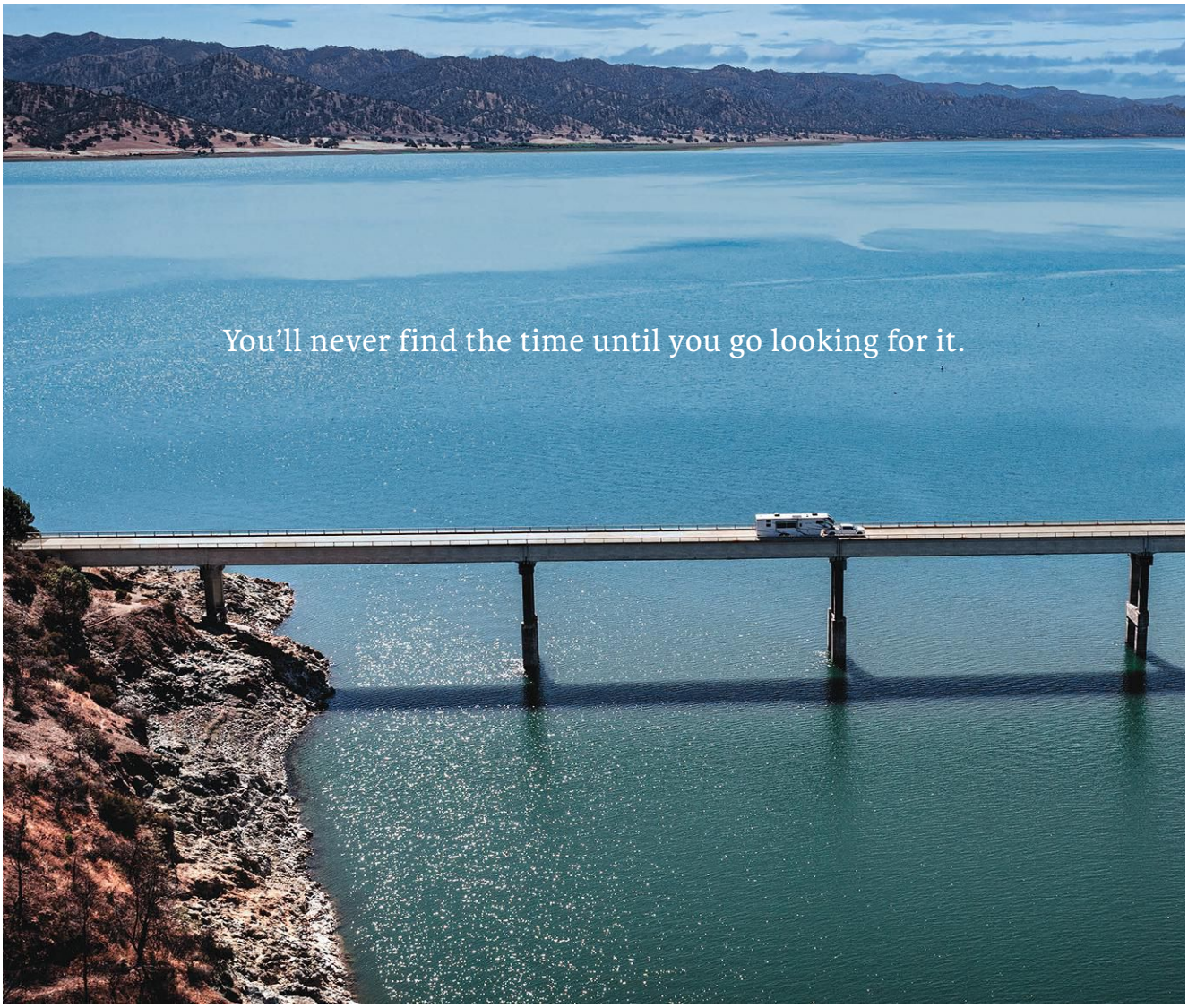
68 Reaching for the Summit
With 18 years in the RV industry, Shasta RV General Manager Meg Grierson has learned that teamwork, and keeping your eyes and ears open, breeds success.

DEPARTMENTS

Editor's Note	8
News	10
Product Highlights	93
Ad Index	95
Pit Stop	96

CERTIFIED AUDIENCE

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Out Of Office

When most of us envision success, I imagine a few words come to mind: wealth, influence, accomplishment, recognition or maybe community. These ideals are often the driving forces for how we choose to navigate life – and we'll often make sacrifices, even to our own well-being, to see them through. Us millennials call it the "hustle culture."

But recently, during my first visit to Costa Rica this April, I understood something new about success: Sometimes, in order to keep up with our own expectations, the opposite is needed – to slow down. Costa Rican ticos (locals) know this well. In fact, their ability to find balance between work and play makes "success" a simple byproduct of a present life. For a family in Jaco, success is fresh fruit and marlins caught just that morning, sold to tourists (the main industry in the country) for a good price that feeds the family. In San Mateo, where the rumble of howler monkeys echoes across a busy rainforest, success is sitting on your front porch with a glass of guanabana (soursop) juice, talking with neighbors for hours.

At first, the number of foreigners working remotely at coffee shops, beachfront bars and sodas (traditional eateries) surprised me. Workers on-the-go have become a sort of movement, and a blossoming market for the RV industry. I realized "island time" might apply to traffic and restaurant service in Costa Rica, but the notion also means less stress, more presence and a redefining of what it means to have abundance. And while life moves fast in the U.S., I felt we could all benefit from a toucan's-eye view at home: appreciate all that you have, and success becomes the byproduct.

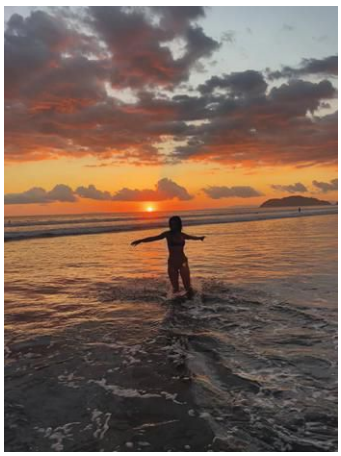
Like the striking beauty of Costa Rica, I was deeply inspired by the insights in this month's special Women in Business (WIB) issue. Said best by Veronica Helms, education director for the Florida RV Trade Association, in her profile on pg. 56: "Nothing is better than letting life teach you what you don't know." You'll find weaved throughout May's feature stories a common idea – ladies who strive to be the best at what they do and are authentic to themselves. Read about their professional contributions to the industry and their companies starting on pg. 44.

A huge thank you to our sponsors of this year's annual WIB issue: Century Chemical Corp., East to West, Ember Recreational Vehicles, Hellwig Suspension Products, NTP-STAG, the RV Women's Alliance, Thetford, United States Warranty Corporation, Winnebago Industries and Xponent. Thank you for committing to the growth, empowerment and representation of women in our amazing industry!

And remember, no matter what success looks like to you, sometimes the most productive thing we can do is take a breath, look around and find the pura vida (simple life) among all that you've already accomplished.

As always, thanks for reading!





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Open House Week Scheduled for Last Week in September

The 2023 Elkhart RV Open House will be held starting Monday, Sept. 25, both THOR Industries and Forest River said recently.

Following a two-year hiatus because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Open House returned to enthusiastic crowds in September 2022, and the annual Supplier's Show held in conjunction with that week at the RV/MH Hall of Fame had a record turnout.

John Mellencamp played one of the few shows he did in 2022 at Open House Week. Who will be there this year?

Open House Week features most of North America's manufacturers showing off product at locations spread out around Elkhart, Indiana. Live entertainment and ample opportunity for networking make it a hugely popular annual event that many dealers plan their year around. Last year, John Mellencamp, Florida Georgia Line and Sammy Hagar were the musical highlights of the show.

This year's Open House will be held a week after the Pennsylvania Recreation Vehicle and Camping Association's 54th Annual America's Largest RV Show – known as the "Hershey Show" – held in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

Genesis Products Finalizes Purchase of Funder America

Genesis Products has completed its acquisition of Funder America. Genesis said the deal positions it to meet the high demand for thermally fused laminate (TFL) panels and broadens its expertise as a leading supplier of laminated panels, components and panel processing. Funder America is one of the oldest, largest and most diversified TFL panel and component manufacturers in North America with 50 years of experience, Genesis said, making it an attractive buyout target. Genesis currently serves kitchen cabinets, closets/shelving, RV, office and health care furniture markets.

"Adding TFL manufacturing to our capabilities solidifies our position as the most comprehensive supplier of laminated components and panels in North America. We are passionate about leveraging the breadth of our offering to better serve OEMs, distributors and retailers across the country," said Jon Wenger, CEO of Genesis.

"As an independent TFL producer, Funder has the ability to work with any board or laminate to serve the constantly evolving needs of our joint customers. Our products and capabilities are naturally aligned to be stronger together," said Peter Funder, who will continue to lead Funder as a division of Genesis after the acquisition.

Winnebago to Acquire Lithium-Ion Battery Producer

Winnebago Industries has reached a definitive agreement to acquire Lithionics Battery, a lithium-ion battery solutions provider to recreational equipment and specialty vehicle markets. Acquiring Lithionics will provide Winnebago Industries with enhanced technological and engineering capabilities to offer consumers more differentiated products with innovative electrical solutions, the company said, as well as bring strategic sourcing benefits and secure a critical area of its supply chain. Terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Founded in 2010, Lithionics is a provider of advanced battery solutions that deliver "house power," supporting internal electrical features and appliances for outdoor products including RVs, boats, specialty and other low-speed vehicles, as well as other industrial applications. Its in-house power solutions extend time spent off-grid, improve reliability, reduce noise and generate fewer emissions, Lithionics said.

Lithionics is led by founder and CEO Steve Tartaglia and is headquartered in Clearwater, Florida.

"The addition of Lithionics enhances Winnebago Industries' ability to develop unique and diverse battery solutions across our portfolio, advancing our overall electrical ecosystem, driving organic growth and supply chain security, reinforcing our technological competitive advantage and allowing us to capitalize on consumer preferences for fully immersive, off-the-grid outdoor experiences," said Winnebago Industries President and CEO Michael Happe. "Lithionics' talented employees bring a unique familiarity with our business and the broader outdoor recreation space, as well as share a commitment to quality and safety that fits seamlessly with our culture of excellence. We see significant opportunity to expand the use of their efficient energy solutions within our own portfolio, to continue to grow relationships with other existing customers and to explore new market applications. Through these applications, we expect Lithionics will enhance Winnebago Industries' margin profile over the near- and long-term and create value for our shareholders, employees and consumers. We look forward to working with Steve and his team to integrate their unique platform of electrical capabilities."

After the transaction closes, which is expected in Winnebago Industries' third fiscal quarter, Tartaglia and the current Lithionics management team will continue leading the business from its Florida headquarters.

Greater Elkhart Chamber Names Nexus RV 2022 Business of the Year

At its annual awards dinner in Elkhart, Indiana, the Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce named Nexus RV its 2022 Business of the Year.

Nexus RV is a factory-direct RV manufacturer, founded in 2010 by childhood friends Claude Donati and Dave Middleton. Nexus RV began with only 15 employees and now has more than 300. They have become a nationally recognized brand because of their all-steel coaches, "NeXclusive" features and brand loyalty. As the company worked to expand their reach outside the Midwest, Nexus incorporated showrooms in Texas, California, Delaware and dealerships in Arizona and Florida.

Nexus RV gives back to their employees and community by sponsoring local sports teams, bands, local events and supporting their employees with a focus on work/life balance, the chamber said in presenting the award. The company says it is the largest privately held motorized manufacturer in the industry.

The criteria for Business of the Month include growth, innovation of products and services, their unique entrepreneurial story, community involvement and impact on the local economy.

LKQ to Acquire Distributor Uni-Select

LKQ Corp., parent company of NTP-STAG, will be acquiring Canada-based Uni-Select, a leading distributor of automotive refinish and industrial coatings and related products in North America through its FinishMaster segment, and in the automotive aftermarket

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Uni-Select has more than 5,200 employees, 15 distribution centers and 400-plus branches, and through them supports more than 70,000 customers annually across the U.S., Canada and the U.K.

Uni-Select shareholders will receive the equivalent of about $35 U.S. per share, making the whole transaction worth approximately $2.06 billion in U.S. dollars.

"This acquisition further enhances LKQ's global automotive vehicle parts distribution business," said Dominick Zarcone, president and CEO of LKQ Corp. "Uni-Select's North American automotive refinish paint and mechanical parts distribution operations complement LKQ's existing footprint and will allow us to distribute a broader array of products to our customers. We look forward to welcoming Uni-Select's employees to the LKQ team. Importantly, we believe that our combined efforts will create tremendous long-term value for our customers, shareholders, employees and other stakeholders as we continue to focus on our operational excellence initiatives."

RVWA Chooses New Officers

The RV Women's Alliance (RVWA) has elected a new slate of officers and added a 14th board member to its leadership. Established in 2019 just before COVID hit, the alliance has seen a steady growth in support and membership since that time, organizers said.

Susan Carpenter of B&B Molders will remain the alliance's chair. Newly named officers are Chair-Elect Denise Chariya of THOR Industries; Treasurer Tracy Anglemeyer of the RV Technical Institute; and Secretary Jennet Lewis of NTP-STAG.

The alliance also elected Stacey Robinson of Great Canadian RV as a new board member. She joins current board members Lisa Reese of East to West; John Tinghitella of RV Designer; Kim Gregory of Coach-Net; Chris Gorski of Airxcel; Pamela VanderMel of Lippert; Monika Geraci of the RV Industry Association; Karen Barnett of Valley Screen Process; Sarah Williams of Patrick Industries; and Brenda Wintrow of Camping World.

"I am incredibly proud of the work that RVWA is doing for the women of our industry and our community," said Chariya, director of marketing at THOR. "I am excited to be taking on a larger role in the organization, supporting and elevating women as they grow in their careers. Susan is a great leader and role model. I am thankful that I have the opportunity to learn from her as we continue to grow the organization and its reach."

"I am excited to have Denise as part of my succession plan. As with any nonprofit, it is important to find the right person, at the right time, to bring new ideas and talent to the organization. RVWA is lucky to have Denise as that person. I look forward to working with her and handing her the reins in 2025," said Susan Carpenter, president and board chair of the RV Women's Alliance.

New board member Robinson has been a dealer principal with Great Canadian RV since 2013.

"I have been very fortunate to have worked in a capacity which has allowed me to realize the importance and the power of creating strong networks and relationships," she said. "An absolute believer in the power of collaboration and approaching problems as opportunities to think outside of the box is my steadfast approach in both my personal and professional life."

Newmar Recognizes Top Suppliers of 2022

Newmar Corp., a subsidiary of Winnebago Industries, recently recognized several suppliers and individual contributors for their supply chain performance for 2022 at its annual banquet in Nappanee, Indiana.

The annual awards recognize suppliers for outstanding performance based on internal surveys, measuring each supplier in multiple categories while interacting with Newmar's purchasing, manufacturing, quality, service and engineering departments. A score of 195 of a possible 201 points were required for the suppliers to earn an invitation to the evening's festivities.

"We had another challenging year for supply chain in 2022, and it is important to recognize our key suppliers that have continued to deliver quality product on time to Newmar," said Matt McQuown, vice president of supply chain. "These companies and individuals contributed greatly to Newmar's continued success."

Newmar's new president, Casey Tubman, took the opportunity to introduce himself in-person to many of Newmar's suppliers. In talking to the crowd of more than 170, Tubman said, "Bringing together our top suppliers for a meal together and recognizing each of you is a highlight of year for the entire Newmar team."

For 2022, more than 500 suppliers were eligible to receive an award. Of those, 73 suppliers scored excellent and were eligible for individuals awards listed below. Award recipients are recognized for the service, dedication and commitment to serving Newmar. In addition to supplier attendees, employees from Newmar and Winnebago Industries were in attendance.

Recognized for the Virgil Miller award for this year was RiverPark. The Virgil Miller award is given to Newmar's top supplier for the year. Additional recognitions:

Customer Service Award

Tracy Cook-Emmorey – Equipment Service
Kaye Fewell – Pletcher Sales
Kelly Cox – Lippert Components-Girard Systems
Patti Leathers – Jasper Plastics Solutions
Tammy Victor – Kampco Steel Products

Salesperson of the Year Award

Mike Steele – Ranger Distribution

Delivery Service Award

Craig Haslett – Eckhart Woodworking

Operations Support Award

Ace Builders
Engineering Innovation Award
American Technology Components

Special Recognition Award

Ryan Brimmer – Sika
Phil Cline – Crossroads Quality Distribution

Top Ten Supplier Award

Clean Seal
LX Hausys America
MORryde International
Ramco Engineering
Ranger Distribution
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RVIA Leadership Conference Debuts CEO Roundtable, New Research

By Jordan Benschop





One thing is clear when it comes to good leaders: They push forward. No matter what.

At least, that's the feel of the RV Industry Association (RVIA) Leadership Conference, whose nearly 180 attendees – some trekking from Australia – shouted "no matter what" during the opening day's keynote speech with Sterling Hawkins.

Hosted by the association's Emerging Leaders Coalition, the conference ran through Friday the week of March 17 at the JW Marriott Phoenix Desert Ridge Resort & Spa.

One of Hawkins' main talking points – that leaders should "hunt discomfort" – was a fitting theme for the day's seminars and group activities. Some attendees started the day at 7 a.m. with a 6-mile hike around the Sonoran Preserve, while others volunteered at a local urban farm.

Later at the conference, a CEO Roundtable moderated by RVIA President Craig Kirby shared leadership wisdom from Winnebago's Mike Happe, THOR Industries' Bob Martin and Debbie Brunoforte of Little Dealer, Little Prices, a Campers Inn company.

"Expand the boundaries of your comfort zone," said Brunoforte when asked what advice she'd give to today's aspiring leaders.

Happe revealed his decision to hire a coach in his first four years with Winnebago, which inspired a certain leadership style.

"My style is a blend of both ends of the spectrum," he said. "Being too focused on people, you might not be able to always deliver the results. And being too focused on performance, you might not always be able to keep the right team."

Following an outdoor lunch, the Path to Purchase seminar detailed Go RVing's latest research on RV owners, intenders and abandonments.

Lack of childhood experience with RVing or camping is one of the top 10 most challenging elements in the journey to becoming an RV owner, said Bill Baker, RVIA's vice president of membership and research, during the presentation with Acxiom Automotive's Steve Schmith.

And some "bubble customers" – who haven't decided to buy an RV but haven't abandoned the process – just need education to shift their expectations.

"Many prospects think solely of motorhomes when exploring the lifestyle, regardless of their needs," Baker said. "...There's also a diverse potential audience, who are looking for ways to incorporate RVing into their lifestyle outside of camping."

More identity data assessments are planned to go deeper into the buyer's process, such as convincing prospects to buy e-RVs.

For now, recommendations include to "embrace what's already working" and highlight brand innovations, enhance storytelling about the RV lifestyle and invest in technologies that help deliver personalized customer experiences.

Wrapping the day's seminars was an anticipated Emerging Leaders Panel with the coalition. Moderated by Sam Rocci, RVIA's senior manager of government affairs, the talk spotlighted Michilah Grimes, Lippert director of corporate and community impact; Anthony Wollschlager, Airxcel group president; Matt Veurink, sales manager at Veurinks' RV Center; and Ashley Bontrager, founder, president and CEO of Ember RVs.

The group discussed how to motivate emerging leaders in today's companies, how to attract and retain talent, and what the Emerging Leaders Coalition (ELC) is doing to keep momentum.

Other events throughout the week included a sustainability panel, an additional keynote speaker and a "Combat Leadership" workshop. The conference closed with a Leprechaun Fiesta - just in time for that certain green holiday. RVP

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The Grand Popularity of Fifth Wheels

Customers are seeking out **Solitude and Reflection** – in more ways than one.

