

October 2022

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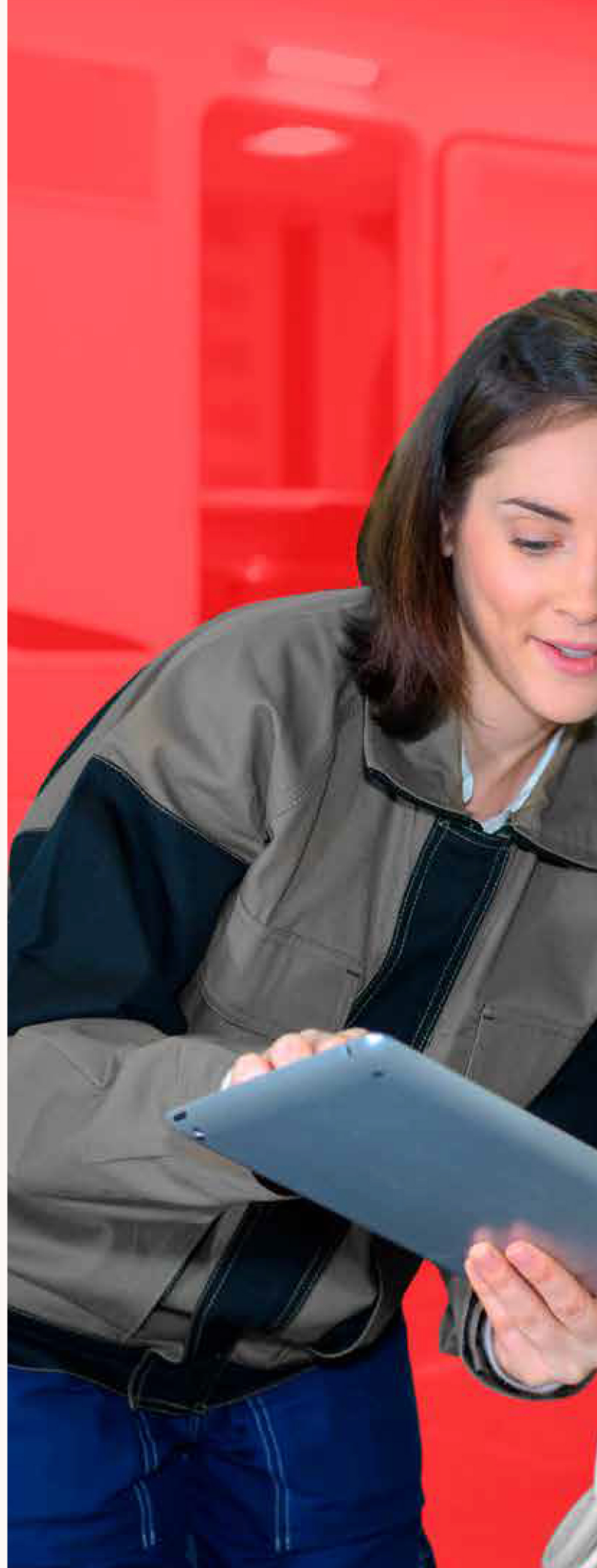
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### RV MANUFACTURERS

#### 14 ***Out-of-this-World Class Bs***

Storyteller Overland has built a business on a commitment to serving the outdoor explorer inside us all.

### BUSINESS SERVICES

#### 20 **Strategies for Fighting Inflation & Recession**

#### 26 **How a Dealer Management System Can Increase Business**

Learn how to automate follow-ups to encourage repeat business and even tighten up RECT.

### RV DEALERS

#### 30 **Eyes on the Summit**

A third-generation family-run business, Hilltop Camper & RV has its sights set on growth and continuous improvement.

### FEATURES

#### 34 **Classic in the Front, Party in the Back**

The vintage trailer market is growing in popularity.

#### 42 **Training for the Industry's Frontline Employees**

Service advisors—and other fixed operations positions—are a key focus of the courses provided at the Mike Molino RV Learning Center.

#### 48 **Dealing With OSHA**

More inspections and greater citations ahead.



14



30



34

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### EVENTS

#### 52 Aftermarket Conference Returns to Texas

Highlights include the annual awards luncheon and a keynote session on direct-to-consumer marketing.

#### 55 The Dealer Dynasty

The upcoming RVDA Convention/Expo has dealers' eyes on Las Vegas for a week of expanded training and networking, plus a peek at new products.

### RV AFTERMARKET

#### 58 Special Product Focus: Business Services

### RV INSIGHT

#### 66 Q&A With Wells Fargo's Chad Lyon

The leader of Wells Fargo's RV commercial lending business discusses what's happening now and what lies ahead for the RV industry.