BY JOHN MCCURRY



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GRAND DESIGN

Grand Design RV rolled out its first product in 2013, the first version of the Solitude fifth wheel. The Reflection fifth wheel brand soon joined Solitude in Grand Design's product mix. Over the past decade, the two brands have established themselves as significant factors in the highly competitive fifth wheel category.

Grand Design's fifth wheel product managers describe the Reflection line as a mid-profile fifth wheel that is more "cost-sensitive" with fewer features and is a relatively smaller unit. They describe Solitude as a full-profile luxury unit, equipped with more residential features, a bigger frame, chassis, wheels and cab area.

The two brands are built in two different plants, both located in Middlebury, Indiana. Both use the same dealer network, which numbers around 270 across North America.

Tony Lizzi, product manager for Reflection, notes that the RV industry as a whole is undergoing a right-sizing due to economic uncertainties. However, Reflection is enjoying improved sales in 2023. Lizzi was busy in early 2023 attending consumer RV shows. Robust sales during shows gives him confidence 2023 will be a strong year for the brands.

"Our brand, from our internal reporting, is showing being up, year over year," Lizzi says. "I feel like our brand is still performing well in a more challenging market, which is something to be really proud of."

Lizzi says Grand Design's philosophy has always been to learn what customers are seeking in a product, rather than being concerned about what competitors are doing. The brand also offers customers scalability in terms of product options.

"Over the years, we have seen demand shift and customers'


SOLITUDE
by GRAND DESIGN


REFLECTION
GRAND DESIGN
YETI



wants change," he says. "We've gone to 12-volt fridges. We've added solar panels on board and charge controllers. We've given customers the chance to add even more solar panels, and to add an inverter, and to choose whatever batteries they want to meet their needs."

Lizzi predicts there will be increasing interest in solar panels and 12-volt refrigerators as interest grows in energy storage capabilities and off-grid camping. Input from consumers drives Grand Design's innovations. Feedback comes largely from RV shows and social media.

"When we are at shows, we are listening to feedback," he says. "The neat thing is that a lot of our current owners will come to shows and seek out our representatives and offer feedback. We've got resources here within Grand Design that monitor our very active Facebook pages and help convey feedback to our product design team."

TIME FOR REFLECTION

Reflection went through a massive interior change last August. Lizzi says if consumers were to start voicing ideas for further changes, the company would listen, but Reflection will stay with the newer, lighter décor launched last August.

Products evolve constantly, and Lizzi says Grand Design doesn't necessarily time upgrades to coincide with shows and events.

"We will add some new floorplans and perhaps some new features before the annual Open House, but if we feel we need to improve the product by making a tweak next week, we don't hold out on giving the customer the best possible unit we can deliver, just because of an arbitrary timeline. We don't hold back."

Reflection's MSRP starts at $68,423 for the Reflection 150 Series and $85,184 for Reflection. There are differences other than the price.

"The Reflection 150 series is built on a platform to be shorter in length, lighter in weight and a little bit lower price point than the regular Reflection," Lizzi says. "It is geared toward being more half-ton towable, while being more price conscious at the same time, compared to the regular Reflection, that has more slide-outs, a longer length and more square footage, with a more robust feature offering."

The pandemic was a catalyst for more people to discover the world of RVs. The accompanying trend toward remote working prompted Grand Design to craft a desk setup in the Reflection 320 MKS. The move was designed to boost versatility and functionality with its coaches.

LOOKING FOR SOLITUDE

Tom Hall, product manager for Solitude, notes the brand was the No. 2 seller in retail in November among all fifth wheels. To build on that momentum, some upgrades are in the works for this summer.

"We are studying our production, and we are studying retail trends. We are trying to be super sensitive, trying to balance production with what is happening in retail. We want to keep the pace as well as complete all of our product changes by July."

Hall says Solitude is the only luxury fifth wheel that offers anti-lock brakes.

"To some, that might seem like old technology. A lot of people assume they have it, but we are the only company that offers it on our Reflection, Solitude and Momentum models," Hall says.

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"As of last month, Solitude has the option to offer independent suspension, which is hugely popular in our segment of buyers in the luxury area. We are the only manufacturer in our price point that offers that option direct from the factory."

Hall notes that Solitude customers are typically 55 and older, generally empty nesters and often use the unit for a full-time living setup. But the Solitude demographic may be changing somewhat, as young families and couples are becoming interested.

There will be some new Solitude introductions at this year's Elkhart Open House. Hall says his staff is currently solidifying design and feature details.

"Last year, we made upgrades to both the interior and exterior of Solitude, and we really gave it a fresher look. This year, there will not be as much updating to the look, but we will have some new features and new add-ons in place before Open House."

Like Reflection, Solitude has two base models: Solitude, with an MSRP starting at $116,786, and Solitude S-Class, with a MSRP of $107,647. Hall says there are more than a dozen differences between the Solitude and the Solitude S-Class, one being the hitch. The Solitude has a full-body paint option and a dishwasher prep option. The Solitude also offers a few floorplans that have an elevated rear area with a slide-out tray storage compartment area.



"The S-class is the product that sits directly in between the Reflection and the traditional Solitude," Hall says. "Compared to Reflection, you will see on the S-class things such as a generator option, bigger wheels. Then when you jump up to Solitude, you get a bit more residential."

Hall attends RV consumer shows in Tampa, Florida; Hershey, Pennsylvania; Denver, Colorado; and California. The shows are valuable in terms of receiving customer feedback and can serve as a springboard for potential future changes.

"In my segment, residential is a huge thing," Hall says. "I try to be a part of home and garden shows, kitchen and bath shows, and do research outside of the RV industry, to see what residential trends can be applied to Solitude and the recreational space.

"Heading into this year, we have all new woods, and we have all new wall colors, top to bottom. That was the big overhaul that we did in the fall and into the new year this year. And we will have some feature add-ons this year. Our goal is to make our units easily identifiable and to make the units easier to use."

As spring approached, Hall reported seeing an increase in sales – a normal occurrence, but encouraging nonetheless.

"Starting April 1, we normally see an uptick, through the spring and summer," he says. "We are starting to see some good retail action. We are anticipating a really good summer, all things considered. Our goal is to keep ahead of the changing game. It's important to keep a new face to the product and to keep doing what customers want." RVP

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Flexible Fifth Wheels

Sabre – *a division of Forest River* – serves up options bursting with features and a close collaboration with its dealer partners.

BY LISA DICKSTEEN



Regional sales managers (left to right): Dan Gill, Shirley Cartwright, Steve Troyer, Corian Correll, Andy Downton, Tony Mynheir (not pictured: David Porter)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOREST RIVER





With several decades in the industry, Steve Troyer, national product/sales manager for the Sabre Fifth Wheel division of Forest River, has a deep understanding of what type of trailer does what and, according to him, "contrary to popular belief, [fifth wheels] are easier to tow, making them more versatile."

It's that versatility, coupled with what he describes as "the right product at the right price point, supported by superior service," that he says makes Sabre fifth wheels appeal to all ages and demographics, "from the weekend camper to the remote worker" – the latter being a market that has exploded since the start of the pandemic.

"We offer a wide variety of flex-room options, from a small cubby to a separate room for an office, which means the kids can do their thing while you work, just like at home, but with the ability to also enjoy the outdoors," Troyer says.

Three units are specifically designed with this in mind. The smallest, the 350BH, offers a rectangular area marked "massive storage" on the floorplan. It's located behind a tri-fold sofa and has room to tuck in a small desk. In that same location, the larger 36BHQ has a square space marked "storage/bunk loft," which offers space for a desk and a bit of elbow room. The 38DBQ offers the largest space, marked "loft area with bunks" on the floorplan. This is an L-shaped space with room for a desk and space for a lot more than just elbows, with two cabinets for putting things away and out of sight.

The Sabre is outfitted with "real wood products [not particle board] for the cabinetry and tongue-and-groove plywood flooring over a fully enclosed heated belly."

Once you're in there, the "Colossal" 16-cubic-foot, 12-volt refrigerator has French doors for easy access and the Sure Seal closing mechanism seals tightly to protect cold items during travel. There is also a 30-inch microwave, accent lighting under the kitchen island and above the crown molding to avoid middle-of-the-night stubbed toes, a space-saving barn door









on the wardrobe, a built-in shower seat, solid surface kitchen countertops and smart TV.

The OneControl ConnectAnywhere is an electronic control system that allows worldwide remote control of LCI OneControl-compatible Controller Area Network (CAN) controllers. It also controls a 128-degree, wide-angle, rear-view backup/security camera with adjustable angle, pan and zoom options.

OneControl also allows owners to stream to mobile devices or Lippert Insight LCD display; control slide-outs, awnings and lighting; receive custom notifications regarding overall maintenance and care as well as real-time diagnostic information on any of its systems, such as low-battery voltage.

Each Sabre is equipped with a Juice Pack for off-grid support. It includes a 100-watt roof-mount solar panel (expandable with additional panels), Series 27 battery, battery box, battery disconnect, voltmeter and 30-amp solar charger.

To keep everyone warm and cool when it's needed, Sabre fifth wheels are equipped with a standard Polar Shield Climate Protection Package, which includes floor and roof protection. The insulated underbelly is thermal foil wrapped, serviceable and heated, and the roof is wrapped in reflective thermal foil for additional protection.

Other features include a tankless water heater, 38/76-gallon black water capacity tank, 76-gallon grey water capacity tank, 8-lug wheels, 7,000-pound axles, axle-driven slides, auto-leveling, full walk-on roof with a lifetime warranty, telescoping roof ladder prep, and solar reflective windows.

Most important, according to Troyer, is the way the brand works with dealers to help them acquire good products and then move them off the lot.

"One of the main things we do is put out a good product at a good price point and back that up with great support," Troyer says.

In service of that goal, the Sabre team, "works with dealers individually to help them acquire the floorplans and models most likely to sell in their area and then move them off the lot as quickly as possible."

With that in mind, each of their seven sales regions in the United States and Canada is small enough that the sales manager can get to each state regularly to meet with dealers to see what they need and conduct on-site trainings for their sales staff. Sales managers are collaborating with dealers in these ways, while also fielding phone calls and emails as quickly as possible so dealers never have to worry about losing a sale over information a customer needs right now.

"Of course, we have a dealer locator tab on our website, and lots of other information for consumers who want to research online before going to the dealership," Troyer says. "But the most important thing is getting out and doing in-person classes and trainings at dealerships and retail shows."

Time and again, Troyer comes back to the essential thing being "producing the right product at the right price, so it's easy to sell and easy to service. We can do this because of the streamlining of our whole operation. This plays a major role in production, service, sales, and thus profitability for dealers. And it's all a backed up by our fantastic service team." RVP

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A Home Away From Home Built To Last

The all-aluminum **ATC Plā 4319 Fifth Wheel Toy Hauler** is designed to last generations with appeal to a wide demographic of today's RVers.

BY ROB MERWIN





PHOTOS COURTESY OF ATC

When the ATC Plā 4319 Fifth-Wheel Toy Hauler made its debut at the Florida RV SuperShow in January, it represented a rebranding initiative for the company's products that features a new logo and naming scheme for all units using three letters – Plā – for each model.

But aside from the logo and name, to understand what the ATC Plā 4319 Fifth-Wheel Toy Hauler is and how it differentiates, it's important to first have an understanding of the company and what drives it.

ATC (Aluminum Trailer Company), launched in 1999 in Nappanee, Indiana, and has always been known for its higher-end aluminum trailers, from its original car haulers to the fifth wheel and gooseneck toy haulers it began building in 2015.

"When we started, we were producing about two units a week and just getting our feet wet in the RV industry. For comparison, we built about 700 units last year," says Jason Schlaback, ATC's category manager. "Our staff has grown, too, from about 60 employees when I arrived in 2006 to more than 400 today."

He stresses that company culture spearheads ATC's success.

"It's why I've been here so long. Our culture filters from the top to all the way down by treating people with respect."

DELIVERING WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT

ATC's engineering team is structured with three departments: frame engineers, design engineers and Research & Development (R&D), all of which are largely informed by feedback from consumers and dealers at RV shows.



"We often just sit back and observe people, asking them how they are using their units and what they are missing – that's how we get our product knowledge and how we develop our floorplans," Schlaback says.

ATC also stays informed by using the firm Statistical Surveys, where the team mines the data and looks for trends. In addition, the company has two user-driven Facebook owner groups, which are monitored for discussions and hot-button topics.

THE FIVE C'S

Schlaback explains that ATC's success is founded on the company's manufacturing processes and its "Five Cs" that sets it apart from the competition:

- **Construction:** All aluminum – no wood. "There's nothing to rot and no steel to rust. Most manufacturers use a steel-based frame, but ours are of aluminum, built in-house. All our cabinetry is also built in-house – and all aluminum. On average, our units are about 15% lighter than our nearest competitor."
- **Configurability:** The toy haulers feature furniture tracks that allow RVers to move components around within the unit, which Schlaback says is unlike anybody else in the industry. "We also have a partition wall in our fifth wheels that basically allows you to have three floorplans in one – you can set your living quarter's space from the garage and move it around, or you can remove it entirely. As families grow or as children get older and move away, a unit's sleeping positions can be configured





accordingly. It's a design to meet your changing needs."

- **Cleanliness:** Because ATC doesn't use wood, its units are easy to clean, he says. "If you get your toy hauler dirty from driving in your side-by-side, you can literally take your garden hose or pressure washer to spray off the floor without damaging it," Schlaback says.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** Due to the manufacturing materials used, ATC's RVs have longevity. "We have a five-year, transferrable structural warranty. And because they're made of all aluminum, the units are lightweight resulting in less wear and tear on a tow vehicle."
- **Capacity:** ATC has a higher carrying capacity because of lighter weight material, which translates into more cargo potential.

Schlaback adds, "When I go to RV shows, I tell people that they can pass our RVs down to their kids, because of their construction and materials – they will last that long."

SLIDE-OUTS MAKE IT SPACIOUS

As an extension of the Plā Fifth-Wheel line, the 4319 is the first ATC RV with two slide-outs. The floorplan of the 4319 means more space for the whole family, including a vanity/desk combo and full-size wardrobe in the bedroom, along with a spacious kitchen and up to 19 feet of garage space.

"People either love or hate slide-outs, and the 4319 is built with a floorplan to attract those who love them," Schlaback says, and just as much is focused on the living quarters and amenities as there is on the garage space. "Because of our configurability and partition wall, we can have a garage that is 19 feet long, 13 feet or 9 feet long. We hit all those customer demographics, whether they have e-bikes, golf carts or a Jeep Wrangler – we can accommodate all of them with the 4319."

The Plā comes available in two series, the 500, which has a lower price point and fewer features, and the 700, which is the top-of-the-line in the offering. The 4319 model's MSRP starts at $156,995 and is only offered in the 700 series. Aluminum, generally speaking, is not an inexpensive material, but in the long run it's more cost-effective due to it durability and longevity.

"You pay a little more upfront. It's a long-term investment that comes with peace of mind – there are no concerns with rot and rust and you can literally pass it on to the next generation in your family," he says.

The 4319 comes standard with a queen bed with an option to upgrade to a king, and features three levels of solar offerings, as well as deck packages which, unlike many competitors, are designed in-house (and, of course, made entirely from aluminum).

"Our enthusiasts are so diverse – a lot of that is grounded in our construction and the materials we use. We're built to last," Schlaback says.

Some ATC RV owners aren't necessarily hauling toys, they just want the space.

"They didn't even use the toy hauler aspect of it. They left the ramp door closed and used it as a conventional fifth wheel," he says. "So while we do target the outdoor enthusiasts with their toys, we attract more than just that demographic of people." RVP

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FORGING HER OWN PATH

With Stacey Robinson as one of the principals of Great Canadian RV Ltd. today, new peaks are on the horizon.

BY STEPHANIE PATRICK

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GREAT CANADIAN RV LTD.

Stacey Robinson (center) is co-principal of Great Canadian RV in Ontario.

Great Canadian RV's history follows a zigzag path common among family-owned dealerships. Just maybe with a few more zags.

First came a love of camping as a family in a 12-foot trailer, then steelworker Ken Robinson and his wife, Marg, purchased a campground in 1972 in Omemee, Ontario, and expanded in the 1980s to sell trailers. Their son, Al, active in the business from the beginning, started Open Road Trailer Sales in Lindsay, Ontario, in 1986, watching it grow to become the leading Cobra (Forest River) dealership in Canada. In 1992, the Robinsons created another campground, calling it Bailey's Bay, (named after their daughter) in Peterborough, Ontario, and chose to move the dealership to the site before selling the businesses in 2005.

More milestones include investing in a



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friend's RV dealership – then called Great Canadian RV Center – and purchasing the name in 2012. Al, along with his wife, Stacey, created its current incarnation and moved all operations to a new location in 2014 in Peterborough, Ontario, south of Fowlers Corners.

But not everything changes. Great Canadian and the family remain loyal and exclusive to Forest River travel trailers and fifth wheels. Their inventory includes the full line of East to West travel trailers and fifth wheels, Puma travel trailers, toy haulers and park models. Through the purchase of another dealership in December 2021, the complete lineup of Rockwood trailers, campers and fifth wheels were added along with Geo Pro trailers.

Great Canadian moves about C$10 million ($7.4 million U.S.) in products each year, says Stacey Robinson, co-principal.

"We place a high value on plywood construction," she says. "Forest River products we carry have plywood floors... some of our high-end Forest River product have plywood rooftops as well; we feel that solid construction will serve our customers well in the long haul."

Great Canadian's customers range in age from their 20s to 90s, many wanting to camp or go to festivals like those Ken and Marg sold to for decades. But Al and Stacey stay cognizant of market trends and notice a new customer group is emerging – younger Canadians buying luxury RVs as long-term housing.



Stacey Robinson runs the business with husband Al.

ALTERNATIVE HOUSING

"It's unaffordable for our young families to buy houses (or rent) modest apartments or top half of houses," Stacey says. "You're looking at C$3,200 ($2,367 U.S.) a month in rent."

Home prices were at record levels in 2022, but The Canadian Real Estate Association reports prices were down in most parts of Ontario in February and falling nationally. The national average was C$662,437 ($490,071 U.S.) in February.

Still, home purchases are probably likely out of budget for many singletons and young families.

Rent for a two-bedroom apartment or condominium in Ontario averaged C$2,661 ($1,969 U.S.) in February, up 15.3% compared to the same point last year, according to rentals.ca. The province also led the nation in annual rent inflation, reporting 16.2% growth compared to the national average of 9.1%.

In response to their customers' new needs, Great Canadian recently added Forest River's Riverstone fifth wheels to its inventory. Stacey says they are built to withstand Canadian winters and allow customers to live in them while saving for homes.

Riverstone's standard package includes a four-burner range, a memory-foam mattress, ample storage and a fireplace in the living room. Some packages include large LED TVs and stackable washer and dryers – more amenities than many apartments. Great Canadian's Riverstone floorplans also sleep four to seven people, enough room for growing families.

"At least three times a day we get an inquiry: 'Can I live in this?'" Stacey says. "And that's about any of our RVs."

Customers of all kinds also request motorized vehicles these days, so Great Canadian is in the process of becoming one of the first dealers to offer Entrada, a new brand by East to West. Great Canadian carries both East to West's Ahara and Tandara fifth wheels and the Alta and Della Terra travel trailers.

"It was just a natural progression for us,"

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says Stacey, who adds Great Canadian's customers hail from all over Canada and even as far away as Florida, thanks to the internet making brand research more accessible.

"We have a very informed customer base," she says. "When they come to our lot, they know basically what they're looking for and they know who has what."