#### 70 Creating Partnerships That Count

How to choose long-term partners that are mutually beneficial.

#### 72 Is Your Business ETDBW?

How to provide an A+ experience for customers that keeps them coming back.

#### 74 Attract vs. Repel

Does your store have an "ick" factor?



#### ABOUT THE COVER:

Inspiring customers to take big adventures is a major goal for Birmingham, Alabama-based Storyteller Overland. Learn more on pg. 14.



### DEPARTMENTS

Editor's Note	8
News	10
Product Highlights	77
Ad Index	79
Pit Stop	80



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**W**hen I think of camper vans, what usually comes to mind is a story my mother told me when I was young. Unfortunately, her introduction to camping wasn't the best memory. My grandfather—who had an affinity for the outdoors as an avid bow hunter—piled my grandmother (who was quite the archer herself) and my mother into their van and headed out West, from New Jersey to Yellowstone National Park. I'm not sure what else my mom remembers from that trip, but she vividly laments sleeping in the overcab bed in a flannel nightgown and a flannel sleeping bag. Turning over? Impossible. Shifting and getting a teensy bit more comfortable? Not happening.

Thankfully for us all, camper vans—or Class Bs—have come a long way. This month, we feature Storyteller Overland on the cover and as we learned from their interview (pg. 14), the company's motto—Live Free. Explore Endlessly. Tell Better Stories.—has resonated heavily with its customers who are seeking adventure and a deeper connection with nature. And, I'm sure my mom would appreciate that they do this with much more comfortable sleeping arrangements! Be sure to check out what they have to offer and learn more about their company culture.

Speaking of company culture, as I write this note I am fresh off the road from a trip to Elkhart, Indiana, where I visited with a group of friendly folks at Lippert. It was my first trip to this idyllic town since joining RV PRO, and I was eager to check it out and get to know some industry professionals face to face. We thank everyone at Lippert for being excellent hosts—we were privileged to check out their new headquarters (see photo below) and even test out one of their new electric bicycles.

It was clear after hearing from Jarod Lippert, vice president of marketing and public relations, that he and his brother, Jason Lippert, president and CEO, have worked tirelessly to create a place to work that fosters creativity, innovative thinking and caring. When they told us about their philanthropic efforts—more than 100,000 hours of community service in the past year—we were impressed. It's that kind of commitment to helping others that make people feel good about where they work, and dedicated to a company that gives of its time and funds.

When you get this October issue in your hands, the RV PRO team will have just returned from Open House in Elkhart, and then we'll be back on the road in November for the RVDA Conference/Expo. Be sure to check out that preview on pg. 55, and drop by to see us at T-7, just inside the entrance.

As always, thanks for reading!

*Jennifer King*

Outside the new Lippert headquarters in Elkhart, Indiana, with (l to r) Ryan Bonnell, senior manager, paid media; Jarod Lippert, vice president of marketing and public relations; Jennifer King, RV PRO executive editor; Lauren Thomas, marketing manager; Melissa Farmer, marketing manager; and Greg Meineke, Cahaba Media Group vice president of sales.



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## MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS

### Spader Business Management Sold to NCM Associates

NCM Associates has acquired Sioux Falls, South Dakota-based Spader Business Management and its subsidiary, A World of Training, effective Aug. 31.

With this merger, NCM, the originator of the first automotive 20 Group in 1947, said it will further expand its footprint of products and services into several nonautomotive industries while maintaining North America's largest database of financial data and operational metrics.

"Building off the foundation established by his father and Spader Business Management founder Duane Spader, John Spader has built an enviable business built on a culture of trust," said NCM President and CEO Paul Faletti. "The employees of NCM are honored to have the opportunity to partner with their talented associates and their outstanding roster of clients."

Spader Business Management, with 45 years of experience, has established itself as a premier 20 Group and training provider across several industries, including RV, powersports and marine.

"Merging the resources of Spader Business Management with those of NCM will allow for us to accelerate the execution of many of our planned strategies," said John Spader, president of Spader Business Management. "We feel the combined organizations will bring many great resources and offerings to our clients that would not have happened independently."

The companies say they expect business as usual for its customers. John Spader will join the executive leadership team of NCM Associates and its corporate office and training facility will continue to be in Sioux Falls.

### Genesis Products Acquires Countertop Division of Native Hardwoods

Elkhart, Indiana-based Genesis Products has acquired the Solid Surface division of Native Hardwoods, a manufacturer of hardwood and solid surface products. Genesis said the acquisition will expand its team and double its production capacity of solid surface countertops for the RV market.

Already a major supplier of RV interiors, Genesis is focusing efforts on becoming the No. 1 RV countertop supplier to the RV industry.

"This strategic acquisition will ramp up our production capacity into 2023,"

said Jon Wenger, Genesis president and CEO. "It will also add nine team members with extensive experience in solid surface manufacturing and bring on new key accounts."

Plans are for Native Hardwoods to move its solid surface operations into Genesis' new plant in Goshen once it is completed sometime this year. Until then it will continue to operate in its facilities in Elkhart.

"After 26 years of providing quality solid surface products, we made the choice to focus more on our core business, which is providing a broad range of quality hardwoods to the luxury RV market," said Jim Edmundson, Native Hardwoods president and owner. "In Genesis Products we found an organization that has the resources, team, and culture to continue to provide quality solid surface products with a strong customer focus."

Genesis' Goshen plant will become its 10th manufacturing facility.

## PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

### Duane Yoder Named CEO of ATC

ATC Trailers (ATC), a manufacturer of aluminum RVs and trailers, announced Duane Yoder as its new CEO. Serving as ATC's chief operating officer for the past 12 years, Yoder replaces Robert Paden, who is stepping down.

Over his career at ATC, Yoder has held senior-level positions in supply chain, manufacturing, sales and operations.

The company said that as CEO, Yoder will continue ATC's commitment to manufacturing the industry's highest-quality aluminum trailers and RVs. He will also oversee the construction and opening of a new 210,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Nappanee, Indiana, scheduled to produce its first units in 2023. The plant will coincide with an expansion of the company's product lines and availability of its RVs and trailers to consumers throughout North America.

"Duane knows ATC inside and out and has the strategic insights that will lead to operational and performance improvements throughout the organization," said Steve Brenneman, board member and ATC founder. "We are grateful to Robert for his leadership over the past four years, helping the company grow while remaining committed to our uncompromising focus on building products of the very highest quality."

### Ray Posadas Named Winnebago's VP of Investor Relations



Winnebago Industries has named Ray Posadas vice president of investor relations and market intelligence, effective immediately.

Posadas succeeds Steve Stuber, who was appointed chief financial officer of Grand Design RV in April 2022.

"We are thrilled to welcome Ray to the Winnebago Industries family," said CFO Bryan Hughes. "He brings more than 15 years of finance and capital markets experience, with expertise in designing, implementing and leading investor relations programs. We're confident Ray will support Winnebago Industries in deepening our relationships with the investment community and serving as a knowledgeable partner to analysts and investors."

Hughes added, "The last several years have been a period of extensive transformation and growth for Winnebago Industries and we are incredibly grateful for Steve's exceptional leadership and contributions to our finance team and investor relations program. I look forward to continuing to work closely with Steve in his new role within Grand Design and know he will be a tremendous asset in helping that business continue to execute and grow."

"I am truly excited to join Winnebago Industries," Posadas said. "This iconic company is undergoing an extraordinary transformation and I look forward to working with the management team to further shape the investor relations strategy and enhance the company's brand awareness within the global investor community."

Prior to joining Winnebago Industries, Posadas served as managing director of investor relations for Allison Transmission, where he was the company spokesperson for the investment community and maintained strong relationships with sell-side analysts and institutional investors.

## BUILDS & EXPANSIONS

### Vixen Composites Expands Into Larger Elkhart Facility

Vixen Composites, an Airxcel brand, has moved into a new 60,000-square-foot facility in Elkhart, Indiana, to accommodate growth in the company's fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) products.