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

No matter the customer request, Great Canadian strives to offer a great RV experience as soon as they enter the dealership. That includes a staff of 12 focused on customer service, regardless of each employee's role.

"We have snacks, we have beverages, we have coloring books, we have TV [and] we have games," Stacey says. "We're very family-oriented, and we're there to make their experience pleasant."

Employees are expected to greet each customer they see, regardless of the employee's position, and include children in the RV-shopping process as much as possible. RV customers are younger these days, and Gen Zers and millennials are well informed and have different needs than their grandparents. So Great Canadian works to ensure the entire family feels welcome and heard.

"We work really hard on understanding people, picking up cues, looking at what's going on in your interaction with somebody and actually listening to what they're telling you," Stacey says.

Ken passed away and Marg is no longer part of the business, so Al and Stacey, a retired clinical psychologist, share equal ownership in the business. None of their five children are part of the business.

The first change Stacey initiated when she started working at Great Canadian in 2014 was to offer all-inclusive pricing – no add-ons except taxes and licensing.

"Because I think our customers appreciate that kind of forthright, let's not dance around it," she says. "This is the price."

Great Canadian's employees are trained to listen. Stacey's vetting process begins with assessing whether each job candidate interacts well with people and is not expecting a high-pressure sales environment. On-staff salespeople receive training weekly.

Active listening, which Stacey says is sometimes difficult for longtime salespeople to learn, means sitting down with the customers to discuss their intended uses, their space needs and narrowing down what they are looking for before venturing onto the lot. Too many options could overwhelm customers; instead, Great Canadian's salespeople offer each customer three or four choices, get feedback and go from there.

Great Canadian's service department runs on a service-what-you-sell philosophy. About 70% of the work is preparing trailers for owners to pick up.

"As the season progresses and if people have issues, we triage those so as to not interfere with their enjoyment," Stacey says. "If it's something that can wait until the fall, then we'll say to them: 'OK, you know what, that can wait until the fall. Let's book you in for October when you are all done camping.'"

Among the service department's favorite parts are Lippert Components including Furrion AC units, Eaz-Lift Recurve hitches and RV Traveler's Choice (RV Care private brand) aftermarket products.

Richard Fitzgerald, Great Canadian's service manager, has worked for Robinsons' businesses for 35 years. The service department employs seven people.

Great Canadian's store focuses on lifestyle products.

"Again, our mandate is to give the customer a complete experience, so we have the hard parts that are necessary," Stacey says. "Android rods, sewer hoses..., all those things that are necessary to make an RV work, but we also have a very large selection of lifestyle products that will add to the enjoyment of the experience."

Life is Better (Camco) offers coolers and drink containers comparable to a Yeti but more affordable, Stacey says. Great Canadian also offers its own sheets and comforter product for RVs. Designed by Stacey about five years ago because finding bedding that fits RV mattresses is challenging, Great Canadian offers five complete options.

"Our customers love those," she says. "For the first year that we did it, we launched it, we gave every customer [who] bought from us a complimentary [set] and they got to choose the design that they wanted."

They continue to be popular and are more appreciated than the RV starter kits other dealerships offer. Everyone needs bedding, but longtime RVers don't need starter kits, Stacey says.

COLLABORATING ACROSS TOWN AND ACROSS THE INDUSTRY

Great Canadian now partners with a neighboring butcher Smokey Joe's to fill the freezer of each RV sold with a meat pack of two steaks, two burgers, two sausages and some chicken.

One step further, Great Canadian has partnered with Harvest Hosts and provides a membership with each trailer sold. This is expanded again with each customer receiving the ROUTE 66 Tech 24 (24/7 the support) and membership into the RV Care Network of dealers.

"Our customers are thrilled with those little touches, and quite honestly, it's great for us because we can network with other businesses; we can help each other," she says.

Great Canadian also hosted the store at the Toronto Spring Camping Show pre-COVID. The store had 11,000 square feet of products, which Stacey describes as a labor of love.

"We're revisiting what we're doing continuously once a year," Stacey says. "I insist that we sit down as an entire dealership and look at what's our plan for continuous improvement."

The industry notices the dealership's success. Al was named the Canadian RV Dealer of the Year in 2020 from The Recreation Vehicle Dealers Association of Canada, and Stacey was named RV Women's Alliance's first Canadian board member in March. She has been involved with the organization since the beginning.

"Stacey contributes distinctive viewpoints and priceless expertise to the RV Women's Alliance with her strategic thinking and fervor for empowering women in the workplace," says Susan Carpenter, RVWA's president. "By inspiring other women to pursue leadership roles, she propels

the organization toward heightened achievements and lasting influence."

Stacey, who employs two women, one of whom is the general manager, says she hopes to help forge a stronger industry connection between the U.S. and Canada.

"I think we've been working in silos, and I think we haven't taken the time to go: 'Wait a minute, we're all working toward the same goal and we're all working in the same industry. Why not be a little more collaborative...?'

"But to be honest with you, I don't feel that historically the RV industry has been particularly collaborative... There's a competitive element in terms of customer base... I think it's been relatively closed for that reason, but there's enough customers to go around for everybody."

She says RVWA is poised to lead collaborative efforts throughout the industry, and she saw members do so during COVID.

It all started when a young physician contacted Great Canadian looking for a trailer to purchase because he was on the medical frontline and wanted a place to sleep in his driveway and away from his family. He bought the trailer wholesale, and the local media picked up the story and Great Canadian was inundated with requests from medical professionals and first responders needing temporary housing assistance. When the Robinsons couldn't fulfill all the requests, Great Canadian reached out to customers to lend their vehicles to those in need.

"We actually matched 51 customers with police, fire, doctors and [other first responders who needed places] to self-isolate, and our customers took their RVs to those people's driveways, set them up and lent them their trailers."

RVWA members stepped in instantly when Great Canadian was contacted by a young physician from New York who was returning from maternity leave early because of COVID demand but couldn't find anywhere to stay that was safe.

"I just sent out a general inquiry to the group, and this woman was given a trailer and it was set up in the parking lot of the hospital," Stacey says. "There's a really great story about the power of networking and what can happen when we're not working in silos anymore."

Stacey says women in the RV industry are less common in Canada, and she is often mistaken for a secretary or a bookkeeper at Great Canadian. She wants to see RVWA's Canadian membership triple and host symposiums in Ottawa and Vancouver.

"When you put an incredible group of people together and you start talking about trying to problem solve or do some collaborative and creative thinking, incredible things can happen," she says. "I think that RVWA is just going to get stronger."

In terms of the industry over the next few years, Stacey says she believes the love of camping has been steadfast over decades and will continue to thrive and grow.

"The customer leads the way in terms of product use, for example Harvest Hosts, Boondockers Welcome are a nontraditional way of addressing campsite shortages. Trailers as housing alternatives will also dramatically change the industry.

"That being said, if COVID has taught us anything it's that trying to forecast year over year is not a science. The best we can do is stay cognizant and connected closely to industry trends as they unfold." RVP



Stacey Robinson has been involved in RV Women's Alliance and believes the group's impact is only just beginning.



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ENJOYING THE SHADE

Stepping into the awning market, Velarium kicks off its business with a standout product.

BY JENNIFER KING



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VELARIUM

Velarium's powered 12-volt vertical arm awning is the brand's first offering.

In the Roman ages, awnings were drawn over theaters or amphitheaters to protect people from the rain or sun.

The word for awnings at that time? Velarium.

That word seemed too good to be true when the team at Airxcel came upon it while brainstorming a new awning brand to launch last fall. Now, less than a year later, the brand is up and running and has introduced its first awning into the marketplace: the Velarium 12V Vertical Arm Awning.

RV PRO spoke with Jeff Cowan, business unit manager of Velarium, to find out more about the awning and about the new brand.

RV PRO: Tell me about the startup of Velarium – how did the brand come to be?

Jeff Cowan: Airxcel is no stranger to the awning market – when Airxcel started, the Coleman-Faulker awning brand was part of the product offering. The history of Velarium started several years ago as the awning supplier landscape began changing. Some of the import brands either gained little traction or altered their alliances, and several of the domestic suppliers changed their strategies. As the number of significant awning suppliers declined, several of our partners that buy a lot of other Airxcel brands came to us and said, "Hey, we feel there's a need in the market for another awning supplier." The staff at Airxcel has over 150 years of combined awning experience from our past lives. So, in 2022, what started as a sketch on a napkin earlier in the year to showing our first product in December at our OEM showcase in Elkhart to showing it to our dealer partners at [the] NTP-STAG Show in January – we're now here with production-ready awnings.

RV PRO: Can you tell me a little bit about the long-term vision or what the hopes are for the brand as you kick it off?

Cowan: First, Velarium is a stand-alone business within Airxcel. It is not a "bolt on" to one of our other major brands. We have our own production facility, our own P&L and are beginning to build our own team – it is a stand-alone business. Our first product was shown at Airxcel's December Showcase: the vertical arm, powered 12-volt awning. Products number two, three and four have already been designed, and are currently being tooled. Velarium will be a full-line awning supplier both to our OEM partners and into our aftermarket channel. In time, the full product line will also be introduced into international markets.

RV PRO: Tell me more about the 12-volt vertical arm awning.

Cowan: In addition to the visually appealing aesthetic, the biggest differentiator on this first product is our patent-pending pitch adjustment. It allows the user to slide the arm up and down easily and lock into place with a cam latch. And no matter where the pitch is set, the awning can be retracted. Anybody that has used a cam latch in any kind of barn door application or any kind of an adjustable bracket knows that cam latch technology has been proven and has a very positive engagement. This one can be operated with one hand and operated very quickly. It gives a strong locking effect, but the lock is done with a single pull

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of a lever – one-handed as opposed to cumbersome two-hand operations. So, we're taking proven technology and applying it to the RV industry, driving higher consumer satisfaction.

The quality is at the highest level. In addition, our extrusions are robust. Ultimately, we have taken feedback from our customers and incorporated it into what we believe to be the industry's best vertical arm awning.

RV PRO: What other features make this awning different?

Cowan: We have a manual override built into our motor that allows you to connect a power drill and slide the awning in and out if there's ever a loss of power. You can attach your power drill onto the manual override and retract the awning so that you can move safely to your next stop. We also have a unique weep hole design built into our head design. The motor and the gears are all waterproof, so water won't hurt them, but should there ever be condensation that builds up inside the power head, we have created a way for water to be removed. When you have our awning in its open and extended position at the low point, there is a weep hole built into our power head, which will allow any condensation or water to weep out of there and not form any kind of water buildup or ice down the road. It's just little things like that we're providing to keep our customers happy and leading the industry in quality.

RV PRO: What other improvements or features are coming down the road?

Cowan: A smart system will be available in the future – that is very high up on the list of our roadmap. Obviously, we're all connected these days. We all have our phones in our hands 24/7 and most systems within our homes and our cars now are app driven – Bluetooth enabled. Our awning will also have those features in the future. Controlling lighting [and opening and closing] and some other bolt-on or add-on features will be included in our awning down the road and will also be controlled through an app or Bluetooth.

RV PRO: Can you tell me about the fabric that's used?

Cowan: Velarium is sourcing canopy material from a large textile company. This company also manufactures large tents that you see outside of a Super Bowl or a large car show. Our experience shows that when trying to reduce cost by using thinner weight materials, the warranty goes up and customer satisfaction goes down. So, we have chosen to use a heavier material – our material is a 13.5 ounce. We're using 13.5-ounce canopies for strength and durability; our canopies will last longer and hold up better against the elements.

RV PRO: The awning we saw at NTP-STAG in Colorado in January also had lighting?

Cowan: Correct, yes. It has been somewhat of a standard feature on awnings for several years. Our first product also includes the awning with the LED light strip. Ours is mounted on the side wall, which allows the LED strip to be used whether the awning is extended or retracted. It is a nice feature controlled by a switch and will be controlled by the app once we get that ready to go. We are also working on an LED light option that installs in conjunction with the awning poly rod installation, giving the OEM a choice of wall mount or a canopy mount from Velarium. And we're already working on generation two of our lights, which has some exciting new shapes and colors and features.

RV PRO: What would you want dealers to tell customers about the new Velarium awning?

Cowan: The first thing that I would ask them to do is grab hold of the awning arms and squeeze. Touch is one of our five senses and our awning, as I mentioned early on, is built with a heavier gauge extrusion than the industry norm. You can physically feel that when you're squeezing the aluminum and touch it. It's robust. It feels very strong. The next thing that I ask them to do is to operate on our pitch adjustment, the cam latch pitch adjustment, which is new to the industry. It is a very positive engagement to give you the security that you've locked that awning where you want it and you're creating water runoff, or the shade desired for your specific needs.

I would discuss our management team and the amount of years that our team has within the RV industry. I mentioned 150 years, and I might even be a little light on that number. We understand the awning market and we want to coach and educate our customers to understand that we are awning experts providing the highest quality products. And then, as part of the Airxcel family, we are going to continually innovate and come to market with new products that enhance their experience with their awning and the overall RV experience. RVP



The awning's 13.5 ounce material is heavier for durability.



The arm locks with a cam latch and can be done with one hand.

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EVERY WAY FORWARD

Get Hitched

GEN-Y Hitch capitalizes on popularity of RVing and looks to open 80,000-square-foot facility in Indiana this month.

BY MIKE HARBOUR



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GEN-Y HITCH



The BOSS

When Carl Burkholder needed an adjustable drop hitch for his tree service trailers back in 2008, he made one. Fifteen years later, he's building a factory to make even more.

"I had no intention of starting a business at the time. It kind of evolved...over a period of time because there were others who wanted a hitch like that," says Burkholder, founder and co-owner of GEN-Y Hitch. The Napanee, Indiana, company was created in 2012 to market his creation, the Mega-Duty, and that hitch has become the foundation for a range of premium towing products offered today.

In 2008, GEN-Y was still a distant dream as Burkholder and a partner spent their days keeping limbs and brush off the powerlines of several municipal utilities.

"I didn't necessarily enjoy the work that much. At the time, I was in my mid-20s when we originally bought the company. I just wanted to do something, so that was kind of in front of me then," he says. "I always thought I would create a product that would sell around the world. That's what I've always had in my mind."

An adjustable hitch was just the start, as it turned out; only a few years later, GEN-Y debuted Torsion-Flex, a technology that uses rubber to absorb the shocks that occur between trailers and tow vehicles when they're in transit.

"First, we did the bumper Torsion-Flex model for bumper-pull trailers and that evolved into gooseneck and fifth wheel models two years later," he says, noting GEN-Y now holds more than two dozen patents for its innovations.





The Executive



That's the year Burkholder, who had been putting everything he had into the business, decided to make some big changes. He started with the hiring of former RV industry veteran and Patrick Industries executive Dan Miller as president in January.

"We got to the point where we had to do something as far as manufacturing. We were outsourcing almost 100% of our products and the people we were outsourcing to also reached a point where they really weren't comfortable growing with us anymore or growing any bigger," he says. "We had to make a decision to bring production in-house, and that's where Dan came into the picture. From that point forward, we created our own manufacturing facility and started doing some of our products. Today, we pretty much manufacture everything ourselves."

The duo's plan began with a baby step, according to Miller, so GEN-Y set up a modest plant in Bremen, Indiana, about 8 miles due west of Napanee, home of the sales office and warehouse.

"On April 1, 2019, we fully started our manufacturing operation and within about 18 months, we had vertically integrated the majority of our products into our own control and our own manufacturing facility," he says.

The next step should come this month when GEN-Y's new 80,000-square-foot building, where all departments finally will be housed together, is due to be completed.

"Part of it was to consolidate and get the teams together and have more space, but also start with a fresh, clean slate," Miller says. "We can paint the picture the way we want it to look."

The capital investments are going beyond the building, too, as GEN-Y is all in on automation. Thankfully for the company's 40-member production team, Miller is confident headcount won't be affected in a significant way.

"The machines can do a lot of things faster and more efficiently and far more consistently than humans can, however, what we've noticed is, while our workforce doesn't have to grow exponentially, it also doesn't have to shrink much from where we're at," he says. "With the increased demand we have, we can certainly keep most of our team members in play, train them up to operate those automated machines and equipment. So really, instead of growing the team exponentially, we can grow our equipment footprint and produce much more product with virtually the same team members."

When GEN-Y examined its manufacturing processes, leadership considered where automation best fit now and in the future.

"We don't have a mature 25-year-old or 30-year-old business that has all the old equipment in place and now we have to replace everything with automation. We're pretty new and we're



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growing so fast that we can bring in automation as it makes sense in each department," Miller says.

According to Miller, GEN-Y stands to improve output considerably without needing a lot of new employees.

"We can increase production from where we're at by probably 30% without adding more than two people. To double production, we'll probably have to add seven people," he says. "We're in a really unique spot and a great position."

To get its products to customers, GEN-Y depends on both direct-to-consumer and two-step distribution, but it didn't begin that way.

"It started out more heavily laden toward the retail and brick-and-mortar stores, shifted over toward online, still retail brick and mortar and then we gradually layered in distribution," Miller says. "Distribution is going to reach more resellers more efficiently than we can directly, so it's just a natural transition. We still do retail direct and we still have a heavy focus on that. We love our customers and we want to be in touch with them. We absolutely don't want to get away from that as they provide us with a ton of valuable feedback."

Still, GEN-Y intends to move more product via distribution and dealers as demand allows, according to Miller, both in the U.S. and internationally.

That's a good thing for RVers, as the benefits to using GEN-Y's Torsion-Flex hitches are appealing. In addition to reducing shocks between towables, whether bumper-pull models or fifth wheels and tow vehicles, the technology also can lengthen tire life and increase fuel mileage.

The capacities of its Mega-Duty and Boss (Torsion-Flex equipped) hitches are generous; both lines can tackle up to 32,000 pounds of weight behind the bumper. The fifth wheel line, known as the Executive, also has Torsion-Flex technology and offers a capacity of 25,000 pounds.

In addition, GEN-Y has always used raw materials and components sourced and made in the U.S. and even offers lifetime warranties on Torsion-Flex rubber components in addition to the standard five-year warranty for an additional fee.

Because trailer hitches are such a large market – one recent study even forecasts global sales to near $1 billion by 2026 – it shouldn't come as a surprise only 10% of GEN-Y's direct sales are to RV owners; retail numbers aren't much higher. Still, part of the reason Miller was brought aboard was to capitalize on the RV industry's tremendous growth.

"It's a piece of our business where we see one of the largest opportunities to grow in," he says.

The adage about quality decreasing as production increases is well known, but Miller maintains that won't be the case with GEN-Y products.

"For us, we've grown exponentially in the last five years, and I feel that based on our returns and warranty, 2022 was probably one of the best years ever in quality," he says. "In our minds, the more product you build, the more strict you have to be." RVP





Women in Business 2023

Meet 10 women, nominated by their peers, who are shining a bright light in the RV industry.

The chance to recognize the significant contributions that women make in the RV industry is one we don't take lightly here at RV PRO. We understand that attracting women to the industry, and keeping them, is important for the growth of every company and organization within this outdoor-loving community.

The "keeping them" part is a bigger deal than ever before. According to a recent study by LeanIn.Org, the annual "Women in the Workplace" report found that women in leadership positions are switching jobs at a higher rate than ever – more so than their male counterparts. The reasons they are leaving are telling:

- Facing tougher headwinds when trying to advance
- Experiencing belittling microaggressions
- Not being recognized for work that promotes employee well-being and inclusion
- Their company fails to do enough to prioritize "flexibility, employee well-being, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)," according to McKinsey.com.

What the report cautions is that if companies continue to fail to meet women where they are, and where they want to be, they will start to lose not only their current leaders, but the next generation.

Recognizing these 10 women – whose nominators described them as critical to the operations of their organizations – is a small step in lifting up a segment of the RV industry that may often go overlooked or under-valued. There is work to be done to ensure we as an industry continue to empower these women as they develop their careers and open up doors for those coming up behind them. We know these 10 women will be helping to lead the way.