The new facility is located within the



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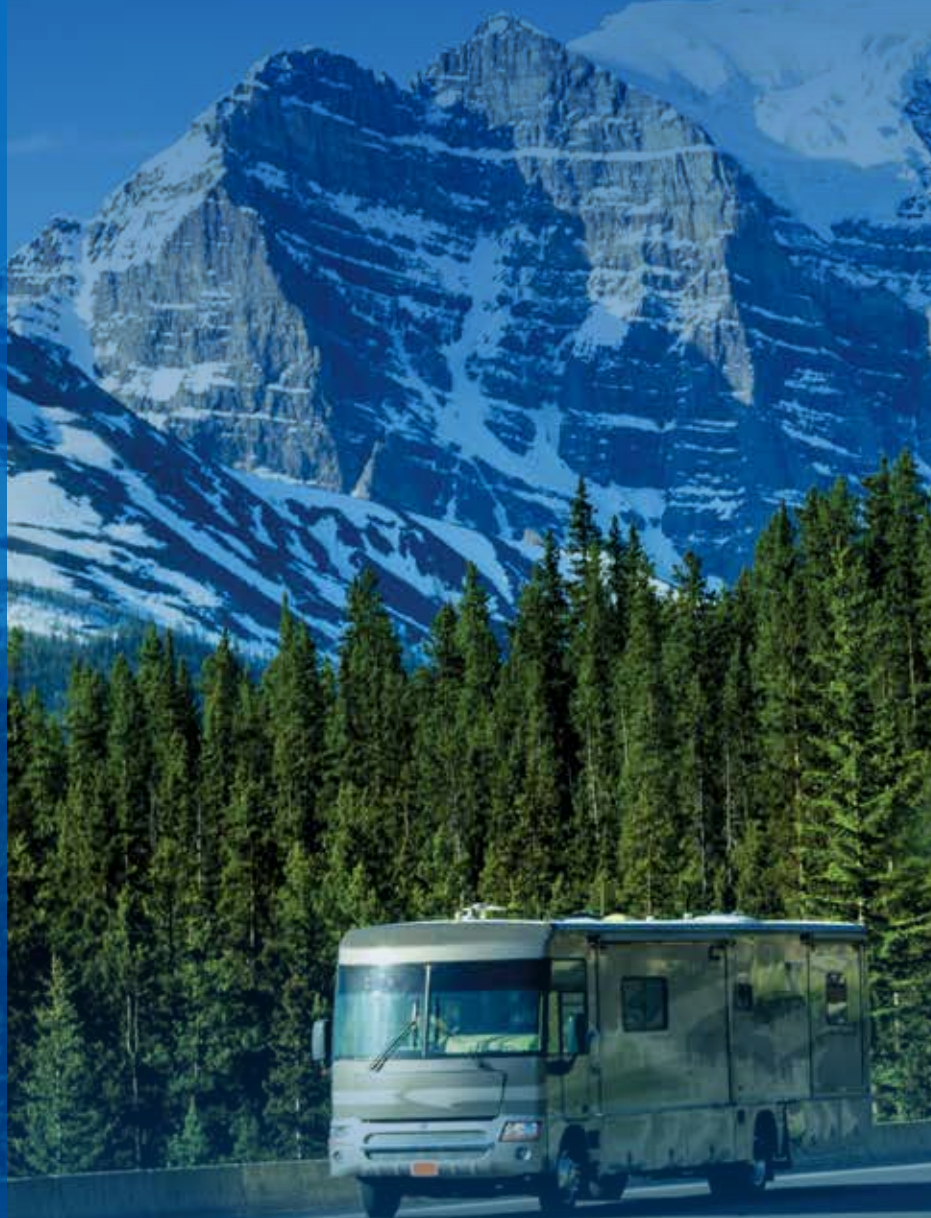
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Aeroplex Industrial Park. It was chosen for its centralized location and proximity to the airport, said Marc Brunner, Vixen's general manager.

"When looking for the new space we specifically looked to stay in Elkhart because we wanted to keep that close connection with our customers in the RV industry," Brunner said. "Being in Elkhart now with a larger space allows us to continue to personally serve our customers in a timely manner while also being responsive to the ever-changing needs of the RV industry."

Since Vixen's inception in 2010, interest in its FRP and innovative composite panel solutions has steadily expanded in the RV community and specialized markets, the company said. Its new facility provides increased space for product line extensions to support customer demand with expanded capacity.

"We're incredibly excited to grow Vixen Composites during this pivotal time in the RV industry," Brunner said. "With Airxcel's support we've been able to invest in growth rather than scaling back, ensuring that in the future we're set up to better meet the needs of our OEM customers and take advantage of new opportunities as they arise."

### **Meyer Distributing Adds New Location in Alberta, Canada**

Meyer Distributing announced the addition of its new Calgary, Alberta, Canada location. The cross-dock site will have a direct, next-day feed from Meyer's Hermiston, Oregon, distribution hub, which houses one of the largest inventories of automotive accessories, exhaust and RV parts in the region.

"We're excited to expand our Canada operations," said John Thompson, general manager of Meyer Distributing Canada. "We received phenomenal support for our entry into Ontario, and we hope to match that in Alberta. We have a lot of unique and diversified product offerings to help customers grow their sales, and we look forward to connecting Calgary and Edmonton to our network."

"We have historically pursued most markets from scratch and with organic growth, and it has served us well," added Jeff Braun, CEO of Meyer. "That being said, we're always considering acquisition opportunities in markets we service and are looking for diversified distribution opportunities in electrical, HVAC and industrial supplies, as well as our traditional automotive segments."