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Alejandrina Valdez

Micro-Air LLC
Senior Electronics Assembler



Valdez is a senior electronics assembler at Micro-Air responsible for precision assembly of sophisticated electronic circuit boards used in RV air conditioning.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Valdez is one of the more senior Micro-Air manufacturing employees. In that role, she is responsible for mentoring new employees and fosters a true team mentality. She is among the fastest and pays the most detailed attention to board assembly at Micro-Air. She is the consummate professional. Valdez is part of the success of Micro-Air, a main provider of soft starts to the RV, marine and home HVAC markets.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Her performance meets the high standards of our corporate culture at Micro-Air. In Valdez, we have an employee that works and leads as any company might want. Not only are we grateful for having her on staff, so is everyone else. She is a true employee pearl, a gem without parallel.

Jennifer Judd

United States Warranty Corporation
Sales Coordinator, Recreational Vehicle, Powersports and Marine Division



Judd is responsible for facilitating several time sensitive duties within our office, including, but not limited to, weekly supply mailings; dealer support, training and onboarding; agent support, training and onboarding; backing up on phone reception; initiating and finalizing quarterly incentives; new client prospecting; arranging and scheduling out-of-state meetings, only to name a few. As a sales coordinator her main role is the key liaison with our nationwide dealer partnerships. Daily she fields material requests and overall training needs on our online quoting system. Judd is the subject matter expert on sales processes, products and services for three outdoor recreational vehicle divisions. She is a staple in our sales department, assisting the day-to-day operations to run smoothly.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Judd always has a great attitude and tackles any assignment thrown her with an arrive early/stay late mentality. I've even caught her burning the oil on the weekends to tie up any loose ends. She is one of our most dedicated employees who goes above and beyond daily. She is passionate about her work, making sure tasks are completed on time as she puts 120% into everything she does. She makes herself available whenever the dealers need something and builds amazing relationships with each account. Her work ethic is top-notch. According to COO Alexis Reed, "she is just someone I have come to rely on daily."

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Judd is an integral part of and fantastic asset to our team. She is a team player that is, and always has, put the good health of the company in front of her own well-being. I look forward to many more years of working together with her and seeing what goals we can achieve.

A strong company culture is a competitive advantage. Judd can bring a unique skill set to our organizational identity. She exemplifies our core values of service, integrity and trust in her interactions with external customers in a way that delivers on our brand promise to customers in a powerful way. A consummate professional, she is always polite and respectful. Since starting in a sales capacity in 2016, her flexibility to accommodate what USWC needs showcases her ability to adapt, learn on the fly and execute. Judd is the go-to person for training new dealers as she makes sure that they are set up for success.

Amy McFarland

Valleybrook RV Body and Paint
President and Owner



As the owner of Valleybrook RV Body and Paint for more than 15 years, McFarland has a wide range of job responsibilities. She oversees all aspects of the business, including managing employees, handling customer inquiries and requests, and ensuring that all repairs and body work are completed to the highest standards. Her strong communication skills are essential to her job, as she interacts regularly with customers to understand their needs and provide guidance throughout the repair process. Additionally, she is responsible for maintaining the financial health of the business, which includes budgeting, forecasting and financial reporting.

Through her leadership and management skills, McFarland creates a work environment that promotes productivity, teamwork and excellent customer service.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

McFarland has an exceptional work ethic and is always willing to go above and beyond for her company and its customers. She demonstrates her dedication to customer service by being available to answer questions and provide guidance throughout the repair process.

McFarland also motivates and supports her employees, promoting a positive and collaborative work environment. She is always willing to lend a helping hand to both her employees and customers, which has earned her respect and admiration within the RV industry.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

McFarland adds a great deal to the culture of Valleybrook RV Body and Paint. Her dedication to customer service and strong communication skills promote a positive and collaborative work environment that is focused on meeting the needs of customers. She is highly supportive of her employees, motivating them to work hard and collaborate effectively. Her work ethic and leadership style have helped to establish a strong sense of teamwork. Additionally, McFarland is an active member of her local community and contributes to various charitable causes, demonstrating her commitment to making a positive impact beyond the workplace.

Lesa Colvin

Florida RV Trade Association
Show Director



Colvin runs the largest RV show in the country, the Florida RV SuperShow. She started as a receptionist more than 35 years ago and grew into her position. She also coordinates the FRVTA Annual State Convention.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Colvin has become the face of the FRVTA as she works with management at all levels of RV manufacturers. The growth of the SuperShow over 38 years can be attributed to her hard work and dedication to her job and the industry.

She is now mentoring Patty Flanagan to replace her as she eyes retirement next year. To see how she has taken Flanagan under her wing to tutor her based on her years of experience is amazing. It is so hard for women to be in charge in an industry that has been mostly male dominated. Colvin has paved the way for not only her success but for any women that follow in her footsteps.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Colvin's years of experience are such an asset – she knows the background behind why certain decisions were made and by whom. That kind of experience is lost once people like Colvin retire. We recently added a new female staffer to take over the regional shows and Colvin has taken the time to not only train her but pass on a lot of the lessons she's learned over the years. She will be greatly missed!

Mindi Kazmierczak

Shaw Industries
Design and Market Manager



Kazmierczak works closely with the RV design community to create current, on-trend decors.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Kazmierczak has aggressively collaborated outside of Shaw Industries' market segment. She has facilitated a new partnership with its global design and color teams to make sure it is bringing the best fashion, trends and colorways to Shaw's RV market. This is extremely important to the end consumer to make sure the camping experience is as beautiful indoors as it is outdoors.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Kazmierczak's passion and energy has been contagious to the company's team and has elevated its focus on the customer experience. She is forward-thinking and a design innovator.



Makell Kohli

Darren Bideaux RV
Advertising and HR Manager



Kohli is responsible for all hires and for five years has grown advertising.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Kohli always makes sure that we are compliant on HR activity. She keeps us up to date on new policies. Kohli was also instrumental in changes that have Darren Bideaux RV operating at a higher level. She implemented a texting platform (Kenect) to stay relevant with the new way customers communicate. A couple of unexpected results gave us more customer feedback and reviews on our social media platforms, along with being a great way for us to improve how we talk to customers. Kohli overhauled our website to make it more user friendly. The Google account is singing now with changes such as keywords, updating information and Google ads. In doing this, it increased the number of customers coming in to see us and being able to find us on the net. Kohli has increased the involvement with the community. One example is the Car Wash Fundraisers during the month of June. These events include local youth groups, high schools, junior highs, etc. The dealership provides the materials and feeds them lunch while donating a 50% match of what they raise. Kohli believes they should learn the value of working for donations. One of the biggest free events we had last year was the Trailer Treat event, with face painting, bounce houses, music and candy. It supported "Latinos in Action" and over 1,000 people attended the event. These are some of the examples of how she creates more name recognition, increasing sales and getting more involved with the community.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

A positive attitude, with a sense of humor that makes buying an RV fun and friendly. Makell has become a big part of Darren Bideaux RV; she honestly cares about every employee and the success of the company. She always takes the time to talk to everyone and help them or give them ideas on how to complete a task or project. She helps anyone who needs it; most recently she helped the parts department.

Cristina Espinoza

Encore RV
Production Team



Espinoza works on the production line and is responsible for numerous facets of the manufacturing process. She is responsible for building all of the interior composite panels, wiring the front seven-way plug and securing all of the electrical wires in the battery compartment and converter area. She installs the battery trays and terminates all of the wires in the front of the trailer. She installs the front wall components including the recessed TV compartment, battery monitoring system and other miscellaneous components. Her areas of responsibility include a high level of quality, fit and finish.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Espinoza is a very talented craftsman and is able to work in numerous areas of the manufacturing process. When we recognize [something] on the production line that needs extra attention, she is always quick to volunteer to move into that area and help make improvements or to help train other workers to overcome obstacles. Espinoza has a "can do" attitude and an exceptional eye for details. These two traits combined make her an invaluable member of our team. Her positive attitude always creates an environment that helps others be their best. Espinoza truly cares for the success of Encore RV and the people that she works with even going so far as to bring in lunches for her fellow team members. Encore is very fortunate to have Espinoza as a valued member of our production team.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Espinoza has embraced our core values and actively looks for ways to improve processes not only from an efficiency standpoint, but also Espinoza has embraced our core values and actively looks for ways to improve processes not only from an efficiency standpoint, but also from a quality perspective. Her dedication and great attitude have been infectious with other Encore employees. We strive to create a welcoming environment where people can look forward to coming to work and feel respected and valued. Espinoza has embraced the core values we promote at Encore RV and become a critical member of our production team.

Mary Minix

Grand Design Recreational Vehicles
VP of Human Resources



Minix is responsible for leading the Human Resource Team at Grand Design. Grand Design employs more than 2,500 employees. Her primary responsibilities include leading compensation and benefits; talent development; recruiting; and diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. She leads a team that is highly valued for their passion of being business partners, a philosophy that Minix brings to work every day.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

No other function at Grand Design can say that they achieved more in calendar year 2022 than Human Resources. The items listed below are truly transformational initiatives that impacted all employees. There are numerous other accomplishments that are not listed here in the interest of highlighting what is above and beyond/transformational.

- Minix transformed an HR team to be business partners for all functions/ leaders; this was an effective change in approach that has led to attract/retain a high level of HR talent and improve business results.
- Minix established an on-site employee clinic/wellness to better serve employees who are injured on the job or need wellness services. We now have an on-site nurse practitioner and physical therapist.
- Minix led the implementation of Grand Design's first-ever 401K program; she led the establishment of the program and all employees attended information and education sessions.
- Minix led the launch of the first-ever Leadership Expectations for all leaders.
- Respectful Workplace Training (all leaders)

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Minix is an exceptional leader at Grand Design RV. Since her arrival just over a year and a half ago, her impact has been felt across the entire organization of 2,500 employees. She leads with compassion, integrity and respect. Her servant leadership helps employees achieve their best, and she balances achieving results while focusing on the development of our people.



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Kimberly Hicks

Johnston RV Center
Controller



Hicks is Johnston RV Center's controller – she oversees all operational accounting and financial functions of the business. She manages all internal controls and ensures the health of the company by protecting its assets through informed, careful decision-making.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

We wouldn't be anywhere near where we are as a company without Hicks. In addition to her everyday duties, she works to ensure employee well-being on various levels. She saw us through the difficult days of the pandemic when only very few of us were able to remain, creating a task force that kept our business informed, compliant and ultimately successful while our doors were closed. Upon returning to the office, she implemented an annual employee appreciation month that takes place each October. She's a figure of this company who year after year remains a positive, influential force to employees new and not so new.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

It's so important to Hicks that people feel seen and feel recognized for their effort as well as secure that their employment at Johnston RV Center is organized and fair. Our employees know their PTO and paychecks, to name a few, are safe in her hands. Hicks bolsters employees annually with a monthlong employee appreciation month that is packed with friendly competition, contests, treats and bonus opportunities. Hicks also coordinates charitable efforts for Johnston RV Center with local businesses that provide relief and supplies for those in need. She's humble, honest and approachable. Our culture has thrived with her in leadership at Johnston RV Center.

Shalet Wingo

Derema Group
Dealer Specialist



Wingo is a field representative for the Derema Group in the Southeast, handling corporate calls, dealer sales, marketing, training, store setups, trade shows and the myriad tasks associated with running a successful territory, both for her company and the manufacturers she represents.

In what ways has the nominee gone above and beyond for her company or organization?

Wingo has not only grown the sales in her region, she has also mentored some of our newer specialists across the country. Within the brands we represent such as Hughes, RV Designer, PowerMax, Starbrite, Samlex, LaSalle Bristol, Pinnacle, SnapPad, Cofair and Xtreme Heater, Wingo has been recognized by all as a standout. She always has a positive attitude, is very knowledgeable, and even if she doesn't have the answer, she will find out and make sure you get it. She goes above and beyond what the normal person would do. Her attention to detail, especially with regard to her managing of the corporate accounts and their needs, is invaluable. They have deadlines for marketing, pricing and shows that are always needing to be managed and she does a great job of keeping everyone on target. Wingo has embraced our product line and represented us in an what is an emerging market for us (RV market), increasing our exposure in her territory significantly. She stepped up to learn our new-to-her product line and interact with us after each sales call to get questions answered, increase her product knowledge and continually improve her effectiveness.

What does the nominee add to her company's culture?

Wingo's dedication and tenacity has been a role model for others in the company to aspire toward. She always brings a smile to the group and a fun atmosphere to any situation. She brings a positive attitude, strong work ethic and a high level of product expertise to her customers and our team at Derema Group.

RISING UP TOGETHER

Four women at Thetford tell us how the company has supported their growth, and why they're determined to help bring up generations of women behind them.

BY JENNIFER KING



Mary Pouliot
Executive Vice President, Americas
Time in the RV industry: 17 years



Alissa Reyes
Senior Vice President of Human Resources and Administration
Time in the RV industry: 3 years



Louaine Larey
OEM Sales Leader
Time in the RV industry: 14 years



Laura Petee
Aftermarket Sales & Marketing Leader
Time in the RV industry: 7 years

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THETFORD



Laura Petee (second from left) receiving a 2022 Annual Values Awards, Customer Focused. Also pictured: (left to right) Rodney Curtis, director of manufacturing and supply chain; Alissa Reyes and Mary Pouliot.

You've likely heard the saying "empowered women empower women."

Well, that's not just a T-shirt slogan for the women at Thetford. Without a doubt, leading the charge is Mary Pouliot – a 17-year veteran of the company and current executive vice president, Americas. RV PRO recently spoke with Pouliot and three other Thetford female executives on how Pouliot has carved the path for them, and how they're reaching back to pull up more women along their way.

How has Thetford fostered an environment that allows women to grow in their careers?

Alissa Reyes
We have 45% female representation in our business. And we have 30% female representation on our plant floor in the U.S., which is kind of high for a manufacturing environment. I wouldn't say we have set out to say 'we want this many females,' but we have, for those that are able to, we have a hybrid remote model. We moved to a 4-10 schedule on our plant floor, so people have a three-day weekend. And a lot of the females we've brought in have been referrals from other females. So, the females that like to work here are saying, 'Hey, come work here.' And so, we create an environment where females can be a mom and grow their career if they want to grow and develop, we have opportunities for that as well. A great example is Nicole Ing, customer service manager. Nicole has been with the company for 11 years and held positions on the sales team as well as operations. She has a drive to develop her career and seeks opportunities within the company to learn more about all areas of the business. She is a great talent and respected part of the team.

Mary Pouliot
We are about equality, and we want our employees to have the opportunity for growth. Our goal is to hire the right person in the job and from their foster their journey within the company offering development opportunities and growth. I am a perfect example of someone who took advantage of the development and opportunities from within. I have had four positions, all career growth opportunities. One of the key attractions as a female when I started with Thetford was the work-life balance. I've been here a long time – 17 years. So, I was here when my kids were young. It was never a bad thing that I was a mom. Alissa and I really try to instill that mentality while we're running the business – we want people to feel like they have that balance with work and home.

Laura Petee
I think [Mary] paved the way as far as really setting the tone for strong women. She's confident, she's strong, she's smart and takes action. So, it has set the tone for a long time. I think the culture here is one

of probably the most equal that I've been in. I've worked at Fortune 500 companies throughout my career and been in the industry a little bit of time. And I haven't been in as many environments where there are as many women at the table. Sometimes you don't even think about the male/female dynamic as much in this organization as I have in the past. There were so many times in the past it would be really obvious I was the only woman in the room. The male voice was being heard before mine, or I had to be careful to temper my emotions – you can't be too passionate as a woman because then sometimes you're seen as being emotional. Here, it's a non-issue.

Louaine Larey
I think Mary, also, not only is she a great leader, but she leads by example. She's never afraid to get into the nitty gritty and help us to succeed. She's always offering good insight and I really think that to be a genuinely good leader, you definitely have to motivate and inspire people. You can tell that she's done that because so many people mirror her. Laura and I are prime examples. We are very similar to Mary in completely different aspects, but very similar to her drive. We really do mirror the good aspects of Mary and see them in ourselves, which helps us to become better at our jobs and be better leaders in our roles.

How do you think others at Thetford create that atmosphere that allows women to shine in the workforce?

Mary Pouliot
I think one of the things that we do very well here, whether you're male or female, is we challenge each other. So, not only do we challenge each other on our daily activities, but we also challenge each other to move ahead. When a job opening comes, we really want to promote from within and we look from within and empower people and encourage them to take those positions. We encourage employees to speak up, get involved and celebrate success.

Alissa Reyes
On our executive team, we have three males on our executive team who are also fathers. And so it's not just a singular practice, but more global. I think too, from a career perspective, we do career discussions with any employee who wants a career discussion. Oftentimes what comes out of those is, 'hey, I want to go lateral. I want to take a step back, or I want to take a step forward.' Or 'maybe not now, but in a few years, I want to be this position.' And we look to see, what are your capabilities now? What do you need to do to get this position? And we come up with individual development plans to help really foster the development to prepare them for the roles when they do come available.



Thetford employees in January to kick off 2023 goals and awards ceremony.

Louaine Larey
I just took over the position I have back in February and the person I took the position from is a prime example – a male. Mentorship is huge; we want to be able to find that person that helps us to become better – whether they're male or female is irrelevant. I don't think we feel threatened by the people that are behind us. We want to actually help them. I think it's a true honor, when I do move on to the next position or the next job, that the person that's going take my place worked for me. I built that person up, but they now are in that position. Within our community, we really do promote within, because we've already built that person to become the next generation or the next person in charge.

Laura Petee
Definitely that investment in each other and that investment in the careers and the career paths of those around you is really important in celebrating successes. I think we're an organization that definitely celebrates the success of others. You're looking for that next win, encouraging others to find a yes. Those are common themes within the organization. And then, we have flexible scheduling, which is huge – having that ability to be in the office or be at home as needed. I think the company really encourages that home-life balance, which is really important. We have a yoga program. It's little things – we have somebody coming in weekly to do yoga and encouraging wellness and health. It's such a warm and inclusive environment. We're looking out for each other and we're growing each other, and we all wear multiple hats. So many of us are cross-trained doing multiple things.

How do you think you have grown both professionally and personally working in this environment?

Mary Pouliot
I think from my standpoint, at least on the professional side, I've been here 17 years and I've had four positions and all of them have been growth positions. You don't typically find that in a lot of industries. So, I think one of the things I really have gained from working at Thetford is personal and professional development, the opportunity for growth, empowerment. On a personal note, we're in a really fun industry and I have made some really good friends that I would consider family.

Alissa Reyes
Prior to coming here, I worked at large corporations and my vision was HR and I had a little bit of insight into the business. Now I'm all business, on all the meetings, and HR is part of my role. But helping manage and run the business and think strategically has been a godsend. Also, there's a lot less bureaucracy, which I love because we can move and make decisions.

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KEYNOTE
Christine Cashen



Author of the award-winning books, *THE GOOD STUFF: Quips & Tips on Life, Love, Work and Happiness* and *It's YOUR Business: Good Stuff for Your Personal, Professional, and Funny Business.*

"The event allowed me the opportunity to interact with many individuals I never would have crossed paths with. The common goal of continuous improvement is one we all can benefit from and will make us all as individuals better, in turn making our organizations better. Thank you for giving women an opportunity to be exposed to the larger circle of RV industry ladies and allies."
- Laurie Hirsch, Human Resource/Administrative Services Manager, Campers Inn RV

"After attending the RVWA's Educational Symposium, I was excited to come back to the office and share the information that I had learned with my supervisor and colleagues. I am planning on getting those of us that attended together to figure out how to help others in our organization learn the things we did. The event was a great opportunity to meet others in the RV industry and learn at the same time. I hope after this that the RVWA continues to grow and help women succeed."
– Kelly Mosher, Customer Service Corporate Training, Forest River, Inc.

Tickets on sale 5/15

FOR MORE INFORMATION: RVWA.ORG/EVENTS/EDUCATIONAL-SYMPOSIUM/

Louaine Larey
What I've learned from here is if you can always look at the bright side, like there is a light at the end of the tunnel, then you're going to learn to not only grow both within your career, but you can grow within your person. There's someone right there that's going to help you move forward. That is one thing I have learned while I've worked here: Don't be afraid to lean on your counterparts or your employees. We're a big family here, and we feel that you can lean on somebody. We just keep building each other up.

Laura Petee
In the two years that I've been here, I started as the marketing manager, I took on digital really quick and then I took on sales, and then product management. I can't say that in another organization in two years I would've been offered so many opportunities and entrusted with those. The safety net we have within the organization and how safe you do feel to try new things, to make mistakes... and having that open and honest communication and that feedback loop. Mary paved the way through the boards and the associations that she's been part of, and being able to step in and get more involved in all those types of things. I feel those are great opportunities for me to grow professionally and personally.

How has the company or managers helped further your career with training or goal-setting?

Alissa Reyes
We have an annual formal performance review for everyone in the company. So that's a performance feedback session. We do monthly town halls for the whole company. And we do plant floor monthly meetings to communicate priorities, keep everyone up to date on the business, make people feel a part of the business. And there's a lot of opportunities for optional touchpoints. We don't force career discussions, but we encourage employees to have one.

Mary Pouliot
Training and development is encouraged. Everyone in the company sets goals through the performance review process and are encouraged to set a personal development goal. Company goals are communicated and discussed often. Alissa and I do round tables on a quarterly basis with all levels of the company, so that we're sitting down with key individuals at all levels, finding out what their needs are, where do we need to change, and then even be able to have the opportunity to talk about positions and job advancement.



How supportive of women is the RV industry?

Mary Pouliot
RVWA is definitely at the forefront for all of us. They continually promote and celebrate women in the industry. Seventeen years ago, I typically was the only female in the room, and now it's not that way anymore. Many women hold key positions in the industry. RVTI is promoting all female tech classes. It is a very attractive industry to work in. As an industry, let's continue to not only promote women but promote diversity in the workplace.

Alissa Reyes
RVWA got started a couple years ago [and] the sky's the limit for the future. We should accept the success of it, but we should ingrain it into other groups for more representation. It matches our industry and the fact that our end users of RVs are getting more and more diverse.

Laura Petee
I think the RVWA's done a ton to really encourage women within the industry. Susan Carpenter [has been] pivotal in forwarding the women's networking and mentorship and growth within the industry.

Louaine Larey
You think about RVWA and you think it's only the women involved, but there are so many male allies that are members of RVWA that helped to build us up and help us become who we are within the



RV industry. You're seeing a lot more women being celebrated with their accomplishments. We'll agree that everyone needs improvement. I think that we need to do, as women, is to remember the struggles we went through. As the younger generations are coming in, we as women need to continue to be mentors and not let them have to go through the same struggles that maybe we did. It's not just about breaking the glass ceiling. I think the ceiling's got lots of cracks in it and it's breaking. It's more about building an escalator and making it so that everybody has that same opportunity to rise up together. RVP

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RV Women in business

VERONICA HELMS: Never Stop Learning

Education director for the Florida RV Trade Association, Veronica Helms credits her rapid professional growth to always seeking knowledge, being the best at her job and letting life be the teacher.

BY JORDAN BENSCHOP

The one thing that Veronica Helms is most proud of professionally: Her timing.

It's not often a person progresses from customer service representative to a director of training and development in only six years. But Helms has always carried a certain mindset – focus on being the best at your job, and the opportunities will open. And most importantly, let life teach you what you don't know.

With a bachelor's degree in design and marketing from New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, Helms left her merchandising job and moved home to Tampa, Florida, at 24 years old. She was hired in Home Depot's call center, and in nearly one year, moved from customer service to supervisor to joining the company's training staff. Having no experience in the field, Helms was offered an opportunity that sparked her journey in training and development – and it was only up from there.

"It happened to be in a time when companies actually were committed to train their employees," Helms says. In the long run, she learned her role was bigger than it seemed. "Hands down, in my opinion, when a company believes in the people they've hired and are ready to build their careers, it will make an impact on the [employee's] life."

In addition to her own training, she pursued multiple leadership certifications





"IF I COULD GIVE ANYBODY ADVICE, IT'S TO NEVER STOP LEARNING AND NEVER STOP GROWING PROFESSIONALLY. BE THE BEST AT YOUR JOB THAT YOU CAN BE UNTIL THE NEXT OPPORTUNITY OPENS UP."

and eventually became PDI (Practical, Dynamic and Interactive)-certified to coach leaders themselves. Pivoting from retail, networking opportunities landed Helms with Bisk Education, where she worked for three years in the higher education space.

"Back then, universities were trying to bring their education online and get more enrollment, which was a challenge," Helms says. "The internet was becoming a thing and they had to figure out how to tap new audiences."

Her focus became the "why," she says – why are people pursuing education? What are their goals and dreams? Helms learned many people already had degrees yet wanted something new, leading to her work with professional certificates and Six Sigma, a process improvement method focused on customer satisfaction. The main question was how to get pros more education, and Helms' passion for helping others succeed at all levels was a driving force.

"If I could give anybody advice, it's to never stop learning and never stop growing professionally," she says. "Be the best at your job that you can be until the next opportunity opens up."

For Helms, that next opportunity came two-fold. She was headhunted by Ideal Image, the laser hair removal giant, and shortly after opening a call center for the company, she became a mother. Deciding that she had





"plenty of years to be who I want to be," Helms put her professional life on pause and pivoted to being present with her kids.

"That's the beauty in being very authentic to yourself," she says. "As women, knowing you have to stop and ask what is important, it's OK to check in with yourself and be willing to part with what you built, because it will be there when you go back in. You never lose your experience – that's why it's important that you always do 100% at the job you're given."

Aiming to Adapt

In 2011, after about a year and half, Helms decided to reenter the workforce at the manager level. In under six months, she moved into a director position.

"While I wasn't planning to course myself there – I was just being who I was in my role – I took a shot in the dark," she says. Helms managed call centers at six locations across Florida and doubled her salary.

"You have to get over the 'maybe I need a mentor' or 'maybe I don't have enough experience,' right? You have to remember, especially as a professional woman, if the opportunity presents itself and you like the challenge, you go after it," she says.

But taking opportunities means adapting to change – especially in training and development, which she calls a "fluctuation industry," as it's often disposable amid company setbacks. Helms was furloughed, and after applying for new roles a few weeks later, landed in a market that hooked her ever since – the RV industry.

"I had never RV'ed before, and I thought this was such a different world," she says. Helms was hired as a training manager with LazyDays in 2018, a sweet spot for her to gain experience working with campgrounds, dealerships, rental sites, service departments and retail stores.

"I literally had every component of the RV business right there in Tampa. I learned the industry through LazyDays' employees, their customers, reading articles and just being a part of that world," she says. "As a training manager looking at their processes, I started figuring out there were missing pieces."

Not knowing what would come next, a partnership between LazyDays and the Florida RV Trade Association (FRVTA) sparked a working relationship that gave Helms a chance to climb the ladder once again. Eventually, she was named FRVTA's education director,

"WE HAVE TO USE TECHNOLOGY TO GET THE JOB DONE – BUT NEVER FORGET THAT THE MOST IMPACTFUL LEARNING IS WHAT PEOPLE CAN TOUCH AND SEE. HANDS-ON LEARNING IS STILL ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS. IF YOU CAN EMBED IT IN YOUR TRAINING PROGRAM, DO IT."

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where she's been ever since.

"I went from call centers to education to being nationwide, and now I'm focused on a whole bunch of members in one state. It's been a really cool landscape," she says.

Helms developed the association's RV Distance Learning Network, an online tool covering nearly all aspects of the RV business, based on a simple question.

"If I could have one thing that would improve the process for people behind me, what would it be?" In the forefront of Helms' mind was how to pay it forward – which sparked the creation of a resource for everything need-to-know in the industry.

"Like I said, nothing is better in life than just allowing it to just teach you what you don't know," she says.

From the Inside Out

Numerous industries, roles and shots in the dark have taught Helms that the universe will reciprocate what you give it. Often, that means adapting to change, prioritizing learning, and putting in 100%, no matter the role. For Helms, many of those qualities were developed by an extensive library of books on leadership and development, for both personal and professional growth.

"It's a lot of self-development. I attribute my passion and dedication to being the best for my employer and myself. You have to look at your life as an entrepreneur," she says. "I was the best that I could be, and that shortened my promotional track."

Helms never had a mentor herself but is open to possible mentorship opportunities, especially for professional women, in the future.

"As women, we think there is a certain track you follow. But honestly, it isn't about that – it's about your skills. What I believe is that your work speaks for who you are," she says.

"If I had to put my life in a statement, it's focus on your job role and being the best at it, and your opportunities will open, whether it's with that company or somewhere else. Their success is in your hands."

While an abundance of opportunity sits on the horizon, Helms is happy with her current work in the RV industry, which she considers as having the "greatest people I've ever met on a personal level.

"We know how to live life. It's the best industry in terms of being fun, relaxing, enjoyable and with wonderful people."

And her training advice amid the industry's rapidly changing landscape?

"Leaders have to meet employees where they are. You have to be able to flex your program to fit the learner more than ever before," she says. "We have to use technology to get the job done – but never forget that the most impactful learning is what people can touch and see. Hands-on learning is still one of the most effective ways. If you can embed it in your training program, do it." RVP

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RV Women in business

Tending the Flame

Ember RV and Ashley Bontrager Lehman are stoking the fires and poised to strike when the iron gets hot again.

BY JENNIFER KING



PHOTOS COURTESY OF EMBER RV

Cautiously optimistic. It's a phrase you heard a lot at industry events last fall and earlier this year, but it seems to hit the mark with many, including Ember RV's Ashley Bontrager Lehman, founder, president and CEO.

"Yes, cautiously optimistic. We've had that mindset, honestly, since summer of last year. We saw a slowdown in retails happening, so we said, OK, let's not just keep going as crazy as we had, or as the industry had been, during the pandemic years. So, we've been cautiously optimistic for quite a while now," she told RV PRO in late March. "I do feel like it's the opening of spring season right now – it feels like it's picking up again. We're feeling a little bit better. We're still signing some new dealership locations, so that's exciting. Dealers are still wanting to partner with us, which is fantastic.

"I would say that where I'm at today, I still think it's a put one foot in front of the other, keep your eyes open, let's get the data in, let's keep checking the numbers, let's keep watching everything that we need to and making the best decisions that we can. Something that I've been preaching a lot this year is that if we can make smart, steady and stable decisions, we will have a sustainable future."

Lehman has been holding fast to that message, not just internally at Ember RV, but externally to the RV industry at large.

"Let's really try hard to get away from reactionary decisions," she says. "Because while they may be great in the moment, they aren't necessarily always great in the long run. So, if we can stop, take a breath, have some patience, and think



through what our next move should be, we'll be better off in the long run."

A Successful Two Years

That ability to see the big picture and think long-term has served Lehman well. While Ember RV is only two years old, as the granddaughter of Lloyd and Bertha Bontrager, the founders of Jayco, Lehman has the industry in her blood.

Ember launched in 2021 with its Overland Series, followed by its Touring Edition at last fall's Open House.

"We did launch our second product line, the Touring Edition. That was aimed to be a little bit of a more conventional travel trailer than our Overland Series, which was very much geared toward going off-grid and off-road with that independent suspension, larger tank sizes, fully composite build, off-road tires, stronger chassis," Lehman says. "We kind of refer to that as our 'hiking boots.' And now we introduced our Touring Edition in September, which we consider to be more of our 'running shoes.' Still an upgrade over a conventional travel trailer with the amenities included…but made to go more on road."

The newer Touring Edition was well received, Lehman says, and users are still interested in the Overland Series as well. It was the economy shift, inflation and interest rates that provoked the slowdown the industry has experienced compared to the pandemic years.

"Dealers couldn't hardly keep inventory on their lots. Everybody wanted to buy an RV to, now this – I don't want to say abrupt, as we saw it coming – but it did hit us a little bit harder than we thought," she says. "I think many of us are predicting there needs to be a shift on the manufacturing side as well as on the dealer side to make sure that we're still an appealing way for our customers to get out and enjoy time with family and friends.

"I personally have been to many retail shows the past three or four months and I have felt like, for the most part, at all the different shows I've been to, retail traffic is still pretty heavy. There's still near record numbers of people coming to the shows to see what's new in RVs.



There's still a lot of interest out there.

"But I do think there has been a shift in the way that retail customers are thinking about discretionary purchases today versus how they were during those pandemic years."

Appealing to Today's Buyers

Ember RV has definitely seen a lot of interest from first-time buyers, Lehman says.

"I don't know if I can put my finger on that exactly other than to say, I think initially with our Overland Series, people were seeking options to get off the beaten path. Not only were campgrounds typically fuller than they had been in the past because of the rising interest, people just wanted to get away and not necessarily be at a campground with a hundred other people. So, I think that appeal of our Overland Series drew people in as well as our commitment to quality and also building a "camping correct" RV. I believe that is the same with our Touring Edition."

By "camping correct," Lehman is referring to the attention that Ember RV pays to the small details – to how people actually live in their units.

"I do hear a lot of people who come into our Touring Editions while I'm at the show and say, 'wow, I can see the quality. Wow. I can see that you thought this through. Thank you for designing it this way. I've owned a camper before and





the layout was not great.' Or 'I needed an outlet over here for my coffee maker, and it looks like somebody actually intentionally designed it.'

"I'm very proud when I hear that because we certainly try to focus on intentionality in our design and the quality aspect as well. So, I think today's buyer is much more discerning and they are looking for a true home away from home that gives them the amenities that they're going to need and that they want on the road, along with the quality that they expect."

Lehman says the team at Ember RV has learned a lot after two seasons – they have paid attention the data, such as which floorplans have been most popular. For the model year 2024, she doesn't expect many changes coming in the Touring Edition as it's still fairly new. But the Overland Series for 2024 will include some "refinements" or broader offerings on specific floor plans, she says.

"We don't see a whole lot of changes necessary going into 2024, but we always like to stay innovative and inventive. So, you may see some new floorplans from us within those two product lines, and maybe some little tweaks here or there. But for model year '24, we're not planning anything too crazy this year. But we won't just sit on our haunches either." RVP



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

"I always wondered why gender was even a topic of discussion," Lehman says.

Her point being, gender shouldn't be a hindrance if a person is capable and their skill set is valuable – that's what matters most.

"I've asked here at Ember that we always look at what the person, not he or she, the person, can do for our team," she says. "Here at Ember, we have more females in leadership roles than we do males, and it wasn't intentional. But I think when you ask your team as they're hiring, as we're promoting, to take a step back and just say, 'who's the best option for this role?' You come out with somebody who was perfect or best for that role, and the rest just doesn't matter."

Lehman says that attitudes about women in higher roles in the industry have shifted, but there's still room to grow. Helping all individuals in the industry understand their path forward and what they need to do to grow in their careers is most important, rather than focusing solely on gender.

"I do think that the industry as a whole has grown to be more it traditionally has been. I feel like I'm seeing more women and not your traditional RV industry executive in leadership roles, and that's really exciting to me," she says. "I do think that that barrier in the mindset has been crumbling over time, therefore allowing more people who are capable of doing the job to have the role that they have. And through that, breaking down that mindset, breaking down that barrier, whether it's conscious or subconscious, I think it's showing because of who is in leadership roles across the industry today versus maybe who [was] in roles 10, 15, 20 years ago.

"I think in general, society's shifting a little bit too. I don't want to just point fingers at our industry."



RV Women in business

PRVCA Director Welcomes Diversity

Heather Leach says women may still be a minority in the industry, but representation is improving.

BY TONY KINDELSPIRE



Heather Leach didn't intend to head up one of the largest state RV and camping associations in the country and be one of the main drivers of what is now billed as "America's Largest RV Show." She was simply applying for a job that sounded interesting and fit her skill set and background back in 2006, which was marketing and communications. She ended up getting the job as marketing and education director with the Pennsylvania RV and Camping Association (PRVCA).

"When this job came up, I thought it sounded interesting; I mean it's RVing and camping – who doesn't love RVing and camping?," Leach says, calling from her car, returning home from one of the many conferences she attends. "[I thought] 'we'll try this for a couple years;' but no one tells you that when you get into this industry, you're in it forever. And here I am, I'm still here. But it's been a really great experience and an interesting ride, that's for sure."

She said she realized right off the bat that working for a state RV association was going to keep her on her toes and stretch her far beyond the traditional duties and responsibilities of a typical marketing/communications job. And it didn't take her long to discover she liked it.

"I really didn't know much about association work, nonprofit work, and it's definitely something that intrigued me," Leach says. "It's definitely a different environment than working for a for-profit company. But I kind of like that – and really, when you're doing association work – ours would be considered a smaller association, based







(top left) Heather Leach with Pennsylvania State Sen. Joe Scarnati at a fundraising event. (top right) Heather Leach with Jon Jones, who was awarded the Gary Bunzer Education Award in 2020 for attending the most training in a year.



Heather Leach with Brad Rhone, past chairman of the PRVCA board, presenting her with the chairman's award.

on staff size – it really gives you a lot of other responsibilities that you wouldn't get otherwise... It really gives you a lot of skill sets that I would not have gotten if I would have been working for a for-profit company."

Seventeen years ago, the RV and camping industries, particularly the former, were different than they were now. The consolidation wave had not yet taken over the RV manufacturing landscape, and the serious economic peril of the Great Recession was still a couple of years in the future.

Her job and this still-new-to-her industry made her realize she had found a career with staying power, even if the industry had few females in a position of leadership.

Even through the very rough patch of 2008-2010 that hit all aspects of the industry, Leach stuck with it, and in 2015 she was named executive director of the PRVCA, which is the organization's highest paid position. As ED she serves at the pleasure of the nonprofit's board of directors, and she must also answer to her hundreds of association members. Having that many voices to tune into simply comes with the territory, Leach said.

"You know, I will say I have always enjoyed working with our board of directors and members," she says. "They have been very supportive and really encouraging me to really grow. They wanted me to get my CAE – which would be Certified Association Executive – and they were the ones that said, 'We think that would be really good for you,' and I'm like, 'OK, great.' So they have been very supportive of my professional development over the years, so that's always great."

The rewarding part of her job, she added, is when she and her staff can help members of the organization grow their businesses and achieve their dreams. Of course, that's not always possible, but at least they can always be there to provide assistance and to have their constituents' backs when they're going through difficult times, as was made clear by the industry's most recent historic upheaval.

"When we went through that whole thing with COVID, it really made me realize the importance of association work, because I had members calling and





America's Largest RV Show is located in Hershey, Pennsylvania, and will take place Sept. 13-17 this year.

the information was changing on an hourly basis sometimes, and the fact that they had someplace to call – I might not have always been able to give them the answer that they wanted to hear, but the fact that they had someplace to call and I could hear what their concerns were and what their struggles were and I could talk to our lobbyists and our attorneys to try to get them answers and a plan to move forward – it's stuff like that," Leach says. "And while that was not a great time in general, those couple weeks when everything was shut down, it really was like a 'wow' moment. You could tell that there was a lot of benefit that we were able to provide, even if it was just as a sounding board. So, it's things like that that come up … you really understand the importance of having an association."