Anyone considering an exit from a distribution business in these verticals should reach out to acquisitions@meyerdistributing.com."

## **SPECIAL EVENTS & MORE**

### **RVTI Uses Forest River Owner's Rally for Recruitment Efforts**

The RV Technical Institute (RVTI) attended a Forest River Owner's Group rally at the Elkhart, Indiana, County Fairgrounds. The rally had around 800 attendees from the owner's group, which also included suppliers, Forest River employees and local support groups. Even some school counselors who were interested in implementing RVTI's training into their schools attended.

According to Tracy Anglemeyer, RVTI's director of recruitment, their participation was part of the institute's ongoing Year of Recruitment initiative, which aims to recruit and train 1,000 new technicians from outside the RV industry by the end of the year.

"Our outreach efforts at the rally came back to us tenfold," Anglemeyer said. "The Forest River Owner's Group understood the need for more technicians in the industry, and they were willing to help us. All the different segments of the industry who were at the rally, such as the owners, suppliers and Forest River support groups, came forward wanting to help. Everyone knew someone else who could somehow benefit from our program."

The weeklong event also featured four seminars hosted by Bill Stewart, RVTI's director of education. One focused on plumbing, another covered RV electrical systems and the other two addressed general RV basics.

RVTI's Executive Director Curt Hemmeler also spoke at a rally dinner on Aug. 24, providing a quick snapshot of RVTI's recent work, including the graduation of an all-female RV technician class and ongoing technician recruitment initiatives.

### **Dragonfly CEO Gives TED Talk on Energy Storage**

Dragonfly Energy Corp. CEO Denis Phares presented recently at TEDxReno and the talk is now available to view on the company's website at dragonflyenergy.com.

Dragonfly said its integrated lithium-ion products, marketed under its Dragonfly and Battle Born Batteries brands, replace large and environmentally toxic lead-acid batteries and provide safe, efficient and

affordable energy storage solutions for a clean, renewable future.

During the event, Phares spoke about the increasing need for energy storage and the role that the development and commercialization of Dragonfly's revolutionary All-Solid-State-Battery technology is poised to play in addressing these market challenges.

"Yes, we have a story to tell about revolutionizing the manufacturing of green energy storage systems," Phares said. "We're looking to change the narrative. Many people think getting an electric vehicle will solve climate change, and it's a step, but there's so much more to be done. If we can begin to have an honest conversation about what's next, I believe we'll start to see real progress."

Recently, THOR Industries invested \$15 million into Dragonfly Energy, specifically mentioning the advancements the company had made in energy storage.

Dragonfly had also previously announced an agreement for a business combination with Chardan NexTech Acquisition 2 Corp. that will result in Dragonfly becoming a public company listed on the Nasdaq Stock Exchange under the new ticker symbol "DFLI."

### **Caravan Salon Wraps Up With 235,000-Plus in Attendance**

Caravan Salon wrapped up its 2022 gathering in Düsseldorf, Germany, recently, with more than 235,000 people from 72 countries attending. The 736 exhibitors from 34 countries filled 16 exhibition halls at the convention center in Düsseldorf.

"Despite a difficult economic environment, we have succeeded in reaching out to visitors with extremely high interest in this form of holiday and concrete intentions to buy. Very striking was the excellent atmosphere during the entire duration of the fair, the connected passion for mobile leisure was noticeable at all times. Only Caravan Salon reflects the entire caravanning world with its great variety," said Erhard Wienkamp, managing director of Messe Düsseldorf.

He added that he was pleased that again more newcomers as well as many young families attended the caravanning fair. The 62nd Caravan Salon Düsseldorf will be held from Aug. 26 to Sept. 1, 2023.

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# Out-of-this-World **CLASS Bs**

Storyteller Overland has built a business on a commitment to serving the outdoor explorer inside us all.

BY JOHN MCCURRY

**LIVE FREE. EXPLORE ENDLESSLY.  
TELL BETTER STORIES.**

The catchy slogan of Birmingham, Alabama-based Class B RV builder Storyteller Overland aptly sums up the attitude of the fledgling firm's founders and its growing customer base. Founded in 2018, the company has rapidly made a name for itself in the luxury adventure van segment.

Andrew Cooley, a company co-founder and its chief revenue officer, describes Storyteller's customers as being anyone open for new adventures. These modern-day explorers typically don't care to stay at traditional campsites.

"They want to go to the places that no one else goes to," Cooley says. "They want to be able to run everything while they are there. There is no certain demographic or pattern. Our customer is anyone who is seeking adventure and wants to explore the countryside."