At this point Leach is well-known nationally in the RV world because of her work in the PRVCA and its role in putting on America's Largest RV Show in Hershey, Pennsylvania, which draws tens of thousands of attendees each year and attracts enough RVs to cover literally dozens of football fields.

As a woman who has climbed the ranks in what not long ago was a field largely dominated by men, it's surprising to learn that she's never been asked to speak about her experiences in the industry as a woman. But she's noticed the efforts of groups like the RV Women's Association (RVWA) – and in fact the Hershey Show has hosted an RVWA event – and the RV Technical Institute (RVTI), which is specifically reaching out to women to train them to be RV technicians.

Maybe it's not quite where it should be in terms of equality, Leach says, but the industry is heading that direction at least.

"I THINK IF YOU REALLY WANT TO BE INCLUSIVE AND HAVE A DIVERSE STAFF, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO PUT A LITTLE BIT OF EFFORT FORTH...MAYBE LOOK AT HOW YOUR APPLICATION'S WORDED."

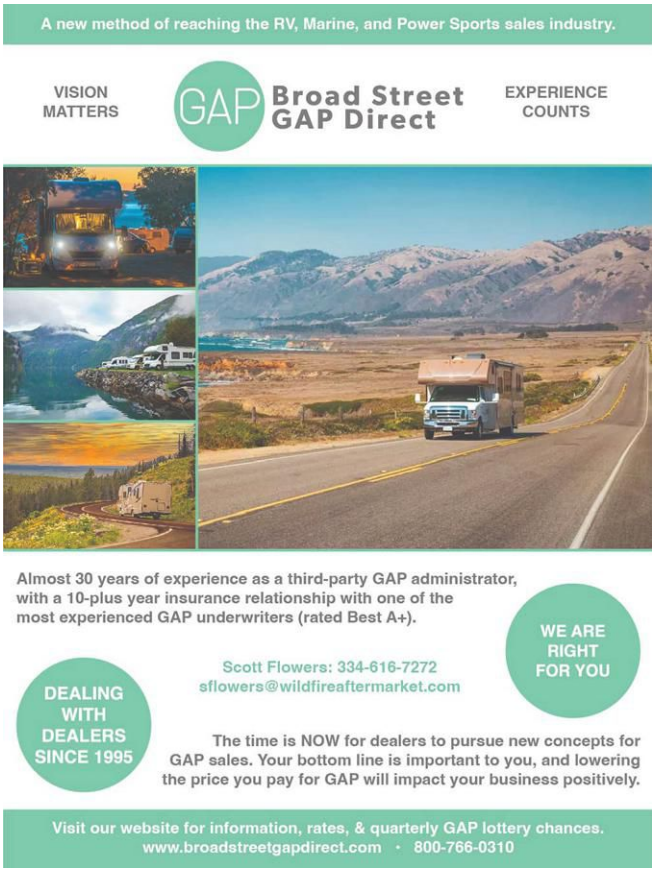
"When I would go to committee week in D.C., I wasn't on a committee, so I would sit in the back row and look around the room. And you can definitely see a much bigger difference now," Leach says. "Now as you look around the room, you can literally say that women have a seat at the table. They're not just sitting around the back like I did 20 years ago. They're at the table participating in the meeting, taking on leadership roles. You can see it at RVIA – you've seen an increase of the number of women that are participating on their board. So, I think we're getting there for sure.

"But, I still go into a room, you know, you can definitely count the number of women – on maybe your two hands sometimes, compared to the number of men in the room. But I do feel like there has definitely been improvement. Even from our board's standpoint, we're not an incredibly diverse board, but I have gotten nothing but support and encouragement from my board of directors to go out and improve myself professionally. So, I think it's there and I think it's a work in progress, but I can definitely see some changes over the last 20 years, for sure."

And she has some advice to those who think the industry will simply become more diverse – whether it's women, people of color or whomever – because of some sort of natural evolution. Thoses people may want to re-think that position, she says.

"Listen, I don't think diversity is going to fall at someone's doorstep," Leach says. "I think if you really want to be inclusive and have a diverse staff, you're going to have to put a little bit of effort forth. And I'm not saying that you hire someone that doesn't have the skills just so you hire someone. But you might have to do a little more work in how to reach people than what you're used to. And if you put a job description out and you don't get any kind of diversity [applying], maybe look at how your application's worded. Maybe there's things in there that you wouldn't normally look at. You might have a woman look at the description and go, 'I would never apply for this, because X, Y, Z.' You might not know that because why would you ever think about that?

"I think from an employer's standpoint, you have to actively look for those types of things: What can you do to attract a more diverse staff?" RVP





RV Women in business

Reaching for the Summit

With 18 years in the RV industry, Shasta RV General Manager Meg Grierson has learned that teamwork, and keeping your eyes and ears open, breeds success.

As the general manager for Shasta RV, a division of Forest River, Meg Grierson says she builds a "conventional" unit – but her interiors are anything but. RV PRO sat down with Grierson for a conversation about designing RVs that satisfy everyone from first-time buyers to seasoned road warriors.

RV PRO: Please tell me about your background and your career path to becoming the Shasta RV General Manager.

Grierson: I started off in the grocery business, and I was in the grocery business for about 20 years. I worked for several years with a retailer as a buyer and a merchandiser for a large chain in our area, and then I transitioned to the wholesale side. And I was a perishable consultant, so I went out and worked with retail stores and I did consulting on how they can be more efficient.

Then in 2004, I came to work for Coachmen, so I've been here about 18 and a half years. I started as a sales coordinator trainee… then I went into the sales side of things after a year, where I really wanted to be anyway, then in 2009 Forest River bought us. That was quite the change for us.

By 2009, I was a sales rep for the Catalina division, then in 2012, I was promoted to sales manager for the Freedom Express division… in 2019, I got the opportunity to come to Shasta. It was awesome. We didn't have a lot of female general managers, but it was great to be able to explore my own avenue.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHASTA RV

In 2021, when the pandemic hit it was crazy, but that leads us to today, where we're trying to figure things out.

Can you explain to me your role as a general manager – what does that encompass?

Well, it definitely is a lot of different hats. For Forest River, the general manager is basically in charge of their own business, their own entity. We're responsible for everything that happens within our building – production, sales, maintenance, purchasing, a little bit of everything, which luckily I feel like my path as a consultant and sales and buyer really helped me to get where I am today.

How are you and your team involved in designing RV interiors?

When I was a sales manager at Freedom Express, the interior and the exterior – basically, the total design of the unit – was on the sales manager and the sales team.

It is exactly the same way now; from where I'm at now, I actually work with an interior designer because of being a general manager and all the hats I wear, and I have a fairly new sales manager that I work with, so I took the step to hire an interior designer for us. She basically coordinates everything – she'll say, "here's the cycle and here's where we're at, you should probably look at changing the wall board or look at



changing the wood color or the flooring or whatever." So, I will have her pick some things out that are popular and somewhat neutral, and then I'll get the sales team together and the sales team – since they're the ones who sell the product and they're the first contact with our dealer body and our retail body – [they] will help make the decision on which direction we're going to go.

We tend to do things in a two-year-type cycle but we also try to stay ahead of it as much as we can. Thinking back to how we used to do it, it seemed the RV industry was always five years behind the housing industry, so I think it got a little frustrating for retail customers because you wouldn't see any cool, innovative things in RVs the way you would in the housing industry.

Now I think there are females involved, and the guys are on Pinterest and maybe forced to watch HGTV with their wives, so I think they're on top of that a lot more than we used to be and maybe we don't have that gap like we used to.

Where do you do your research or get your inspiration for the designs?

Everything! From boats to new construction to you name it. We try to listen to the retail customers, and hopefully people within your network do some camping. We listen to the customers when they say "oh, I wish they could of done this" or "why would they have put something this old into the unit?" You need to almost live it to realize what they're looking at or looking for. Also, being at shows – the Hershey show, the Tampa show or Boston or California – those help out tremendously for our group.

Do you do formal surveys or focus groups?

It's mostly interacting with customers. It's hard to gauge that right now because the last two years have been so crazy. I can remember in the past when I first got Freedom Express, we'd call dealers with questionnaires and say, "hey, what about this, how's our quality or how's our warranty, how's this or how's that?"

Now's a good time to get back into that, because it is important what our retail customers think. There are people in the last couple of years that are first-time buyers, so we want to know how their experience has been.

What are you seeing that's trendy right now?

We're in the beginning of deciding what we're going to do for next year. We've been meeting with some forums but I feel like the first-time buyers the past couple of years probably just didn't get enough training. You get into an RV – there's a lot to learn – you have a house on wheels, things aren't going to stay together as if it was staying in one spot, and it might be something that's easy that they can look at on their own.

From an interior side, people want their RV to feel homey and feel like it's not much of a transition from being at home, so as much as we can give them that makes them feel like they're going away on a luxury vacation, the better off we are.

There's different levels out there; I build a conventional trailer, whereas there's different levels you can go to from a price standpoint. But the more we can stay current with what our customers want, the better off we are.

We look and see what's going in houses, and the lighter cabinets have definitely been a popular item. Everyone's personal taste is really hard to figure out at some points in time, so we went where the masses are – and since the lighter colors have been really popular, we went in that direction.

We like to have coordinating or accent colors be blacks, maybe gold, some satin – in design right now, you can do just about anything at your house and call it shabby chic or barnyard chic or so many different designs.

Being the smaller division, we're trying to capture that 80% of our customers that we can, so we won't always please everyone. If we can be somewhat neutral but flashy, we try to do that.

People want to do things with their phone to control their devices, they want to have Bluetooth and we have gone more in that direction with the Lippert One Control. We put that in ours so people can use their phones to put their awnings out or their lights – as much as we can, we try to do some of that.

When it comes to choices you make for materials that will be family-friendly or wear well, how much does that weigh in when making those choices?

It weighs in a lot – we want this to last a long time and we don't know how the customer is going to use it.

As a young salesperson, someone would say, "I'm looking for a trailer." [I learned to say,] well, OK, but do you have kids, do you have pets, how much will you use it? Is it going to be a twice-a-year deal, or will you be going every

I THINK RIGHT NOW, WE NEED TO WATCH WHERE WE ARE FROM A PRICE STANDPOINT. WE'RE GOING TO KEEP OUR EYES AND EARS OPEN TO ADD AS MUCH VALUE AS WE CAN AT A GREAT PRICE.



weekend? I really think those questions will dictate which way that retail customer wants to go.

With my line, we don't have a lot of options; we want to make it very simple and we try to get as many things in that are standard as we can.

As you move up into different models, whether its fifth wheels or motorized, that's where you tend to see more options where you might be able to get different fabrics, different floors, different cabinets.

Who has been your mentor in your career? What have you learned from him/her?

I've worked with a lot of great people; there hasn't just been one. The time that I was at Coachmen – Mike Terlep was here for 38 years and has always been an inspiration and an awesome president of the company, and friend and great father and grandfather.

Surrounding yourself with fabulous people and great mentors makes you who you are. As long as you pick and choose from those people the things that make you better, I think that's what makes a great person.

I pride myself in making sure that my team – because we are truly a great team – we work together and communicate together and I don't make all the decisions. I really count on hearing all the different opinions, and then I try to decipher what the best is.

I surrounded myself with really great guys to help me, and they've taught me a lot of different things throughout the years, and I really think that's the key. I feel so blessed to be a part of this company and the people I have worked with.

How have you prepared for what was expected to be a shift in the industry this year?

We're keeping all of our options open. We're at a very unique time right now, where business has shifted so much. We're just trying to stay ahead as much as we can.

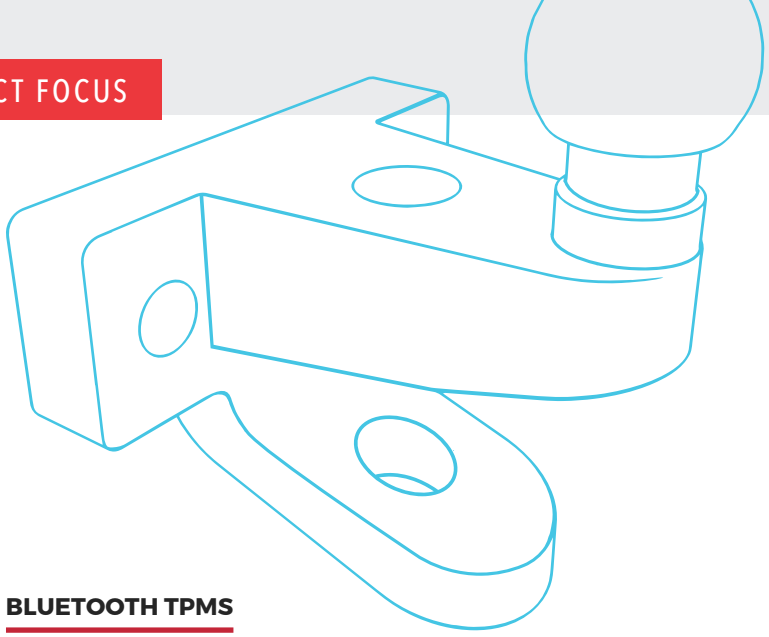
Knowing prices have inflated so much in the last couple of years, we've come out with a price leader-type line – our i-5 line. Shasta was created from Shasta Mountain out in California – that's on the Interstate 5 freeway. The i-5 edition is our more price-friendly option.

We basically have a lot of the same interiors in there, but we've changed up a couple of things. We changed the exterior to be a little different, and we've taken some things out that customers won't notice in that model to try to save some money.

I think right now, and the next couple of years or at least a year, we need to really watch where we are from a price standpoint. So, we're going to keep our eyes and ears open to add as much value as we can at a great price. RVP



HITCHES AND TOWING





BLUETOOTH TPMS

ASA Electronics, Elkhart, Indiana, presents its iN·Command TPMS. Tires are replaceable. Loved ones aren't. ASA Electronics knows how devastating crashes are, especially involving your RV, and that tire pressure monitoring can make all the difference. Equipped with a Bluetooth repeater that strengthens the signal, enabling its use on longer towables, ASA's iN·Command TPMS comes with an app to provide drivers with instant alerts about the temperature and pressure of each tire. Proper tire inflation can reduce blowouts and provide peace of mind, improve fuel economy and extend tire life.

in-command.net/tpms

WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION HITCH



B&W Trailer Hitches, Humboldt, Kansas, offers its Continuum Weight Distribution Hitch, which has several notable features that allow you to control your towing experience. Composite spring bars made with LITEFLEX technology from Hendrickson are five times more flexible than steel with similar strength. This allows coverage of tongue weights of 600 to 1,600 pounds with a single bar size. A closed-loop hydraulic cylinder and pump assembly make it possible to fine tune your setup. Adjustment is easy – pump the handle and watch as weight is moved from the rear axle to the front axle. If your trailer load changes, or if your steering doesn't feel quite right, you can easily add or subtract weight for optimum towing in just a few seconds. In most cases, the Continuum can be installed in 30 minutes or less, using only a 9/16-inch wrench. The head angle of the hitch is pre-set, and the bar assembly ships preassembled.

bwtrailerhitches.com



FIFTH WHEEL HITCH

Blue Ox, Pender, Nebraska, presents its BXR2100 5th Wheel Hitch. The Blue OX BXR 2100 connects to 2-5/16-inch gooseneck ball. The funnel-shaped hitch head helps guide the kingpin into place, reducing the risk of false hookups and trailer drops with true 360-degree nesting of the kingpin. Dual articulating head: front/back and side-to-side. Lightweight, two-piece design at 122 pounds total. Adjustable height: 17, 18 and 19 inches. Tested to SAE J2638.

blueox.com

DROP/RISE HITCH

BulletProof Hitches, Bradenton, Florida, offers its HD256 Drop/Rise Hitch, also called BulletProof Heavy Duty 2.5 or Shank 6 Drop/Rise Hitch. Rated for a max towing capacity of 22,000 pounds and max tongue weight of 3,000 pounds. Standard dual ball is 2-inch and 2 5/16-inch. Hitch features a solid steel shank and works with all of the company's accessories. Backed by a lifetime, no-hassle warranty.

bulletproofhitches.com





WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION HITCHES

Camco, Greensboro, North Carolina, presents its Eaz-Lift ReCurve R3 weight distribution hitches to help safely distribute the weight of your trailer across your tow vehicle's axles. It features innovative sway control technology for safer, easier towing. With adjustable sway control, you choose how much sway is exerted on your trailer with a simple clamp adjustment. The sway control feature can be quickly turned off during dangerous or icy road conditions. The no metal-on-metal design reduces friction, unwanted noise and eliminates the need to grease the bars.

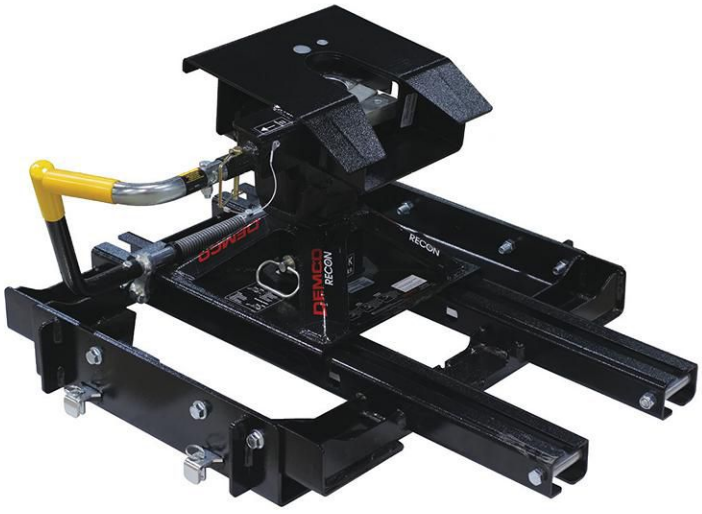
camco.net/home

WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION HITCH

Curt Mfg., Eau Claire, Wisconsin, offers its TruTrack 2P Weight Distribution Hitch with two-times sway control, 8-10K. While many weight distribution hitches are made to be compatible with a sway control attachment, the Curt TruTrack is an advanced WD system that integrates the sway control function into the design of the hitch. It combines precise weight distributing with passive sway control to deliver a smooth, safe ride.

curtmfg.com





MANUAL SLIDER

Demco, Boyden, Iowa, presents its 21k Recon Manual Slider, new for 2023. Demco Recon Manual Sliders are for Ford, Ram and 2020-present GM fifth wheel factory prep systems. The puck system provides easy installation and removal, along with the convenience a sliding hitch offers. These hitches have all the same benefits of the original Recon design. Available May 2023.

demco-products.com



WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION HITCH

Weigh Safe, Lindon, Utah, presents its True Tow Weight Distribution Middleweight hitch, an accurate weight distribution system. Combining the Weigh Safe app, built-in gauge and adjustable lead screw, you'll never have to guess if your weight is properly distributed. The True Tow Middleweight also offers four-point anti-sway control. It's rated up to 12,500 total towing capacity to tow anything you can throw at it.

weigh-safe.com



FIFTH WHEEL TO GOOSENECK COUPLER

GEN-Y Hitch, Nappanee, Indiana, presents its EXECUTIVE Fifth Wheel to Gooseneck Coupler (auto latch coupler and cable) with Torsion-flex technology to provide customers with a safe, smooth traveling experience. The built-in suspension system reduces up to 90% of inertia between truck and trailer, which helps minimize chucking and jerking while protecting cargo from harsh bumps. Past customers' testimonies have also mentioned the reduced shock transfer increases fuel economy and reduces tire wear on trucks and trailers.

genyhitch.com

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WIRE HARNESS PROTECTION DEVICE

Hanington Innovations Ltd., Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, offers its Connect-to-Protect complete wire harness protection devices. The Connect-to-Protect secures, seals and protects the wire harness when the trailer is not in use; eliminating corrosion, connector damage and fouling issues, which can render the trailer lighting and braking systems inoperable. These products are military spec, high quality, semi-malleable, PVC formulated and have been impact and engagement tested in extreme temperature ranges to ensure our product meets stringent quality standards. They are available on most major online sales platforms, as well as in retail environments for aftermarket, or in large quantity bulk format for manufacturers.

connecttoprotect.ca



HELPER SPRINGS

Hellwig Products, Visalia, California, presents its Silent Support System Helper Springs. The new trademarked Silent Support System acts as a barrier between surfaces to reduce metal-to-metal contact noise that is common with aftermarket helper springs and typically results in unwanted metallic harmonics. The Silent Support System bushing provides a silent ride and will come standard on Hellwig Products' line of Silent Support System Helper Springs.

hellwigproducts.com



HITCH-MOUNTED MUDFLAP SYSTEM

Rock Tamers, Monument, Colorado, offers its Rock Tamers Mudflap System. Designed to help customers "Protect What They Tow," the hitch-mounted mudflap system easily fits over 2-, 2.5- and 3-inch drawbars. The entire system can be quickly removed when the customer is done towing, so the flaps are only used when needed. Oversized and reinforced flaps can be cut to fit for maximum protection. Accessories available for heat protection, added visibility (LED bars), as well as the protective screen for complete coverage in between the two flaps.

cruiserframes.com/rocktamers.asp





TIRE PRESSURE AND TEMPERATURE MONITORING SYSTEM



Lippert, Elkhart, Indiana, offers its Tire Linc Tire Pressure and Temperature Monitoring System. Is your RV ready for the road? The Tire Linc (TPMS) by Lippert is the easy-to-install, always-on tire pressure and temperature monitoring system that makes sure you're always ready for the road. Integrated with Lippert's OneControl app, you can monitor your fifth wheel RV, travel trailer, motorhome or towed vehicle's tire pressure and temperature right from your smartphone – don't mess with additional dashboard interfaces again.

store.lci1.com



RUBBER PIN BOX

MORryde, Elkhart, Indiana, offers its Rubber Pin Box. MORryde's fifth wheel rubber pin box system uses a unique rubber shear spring to help cushion and absorb the transfer of energy from the fifth wheel to the truck. This energy is on a "horizontal plane" and occurs when starting, stopping or on rough roads. It creates a jerking and chucking sensation that traditional rigid pin boxes can't absorb. The unique rubber shear spring provides up to 3 inches of fore/aft movement and 1 1/2 inches of side to side, allowing it to be flexible. Installation is simple and all bolt-on.

morryde.com

TOWING MIRRORS

Milenco America, Indiana, presents its Grand Aero Platinum Mirrors. The Grand Aero Platinum Towing Mirror is an innovative new design. Developed to securely fit to the tapered mirror bezels, now found on increasing numbers of manufacturers' vehicles. One of the key developments of the Aero Platinum Mirror is the inclusion of new flexible, rubber-faced stainless steel, sprung loaded gripper plates.

milenco.com/home

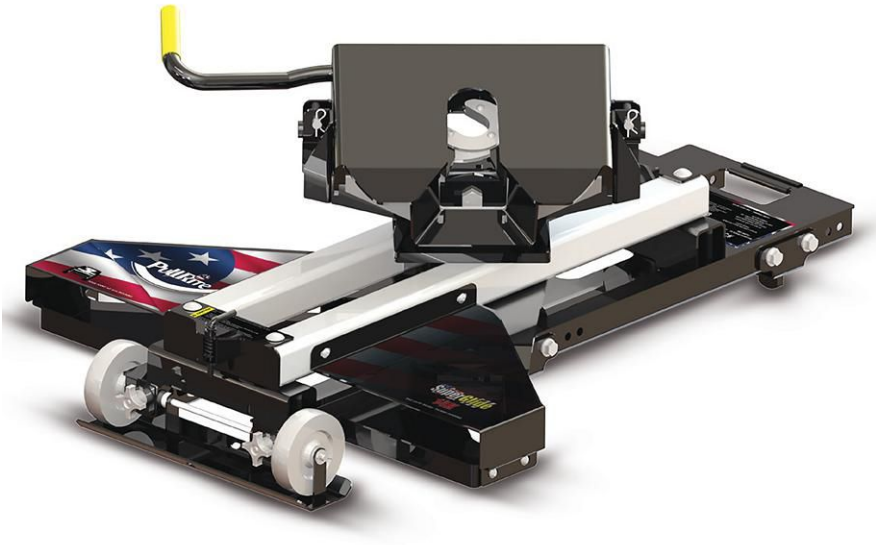




PIN BOX REPLACEMENT

PopUp Towing Products, Chanute, Kansas, presents its RVGC-Air, which replaces a traditional pin box and allows the use of a gooseneck hitch. The RVGC-Air improves ride, reduces wear and tear, and helps eliminate tugs and bumps felt while towing on rough roads. RVGC-Air directs tow resistance through the airbag, smoothing the ride. This unit comes standard with our self-latching 2 5/16-inch ball coupler and easy release cable. Rated at 24,000 pounds tow and 6,000 pounds tongue weight and designed to fit popular bolt patterns with a 12-inch or 12.5-inch width.

popuphitch.com



HALF-TON TRUCK HITCH

PullRite, Mishawaka, Indiana, offers its #3200 SuperGlide half-ton ISR. Designed specifically for half-ton trucks with beds shorter than 6 feet. The SuperGlide has 22 3/4-inch of travel and quickly moves the trailer away from the cab while turning or backing up. The #3200 also features PullRite's first built-in wheels that make it easy to maneuver in and out of the bed or while in storage. The #3200 mounts to an industry standard-type rail. Supported by a national advertising campaign to drive consumer awareness, and like all PullRite hitches, it's 100% made in the USA.

pullrite.com



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HALF-TON TOWING SYSTEM

REESE, Plymouth, Michigan, presents its Max Duty Towing System. Use your half-ton pickup for towing and still have a clean bed when you're not. The REESE Max Duty Towing System is the ultimate solution for half-ton pickups, featuring REESE's power puck under-bed mounting system, providing tight, secure connections when using either a fifth wheel or gooseneck hitch, and when you're not – a clean truck bed. No above bed, permanent rails to work around and take up valuable space.

reeseproducts.com



LED NON-BINDING TOW BAR

Roadmaster, Vancouver, Canada, offers its Nighthawk, a truly nonbinding tow bar made from styled aluminum and featuring embedded LED lights along each arm that illuminate with the RV's lights for increased safety. What was once the darkest portion of your towing system is now easily visible to other drivers, and also visible when it comes time to disconnect. Includes internally routed safety cables and power cord, solid stainless steel inner arms and a heavy-duty 8,000-pound capacity.

roadmasterinc.com



SWAY CONTROL HITCH

Equal-i-zer Hitch, Provo, Utah, offers its original Equal-i-zer Sway Control Hitch that has kept families safe on the road for more than 75 years. Manufactured from 100% American-made steel, it is the only hitch with Integrated 4-Point Sway Control. The result is sway control performance, weight distribution, quality and ease of use.

equalizerhitch.com



ADJUSTABLE ACCESSORY HITCH

Stromberg Carlson, Traverse City, Michigan, presents its Adjustable Accessory Hitch. Love the Stromberg Cargo Caddy but don't have a hitch to mount it into? Need a place to mount your Bike Rack/Carrier but don't trust the strength of your hollow bumper? Check out the Stromberg Carlson CC-300 Adjustable Accessory Hitch for all your cargo carrying needs. It bolts on as Class I or welds on as a Class II hitch to frame. The 2-inch hitch can mount to the side wall of the frame or horizontal wall of "C" channel or "I" Beam with angled hardware. Not to be used pulling cars or boats in Class I configuration.

strombergcarlson.com



SUSPENSION ENHANCEMENT SYSTEM

Timbren Industries, Whitby, Ontario, offers its Timbren SES (Suspension Enhancement Systems). Unstable loads don't just make for an uncomfortable ride. Difficult handling, suspension squat and corner sway create dangerous driving conditions for you, your passengers, other drivers, your vehicle and equipment. Timbren SES kits solve your towing and hauling problems. No more high beams from other drivers. No more crosswind sway. No more body roll. Just a controlled, smooth ride. At a price point for any wallet, and installation for any skill level.

timbren.com

FIFTH WHEEL HITCH

NSA RV Products, Iola, Kansas, offers its new Zeus fifth wheel hitch. This product has a 24,500-pound towing capacity, lifetime guarantee (the only hitch on the market with a lifetime guarantee) and is 100% made in the USA. Uses industry standard bed rails and works with any short bed or long bed trucks. The 2 5/16-inch ball can be positioned anywhere you need it to be, forward or backward 22-inches of ball placement. All steel construction and only weighs 53 pounds.

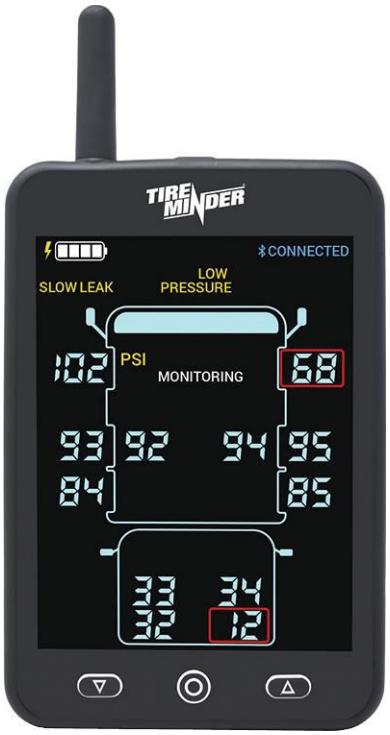
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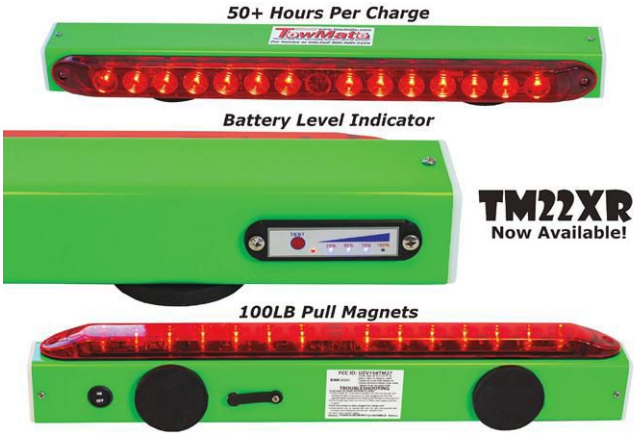




SMARTPHONE-BASED TPMS WITH MONITOR

TireMinder, Stuart, Florida, presents its TireMinder A1AS. The new TireMinder A1AS is the world's first unified monitor and smartphone-based RV tire monitoring system (TPMS). This new model includes the ability to simultaneously display 22 tires on the included 5.5-inch color display or using the smartphone app. A new addition is the ability to add features to the A1AS using the TireMinder Firmware Updater app. This allows the customer to add features at no charge. With +/- 1 psi accuracy from 0 to 199 psi and a three-year warranty.

tireminder.com



LITHIUM-POWERED WIRELESS TOW LIGHT

TowMate, Rogers, Arkansas, offers its TM22XR Lithium Powered Wireless Tow Light. The best-selling wireless tow light just got an upgrade. With its new lithium power supply, the TM22XR operates more than 50 hours on a single charge. The solution for your RV towed vehicle – order the magnetic, rechargeable TM22XR today. Made in the USA. Lifetime warranty on electronics and LEDs.

towmate.com



FIFTH WHEEL/GOOSENECK HARNESS

Valterra Products, Mission Hills, California, offers its Mighty Cord fifth wheel/gooseneck harness. Mount this seven-way, RV-style connector in the truck bed to simplify hookup of a fifth wheel or gooseneck trailer. Harness plugs into existing wiring and retains use of factory 7-pole at the bumper. Connector mounts in truck bed sidewall, tailgate post or wheel well. Plugs into factory wiring – no cutting or splicing. Molded cable and spring-loaded dust cover protects from the elements. Available in 7-foot and 10-foot lengths.

valterra.com



TPMS SENSOR PACKS

Truck System Technologies (TST), San Antonio, Texas, presents its TPMS Sensor Tow Packs. TST offers two- or four-sensor Tow Packs, which can help protect a towed vehicle from tire-related issues. Compatible with any existing 507 or 770 Series System, TST's cap or flow-thru sensors provide peace of mind with real-time pressure and temperature monitoring. These can mix and match to make sure all vehicles, trailers and toys are protected. Truck System Technologies is a Clarience Technologies company.

tsttruck.com











WIND DEFLECTOR

Icon Technologies Ltd., Winkler, Manitoba, presents its AeroShield Wind Deflector. Celebrating 25 years and various innovative iterations, the AeroShield Wind Deflector continues to help RV owners tow. The aerodynamic design ensures smoother handling, as it reduces overall wind resistance and practically eliminates turbulent winds trapped in the truck box. Enjoy better fuel economy and decrease wear on your vehicle.

icondirect.com



SWAY CONTROL HITCH

Husky Towing, Exeter, Pennsylvania, offers its new Center Line FS (CLFS) hitch that provides highly effective sway control with fewer components. A pair of spring bars are connected to the trailer frame using heavy-duty, adjustable support brackets that hold the spring bars in place laterally and vertically. Engagement pins create extra security and friction, which allows the CLFS to deliver a smooth, safe ride, and prevents the trailer from traveling side to side. In addition to the integrated sway control, the CLFS features a pin-style locking system for the round bars and a new pre-set head that eliminates the use of washers for adjustment. Center Line hitches also come with the shank and the trailer ball pre-attached and pre-torqued, something not offered by other brands. An attractive and durable, powder-coated finish ensures the highest level of corrosion resistance for years of worry-free use.

huskytow.com



SILENT HITCH PIN SET

Let's Go Aero, Colorado Springs, Colorado, offers its Silent Hitch Pin retailer set. New from Let's Go Aero is a complete retailer starter pack of its Silent Hitch Pin line for quiet and stable towing performance. Enjoy the sound of silence and peace of mind with industry-leading technology for removing rattle and free-play from any towing device that is hollow. Starter pack of 12 includes four models for 2-, 2.5- and 3-inch hitches for Safe & Silent Towing security, in peg hook retail packaging with a wall poster. Part No. SHP2578.

letsgoaero.com



SAFETY CHAIN ADJUSTMENT SYSTEM

LinkLock, Alpine, Utah, presents its Safety Chain Adjustment System. The patented, award-winning LinkLock system allows you to adjust the safety chain length properly to fit any tow vehicle in seconds. Stop illegal chain twisting. The LinkLock system meets the safety chain requirements for all 50 states. The LinkLock system is available in both weld-on and bolt-on versions.

linklock.net







Defining 'WIMIN'

The acronym – which stands for What Inventory Management Is Needed – takes a deep dive on inventory management methods.

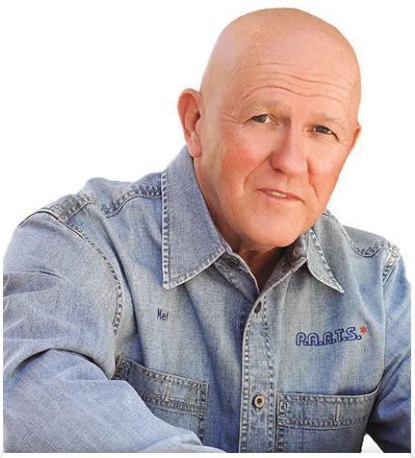
In this month's column, I will be presenting two types of inventory management – the software offered by dealership management system (DMS) vendors and the personnel who use those software features to manage your parts and accessories (P&A) inventories.

For this column, I am assuming that you either use a DMS to assist in managing your P&A inventories, or you are considering the purchase of such a system.

Inventory Management Software: The Basics

Going out on a limb, I am going to guess that your P&A inventories contain at least 2,000 items. Each of these items has a unique set of data with regard to sales, receipts, adjustments and other operational factors. Together, these separate items contribute to the overall performance of your inventory investment.

To determine if your P&A inventories are performing to your



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expectations, it will be necessary for you/your inventory manager to establish objectives for various aspects of the inventory performance. I have termed these Inventory Performance Factors (IPF). Some of these IPFs that could be used are:

- Gross turn
- Aging
- Lost sales
- Minus on-hand
- No bin location

There are other IPF that could be incorporated into your inventory management portfolio, however, these five basic factors can probably be tracked within your DMS inventory management software.

Inventory Management – a Concept and Tool

As mentioned previously, your inventory manager might have 2,000-plus items to evaluate to determine if each is performing as expected. I suggest this could be accomplished in two parts, which are:

1. Your inventory manager establishes the IPFs and the objective for each
2. Using the report generation capability of the DMS, she creates and runs reports that provide data for each of the IPFs

When creating these reports, I suggest that your inventory manager apply the concept of management by exception (MBE). The basic premise of MBE is to look at the few rather than the many. It is important to clarify the term exception as used in MBE: These are exceptions to the performance of a specific part number (PN), to a subset of the entire inventory or to the entire inventory can be good or bad.

Perhaps an example is in order: Your inventory manager has been mandated to achieve an overall gross profit value of 30%. She creates a report to identify the gross profit percentage for the entire inventory – or she uses a report offered within the DMS software. The gross profit percentage for the entire inventory is 28.78%, which is below the objective. Now, she needs to determine which specific PNs are performing below the 30% objective, which she could possibly do by requesting the same report, but by setting the parameters to only show those PNs achieving a gross profit percentage of less than 30%.

However, there are 254 PNs that qualify. To determine which of these are impacting the overall performance the most, she might add a filter to her report that shows those having the highest gross sales amount or those that have the highest volume of transactions.

By filtering her reports, she can focus her attention on those culprits having the greatest impact on the profitability of the P&A inventories.

Using the same reports, she could also identify those PNs that have a gross profit percentage greater than 30%, to determine if each of them is being stocked at appropriate levels to preclude an out-of-stock condition that could incur a lost sale.

If the DMS has limitations to the filtering of reports, then I suggest exporting the DMS report to Microsoft Excel or some other spreadsheet software and using the data sort function to identify the exceptions of the IPF in question.

The application of management by exception is a powerful tool to assist your inventory manager with operating an efficient, profitable department. I urge you to make certain it is contained within your inventory manager's portfolio.

The Inventory Manager

When the term inventory management is broached, we frequently think of the hardware/software that is or could be used. I suggest that it is also important to consider the human factor – the inventory manager.

Because the inventory manager is responsible for a substantial investment of money, the control of which can impact customer service either positively or negatively. It is important that she is trained in concepts, techniques and tools related to the effective, profitable operation of the P&A inventories.

Your inventory manager should possess the knowledge to establish operating parameters and to evaluate the performance of the inventories to those parameters. She should also know how to modify the contents of the P&A inventories to achieve the objectives that you have established for the P&A department.

Many inventory managers are in that position because of attrition and may not have received the training that is necessary to properly and to effectively control the P&A inventories. If this is the case in your business, then I suggest that you consider contracting for an inventory management consultant

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to provide training; or, that you contact the RV Dealers Association (RVDA) to inquire about inventory management training options.

Where Are the Managers?

Currently, many businesses are seeking qualified candidates for open job positions. If you are seeking an inventory manager, please don't limit your search to less than half the population in both Canada and the U.S. – i.e., men only. I decided on the title of this month's column (WIMIN) to emphasize that women candidates could be considered as inventory managers within your business.

Does one of your parts associates exhibit the initiative to organize the P&A inventory? Is she comfortable with the DMS software and investigates some of the features/functions that are not currently being used? Perhaps you might consider meeting with her to identify her career aspirations and determine if she would be interested in a management position.