The popularity of adventure vans is increasing rapidly, and the trend seems to be moving eastward. Most customers have been located in the West, but Cooley says the number of aficionados in the East is growing.

"The European influence and the influence of the younger generation is building interest in having a small space they can park anywhere," he says.

Storyteller produces four models, or MODEs as the company refers to them, with MSRP's ranging from \$171,429 to \$218,620. Each one has a unique trim level and no options, making it simple for dealers to sell, according to Cooley.

The lineup of 4X4 vehicles starts with the MODE LT, built on a Ford Transit AWD. The name is a play on words, paying tribute to the Ford Model T. The other three models are built on Mercedes-Benz Sprinter vans. The Classic MODE was the first Storyteller model and the Stealth MODE offers a stealthy look with dark trim features, Cooley says. The Beast MODE is the top-of-the-line model with every available feature.



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**THE POPULARITY OF  
ADVENTURE VANS IS  
INCREASING RAPIDLY, AND  
THE TREND SEEMS TO BE  
MOVING EASTWARD.**

---





Andrew Cooley

“Our vans harken back to the first RVs, because they are small, 19.5 feet,” Cooley says. “They have to do multiple things in a small space. There are several flex spaces. You can flex the bed up and out, you can flex the shower in and out. We want the van to fit any mode of life that you find yourself in.”

Storyteller is a Mercedes-certified master upfitter, a designation the company relishes.

“We look at that as a point of pride, that someone like Mercedes Benz looks at us as a manufacturer that is doing things differently,” Cooley says. “When you send a chassis to Storyteller, it actually improves the RV ecosystem because of how they are sold.”

### The Origins of Storyteller Overland

Storyteller Overland is the brainchild of Jeffrey Hunter, who previously served as executive officer with McSweeney Designs, a second-stage automotive company that focused on high-end custom vehicles. Looking for new challenges, and keenly aware of the uniqueness of the van community, he was inspired to develop something new.

“We were thinking that if you really came up with a flexible adaptive interior, and you used the best of the best materials, and you made it easy to buy and easy to insure and easy to service, then you could take a lot of the headache and heartache out of that pure custom process,” he recalls.

Hunter says he and his partners were drawn together due to a personal interest in the outdoor lifestyle community. They wanted to develop an RV where someone could “just turn a key and follow a compass direction and pursue their adventure, instead of spending all their nights and weekends trying to figure out how to build their own van.”

In addition to Cooley, Hunter’s other co-founder is Lee Conn, who has an extensive background in motorcycle manufacturing. Conn serves as COO. Hunter connected to Cooley through his dad, long-time Alabama RV dealer Jim “Dandy” Cooley. The elder Cooley is now chief investor in Storyteller and a member of its board of directors.

The younger Cooley is a fourth-generation RV dealer who brought youthful energy and forward thinking to the effort. Hunter credits Cooley’s “tireless research” and industry connections as a major reason for the company’s success.

“We wanted to build the organization from Day One to be directly responsive not just to the sales side, but to partner effectively with the dealer network to set up a sales and service network, and to build infrastructure to be immediately responsive to the customer with tech support and warranty needs,” Hunter says. “That was what we saw as a real missing piece in the industry. He built what we consider the most well-crafted nationwide dealer network that anyone has ever started out with.”

Hunter credits Alabama’s strong automotive industry for providing a foundation for the RV sector to flourish. That helps establish a pool of skilled workers.

“Alabama has been stellar all around as a place to do business for us,” he says. “They have attracted world-class manufacturers to the state, such as Mercedes Benz and Toyota and Honda. A lot of great companies are right in our backyard. It has helped to cultivate a group of highly skilled, qualified and creative craftsmen and technicians.”

Hunter attributes the company’s success to the creation of a great team of designers, engineers and marketers who carry out the founders’ vision. He describes his role as setting the compass for Storyteller’s direction and creating the brand’s philosophy.



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He then lets his team execute the strategy and run day-to-day operations.

### Adventurers and Explorers

The company's name has an interesting origin. Hunter says it was a response to what he heard from the RV community who desired this type of vehicle and type of travel.

"You could hear it in the voices and the passion of the people, those who are looking for new adventures out beyond the edge of the map, and to commune with people who are on the same type of journey," he recalls. "They are people with diverse and fascinating backgrounds who want to share their stories. We want to inspire and equip the next generation of storytellers."

Cooley says Storyteller views its dealers not as customers, but as partners, serving the shared customer. That philosophy helps set Storyteller apart from other manufacturers.

"Most manufacturers look at the dealer as their customer," Cooley says. "All of our programs have been designed in a way to support a sustainable pathway to profitability for our dealers, while simultaneously being just as advantageous to the consumers."

Storyteller currently has 53 service locations and nine dealers across the U.S. Units are sold at 36 of the service locations.

"We are a small manufacturer, and we may never produce more than 1,400 to 1,600 units per year," Cooley says. "We want to ensure that the dealers get four turns a year from our product."

### Stellar Features

One aspect of Storyteller units that sets it apart, Cooley says, is its power system.

"Our unique power system allows you to have full power when you are there," Cooley says. "Now, everywhere is your campsite and there is nowhere you can't go. We call it an energy system. It can run your AC unit for 10 to 12 hours, even in the southeastern heat and humidity. As you drive down the road, an additional alternator recharges your engine. That way, you have power in national parks, where you are not allowed to run a generator."

Cooley touts the quality of materials Storyteller uses to build its van as being crucial to the company's appeal.

"Our goal was to get custom level fit and finish to the marketplace at a mass-produced price," he says. "I feel that we have nailed about 60% of what people are looking for, and our customers love to customize our vans, and make them uniquely theirs. They can continue to customize after purchase as well."

Increased demand for Storyteller units made it possible for the company to move into a new facility in August. Cooley wryly refers to the 100,000-square-foot building as the "Storyteller Intergalactic Headquarters." The company's former headquarters will be home to Global Expedition Vehicles, an adventure truck builder the company purchased in January.

"We are already looking around our new space and wondering if we need to expand," Cooley says. "It's a good problem to have."

### To Infinity and Beyond

Hunter and Cooley agree that 2022 is shaping up as Storyteller's best year yet, barring supply chain interruptions.

Hunter says Storyteller spent its first four years building a strong foundation, and is now ready to build on it.

"We believe our best ideas are ahead of us," he says. "It's fun to take our unique and creative mode and build on it. We want to listen to our customers and see where we want to head next. We hope to be a good steward of the industry we are a part of, and the outdoor lifestyle and adventure travel community we serve."

Production increases in 2022 validate the founders' optimism. In August, Storyteller was building units at a rate of 50 to 55 per month. Cooley expects that to rise to 75 to 90 per month by the fourth quarter.

"We believe the best is in front of us," Cooley says. "All the things that are happening in the world today has made the mindset go from 'I don't want to end up living in a van down by the river,' to now it's more like, 'Wow, I wish I had a van down by the river.' Just to turn everything off and get away, to get back to real life." **RV**



Jeffrey Hunter speaks to a crowd at the Storyteller Overland open house in Birmingham, Alabama, in August.