One Other Option

Another great option is to consider a citizen of Ukraine as a possible candidate for any openings in your staff. The website ukraine.welcome.us can help with this search.

Coincidentally, the U.S. government recently launched the Welcome Corps (welcomecorps.org) that provides assistance to U.S. citizens who are interested in helping refugees get settled in the United States. These refugee candidates will be properly vetted and certified by a consortium of nonprofit organizations. There are only 5,000 slots available, so you should review the website sooner than later.

Perhaps this is outside your normal recruitment procedures; however, as the saying goes: "If you do things the same way you have always done them, then don't expect different results." RVP



Successful Emotional and Sensory Merchandising

Appealing to customers' emotions and the five senses can lead to positive memories of a shopping experience – meaning a higher bottom line.

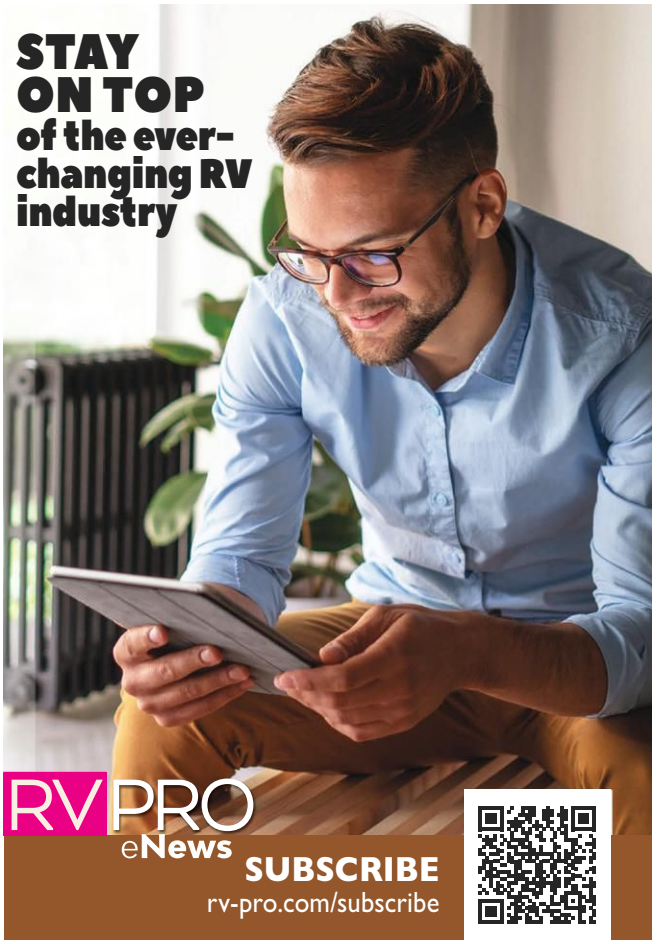
For centuries, women have been considered to be more emotional, hysterical and unable to control their feelings. Yet, men have been proven through many scientific studies to be as emotional as women, if not more so. Just observe a man watching his favorite team losing a game. According to Alison Escalante in Forbes, "In the analysis of 184,000 people who posted about their relationships to an anonymous online forum, researchers found that men discussed their feelings of heartbreak or sadness significantly more than the women did." This may be because men feel less comfortable talking to a friend or family member about their feelings, so the anonymity of an online experience feels safer and more comfortable.

Yet, when women show emotion, they are called "hysterical." When men show emotion, they are "passionate." Words often used to describe a



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women's behavior include crazy, bossy, excitable, ditsy, high maintenance and temperamental. Not exactly fair. Men are often described negatively as arrogant and irresponsible.

There is no major difference in how the sexes feel emotions. There may be a difference in the work environment in how they express their feelings, but the bottom line is they all feel strong emotions.

Creativity, innovation and intelligent solutions are the result of a good balance between emotions and intellect. Intellect alone is just half the picture. When Southwest Airlines was taken over by accountants, they decided that upgrading their outdated scheduling software system was not worth the cost. That was a purely intellectual decision that cost this very popular airline their good reputation when their system shut down in late December 2022, stranding thousands of travelers with no recourse.

In retail, many large retail chains were led by merchants for most of their growth period. When a "money man" took the helm, extras were cut to make operations leaner and more profitable. Unfortunately, many of the promotions and visuals that created a sense of fun and interest to customers were cut, deemed to be frivolous. Many of these stores suffered losses as their customers lost interest.

Emotional and sensory merchandising exists to appeal to people of all sexes and orientations. These are the extras that can set your location apart from your competitors.

Emotional Intelligence

In our stores, we want to create feelings of happiness, wonder, the joy of discovery and adventure, and reward.

I interviewed a solo female RVer who drove a 22-foot Class B around the country. She only went into RV stores for parts she couldn't buy online. I asked her about the sensory aspect of shopping, and she said most stores smelled of fresh tires. She didn't mind the odor but would have preferred a scent that reminded her of where she was traveling – such as a woodsy or cedar scent.

Scents are memorable. Babies know and remember their mother's and father's scent. When we smell something familiar and appealing, our whole shopping experience is colored in a positive light.

Appealing to the Five Senses

Food scents are appealing to most people and are less annoying to scent-allergy prone people. Floral scents can irritate people – I'm one of those people. I stopped shopping at a favorite clothing store once they added a strong perfume scent. It permeated the merchandise, and if I purchased something, it would pollute my closet and home. Their perfume saved me money.

Most important – whatever scent you choose to use – keep it light and faint. Some methods of dispersing scents include scent balls that plug in (not something you can buy at the grocery store!), electric scent diffusers for larger spaces, and sticks in scented oil in glass bottles.

For an RV shop, I recommend pine or cedar – an outdoor

scent for year-round; citrus, lemon or grapefruit for spring and summer; and apple or cinnamon in the fall and winter.

Music is a great way to enhance the sense of sound. The music should relate to your customers, relate to your merchandise and relate to your advertisements. A lack of music makes for a tomb-like store. But it can't be too loud, as that could annoy older people and make communication between people difficult. There's a fine balance.

My friend Laura Goodrow, who was a solo RVer for two years, suggests using songs that have a traveling theme. My favorite was CCR's "Green River" when I road tripped. You can create your store's music theme on Spotify or similar app.

Taste is another powerful sense and can easily be engaged by having a candy bowl at the service desk. This sense is the most ignored in non-food stores but goes a long way toward shopping memory retention. One piece of hard candy can create a positive memory. For higher priced goods, a chocolate kiss or small square of chocolate can cement a shopping relationship. RV dealers are working with both huge and small sales. Treat your accessories customers with the same graciousness as your mobile unit buyers. Try to avoid the loser candy – red and white mints. And give people water! Cider in the winter is a true gift and popcorn is always appreciated in certain types of stores. Many hard goods stores offer popcorn, coffee and water.

Touch relates to our largest organ – our skin. I've covered this in most of my columns. Dust and clean your merchandise and fixtures at least once a week so you can pass the "white glove" test that is unconsciously given by both men and women.

There are several other senses I'll cover in another column, including the sixth sense – the vibes of your business; the seventh sense – expectations versus reality; and our eighth sense – the memory of the shopping experience. RVP

Positive emotions are engaged through sensory merchandising. How we remember and retain information:

Just seeing = 23% retention
Seeing and hearing = 43% retention
Seeing and hearing and touching = 80% retention
Imagine adding taste and smell – you'll be over 100%!

How do you add emotional and sensory merchandising to your RV showroom and parts department?

"Scent is our oldest and most evolved sense. Today, it's used as a marketing tool by retailers to attract, delight and convert in-store shoppers. Research has shown that scent marketing can raise retail store sales by 11% and increase customer satisfaction scores by 20%."

– *Nov. 1, 2021, Shopify.com*





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Empower Your Team By Making Coaching Your Default Management Style

Consider the management style that dominates your company. Are managers hierarchical, dictating instructions without regard for employee input? Or are they adaptive, recognizing the strengths and needs of their team and empowering them to succeed?

To cultivate an engaged and productive workforce that's invested in their work, you and your managers need to shift. The shift is from a command-and-control approach to that of a coach.

In this article, we'll argue why. We'll explore the surprising benefits of coaching and outline how to encourage a coaching mindset in your managers.

The promise of a coaching mindset is that managers will empower their teams to work through performance issues, take ownership of their development and find solutions together. As much as we see areas where our teams could improve, evidence suggests we should first look inward at our own leadership style.

Get ready to unlock the full



Ryan Carruthers is content marketing manager at Together Software, a company that builds software to help enterprise companies run effective mentorship programs within organizations. His research and content focus on human resources, learning, development, and how successful companies invest in their workforces.

potential of your workforce with the power of coaching.

What Is A Manager-Coach?

A manager with a command-and-control style will be hierarchical and authoritarian. They'll make decisions independently and expect others to follow suit without question. Consequently, their team likely describes them as a micromanager behind closed doors.

On the other hand, a manager who sees themselves as a coach will practice what Herminia Ibarra, professor of organizational behavior at London Business School and Anne Scoular, associate scholar at the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School, call situation coaching.

Situational coaches recognize that each team member has unique strengths and needs. They adjust their management style to equip employees with the confidence to solve problems and make decisions.

When employees bring a challenge to them, these managers start by listening to their team. And not just nodding along but actively listening. They ask open-ended questions and give their team autonomy to take ownership of the best solution.

The Compelling Benefits Of Managers Who Take Coaching Seriously

What kind of impact do these kinds of coaching managers have on their companies? Unsurprisingly, study after study links to above-average performance, engagement and employee retention.

Let's look at three areas where the research reveals coaching to have the greatest impact.

Development: Coaching-oriented managers are more effective at developing their employees' skills

A differentiating trait of coaching managers is that they don't assume they know it all. They expect their team to have valuable tacit knowledge, and they draw on it. These coaches offer accountability to their teams, and in return, the teams feel empowered.

A study by Salesforce confirms this. Their Impact of Equality and Values Driven Business Report found that "employees who feel their voice is heard at work are nearly five times (4.6x) more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work."

Additionally, Harvard Business Review confirms that empowered employees have "stronger job performance, job satisfaction and commitment to the organization."

Culture: Strong coaching cultures have higher employee engagement and retention rates

When all managers lean into coaching as a management style, companies can expect benefits across the entire employee life cycle.

Gartner, a management consulting company, demonstrated in a study that employees with leaders who coach them are "20% more likely to stay at their organizations, 40% more engaged, and exhibit 38% more discretionary effort than those who do not feel the same."

Performance: Teams perform better when they have managers who act as coaches

A study by the Human Capital Institute and the International Coach Federation found that companies that take a coaching-first approach to management outperform their competitors. The study revealed that 46% of companies reported higher revenue than competitors without strong coaching cultures at work. Additionally, 61% reported higher employee engagement levels.

How To Make Coaching Your Default Management Style

It's hard to ignore the benefits of coaching. It has positive impacts across the board. So why don't we all change our ways?

Whether you lead sales teams, back-office departments or plant workers, you can adopt a coaching approach. But it takes some getting used to. Here's how:

Recognize that coaching may not come naturally

The first step in becoming a coaching manager is to acknowledge that it might not come naturally to you.

Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular studied 3,800 leaders where they compared perceptions of leaders' coaching skills. As you might expect, 24% of "the executives significantly overestimated their coaching abilities, rating themselves as above average while colleagues ranked them in the bottom third of the group."

If you think you're a coaching-first manager, think again. Coaching may not be your default management style, and that's okay. It's safe to assume there's still more to learn. With that approach, then you can start experimenting with coaching best practices.

Understand and leverage coaching tools and techniques

Coaching is a hot topic. There are innumerable studies revealing its benefits. For that reason, there are also many coaching tools and techniques to help you grow into an effective coach.

For example, effective managers that practice active listening, open-ended questions, and goal-setting all help their employees develop their skills and achieve their goals.

Julia Milner, professor in leadership at EDHEC Business School in France and Trenton Milner, general manager of the International Centre for Leadership Coaching, compiled the following nine leadership coaching skills from existing literature:

1. listening
2. questioning
3. giving feedback
4. assisting with goal setting
5. showing empathy
6. letting the coachee arrive at their own solution
7. recognizing and pointing out strengths

> COACHING OFFERS TREMENDOUS BENEFITS ACROSS AREAS OF EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT, COMPANY CULTURE AND TEAM PERFORMANCE.

8. providing structure
9. encouraging a solution-focused approach

Although we know from the previous section that we're not the best judges of our own skill levels, consider yourself. Which of the above skills comes most naturally to you? Which are the most challenging? The Milners found that "listening" came most naturally to participants, whereas "recognizing and pointing out strengths" and "letting the coachee arrive at their own solution" was less so.

So, how can you develop them in yourself? As with most things, practice.

Practice, Practice, Practice

The key to making coaching your default management style is to practice regularly. Make coaching a part of your daily routine, and look for opportunities to coach your team in real time.

For example, take an afternoon to shadow a one of your employees. Understand the challenges and opportunities they face. See firsthand the physical demands of the job, the challenges and the interactions with customers or business partners. In doing so, you'll better understand the realities of their work and provide more meaningful support and feedback.

Another example could be joining the sales team to understand customer concerns. Observe how the sales team interacts with customers, ask questions about their concerns and needs, and provide feedback if appropriate. This approach will lead to more effective coaching on how to build strong relationships with customers and increase sales.

Authors Ibarra and Scoular point out that "when you notice your managers growing increasingly inquisitive, asking good questions, and working from the premise that they don't have all the answers – you'll know you're on the right track."

Don't expect to be perfect on day one. Instead, follow the advice of John Maxwell, a leadership expert and author, and fail forward. The more you practice, the more natural coaching will become, and the more effective you will be at helping your employees grow and succeed. RVP

HOW TO FOSTER A COACHING MINDSET IN YOUR MID-LEVEL MANAGERS

We should always work on our own coaching skills. But as we grow, we will likely see the benefits of getting other managers on board with coaching as well. Here's how to lead other managers toward a coaching-first approach.

Be a Role Model

The best way to convince the leaders in your organization to adopt a coaching approach is to model it yourself. Without calling attention to yourself, demonstrate a coaching mindset by actively listening to your team members, providing feedback and asking questions that help them find their own solutions to problems.

When mid-level managers see you using a coaching approach instead of a command-and-control approach, they are more likely to adopt similar behaviors in their own management style.

Highlight the Benefits

As you walk the walk, other managers will notice. They'll start asking questions about what's changed. When this happens, you have an opportunity to share the benefits of coaching, both for their teams and for the organization.

Highlight the studies that show how beneficial coaching is compared to more authoritative managing styles. Explain how coaching can help them build stronger relationships with their team members and create a more collaborative and supportive work environment. By emphasizing the benefits, you'll help your managers see the value in adopting a coaching mindset.

Recognize Positive Coaching Behaviors

As change sweeps your organization and mid-level managers start using coaching techniques with their teams, be sure to acknowledge and praise their efforts.

For instance, you could share a success story about their team's accomplishments in a company-wide meeting. Such public recognition will build their confidence and signal to other managers that coaching styles work.

You might also consider providing opportunities for mid-level managers to receive additional training and support to further develop their coaching skills.

Bottom Line

Managers who don't adopt a coaching approach to leading their teams will be left behind. As Generation Z enters the workforce, studies show the majority (75%) of them want a boss who will coach them.

And for good reason. Coaching offers tremendous benefits across areas of employee development, company culture and team performance. To make coaching your – and other managers' – default management style, recognize that coaching may not come naturally, leverage coaching best practices and praise coaching efforts.

In doing so, you'll lead high-performing teams that love their jobs and make your life much easier.



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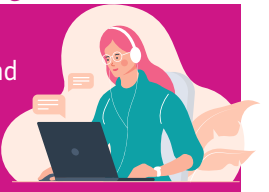
ADVERTISER	PAGE
50 State DMV	58
Acuity Brands Lighting dba IOTA Engineering	48B
American Bolt & Screw	59
American Guardian Warranty Services Inc/AGWS	39
Arterra Distribution	3
B&W Trailer Hitches	19
Blue Ox	15
Camco Manufacturing, LLC	21,94
CDK Global LLC	32A
Century Chemical Corp	44, 88
Cheltec	82, 94
Continental Automotive	89
Cruiser Accessories LLC	81
DealerPro Training	83,94
Demco/Dethmers Mfg Co	32B
Design Engineering Inc/DEI	83
Dexter Axle	1
Ember Recreational Vehicles	44
Forest River dba East to West Inc	44, 48A
Forest River Inc	67
Go Power!	76
Grand Design RV LLC	7
Haier US Appliance Solutions Inc dba GE Appliances	BC
Happy Camper	77
Hellwig Suspension Products	44, 70
Husky Towing	11
Icon Technologies Ltd	13
Kropf Industries	62
Lamilux Composites GmbH	2
Lippert Components Inc	9,29

ADVERTISER	PAGE
Marshall Excelsior	42
MBA Insurance	75
MTI Industries	79
Norco Industries Inc dba BAL RV Products	86
NTP-STAG	IFC, 44
Pace Intl	35
Pinnacle Appliances	94
Progress Mfg Inc	74,93
Protective Asset Protection Division	37
Richloom Fabrics Group	86
Riverside RV	31
Robert Weed Plywood Corp	5
RV Roof Magic	89
RV Women's Alliance/RVWA	44, 53
Southwire Co	43
Specialty Recreation Inc	78
Sweepovac Ltd	81
Thermo-Tec	82
Thetford	44
TowMate LLC	93
TRA Certification Inc	93
Tri-Lynx Corp	71
Trim-Lok Inc	63
Truck System Technologies Inc	66
Truma	25
United States Warranty Corporation	44, 94
Valterra Products Inc	80
Wildfire Aftermarket Services, L.L.C.	67
Winnebago Industries	44
Xponent	44

Pit Stop



WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE – 2022 Key Findings



- Women are still dramatically underrepresented in leadership: **only 1 in 4 C-suite executives is a woman**, and only 1 in 20 is a woman of color.
- Among employees who switched jobs in the past two years, **48% of women leaders** say they did so because they wanted **more opportunity to advance.**
- **58% of women under 30 say advancement** has become more important to them in the past two years.
- **49%** of women leaders say **flexibility** is one of the top three things they consider when deciding whether to join or stay with a company, compared to 34% of men leaders.
- **Only 1 in 10 women want to work mostly on-site**. Many women point to remote and hybrid work options as one of their top reasons for joining or staying with an organization.
- **78%** of companies say **managers** have been **expected to do more** over the last two years to support employee well-being, and 80% say managers have been expected to do more to promote inclusion on their teams.

SOURCE: LEANIN.ORG

FEBRUARY SHIPMENTS

24,903 TOTAL RV SHIPMENTS

53.7% DECREASE compared to February 2022 record (53,773 units)

TO DATE, RV SHIPMENTS ARE DOWN **57.7%** compared to same point last year

"With record high RV production through the first half of 2022, the industry has expected the year over year decreases we are seeing in our early reports for 2023," said RV Industry Association (RVIA) President and CEO Craig Kirby. "Looking ahead to this year's camping season, we've seen tremendous crowds at RV shows throughout the winter and early spring, and the future is very bright considering the hundreds of thousands of younger and more diverse RVers who joined the lifestyle over the past few years."



NEW HORIZONS

First-time RV buyers in 2022 continued the trend of younger and more diverse buyers entering the RV lifestyle. Here's a bit about them:

- **65% are millennials; 19% are Gen Z; 14% are Gen X; 3% are boomers**
- **Median age is 32** and median household income is **$80,900**
- Average spent on an RV is **$92,415**
- **92%** purchased an **aftermarket** product or accessory
- **17% spike** in buyers who wanted a place to stay while working



SOURCE: RVIA



According to Kampgrounds of America (KOA),

74%

of households who camped last year plan to camp in 2023.

The majority are prioritizing summer trips, especially in July and August.

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