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# STRATEGIES FOR FIGHTING INFLATION & RECESSION

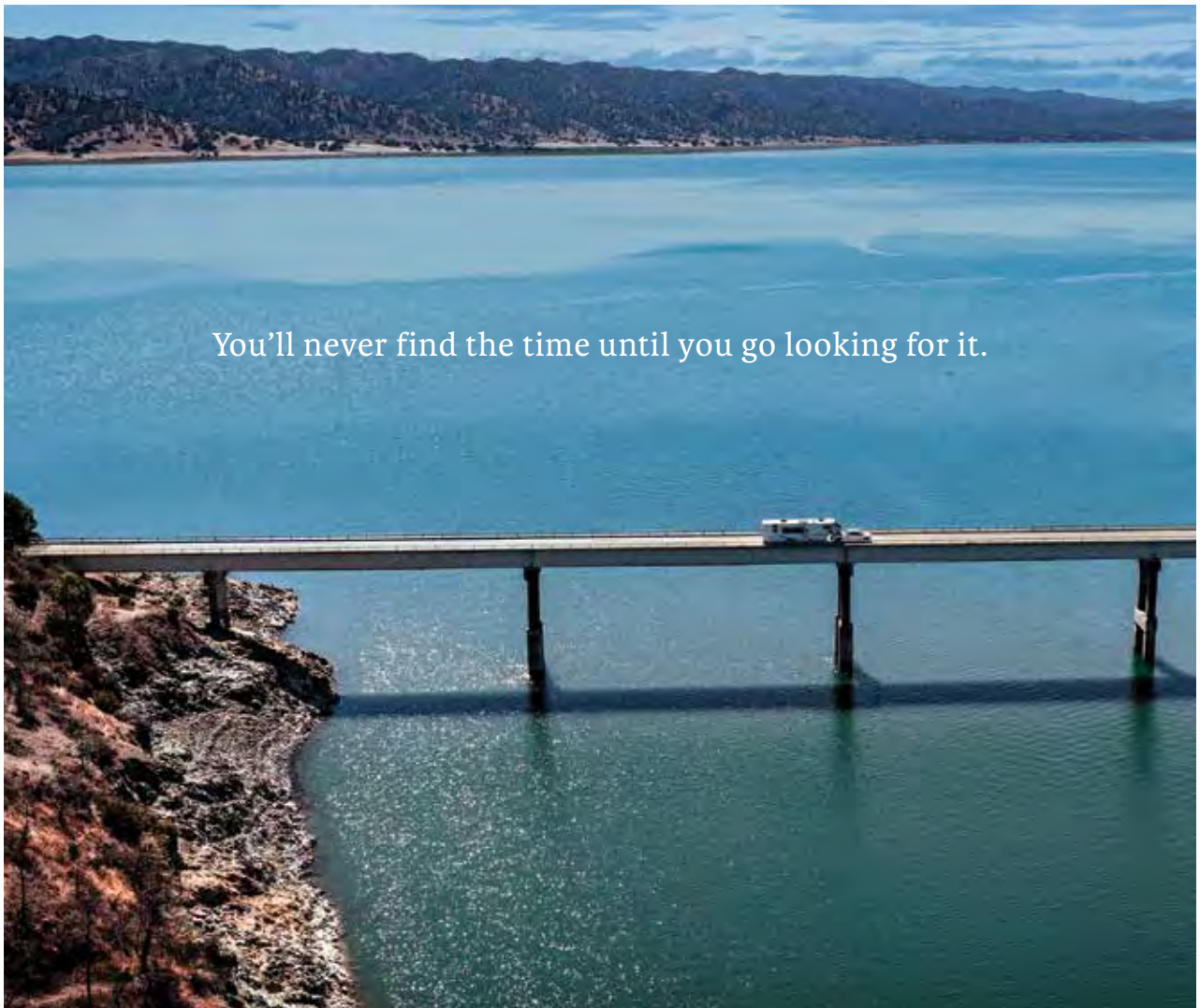
**Walter Burns V**



**F**or the first time in more than two years, sales of RVs are slowing down. When the pandemic hit, thousands of consumers wanted to buy an RV, travel and work remotely. Many dealerships had record sales and could hardly keep enough inventory in stock.

Now the winds are shifting. Due to inflation, high gas prices, rising interest rates, and the threat of a recession, consumers are cutting back on discretionary expenses. At the same time, operational costs are rising for dealerships. Parts and labor, in particular, have spiked substantially.

This means that many RV dealers are looking at solutions to help them grow revenue in variable and fixed operations. If sales are slowing down at your dealership, it might be time to implement a few strategies designed to help generate revenue during lean times.



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## Sales Strategy

In recent years, if one customer didn't want to pay the list price for an RV, another customer would come along who was willing to pay it. As a result, most salespeople didn't really have to "sell." As consumers become more cautious and uncertain about whether they can afford an RV, it's time for salespeople to get back to the basics.

Fewer showroom customers will mean that salespeople can spend more one-on-one time with them. A critical skill that salespeople need to perfect is the art of the walkaround—how to discuss the benefits and features of every model and, most important of all, shift the focus of a conversation from price to value.

That personal time spent in the walkaround can give sales insight into what makes the customer tick and potential upsell opportunities. Every

buyer has a reason for wanting an RV; whether it's because they want a change in lifestyle, travel, freedom or adventure. Salespeople need to identify that desire early in the process and sell into that reason.

If your team needs a refresher on tried-and-true sales techniques, bringing in qualified trainers can pay off big time. Processes and tips that haven't been as critical in the heyday of RV sales probably need a bit of polish to ride out tougher times.

## Service Retention Strategy

At most RV dealerships, service is booming. But so is the cost of doing business. Qualified employees, especially technicians, are getting more expensive to hire and retain. Parts prices are higher, and dealers have no choice but to pass these costs on to the consumer. As a result, the average service repair bill

for RVs has risen 20% to 25%. Many customers are experiencing sticker shock, and some might be prompted to look for cheaper repair options.

Some dealers might reason they are booked out for several weeks in advance, so what does it matter if a few customers are lost? However, with front-end profit margins poised to take a hit, those customers will be key to thriving in the next few years.

Once a customer goes elsewhere for service, it's much harder—or impossible—to get them back. That's why it's critical to have a long-term service retention strategy in place. Any decline in sales will eventually lead to fewer service appointments. One effective tool for bringing customers back in is to give away two free services every year; one to "winterize" and one to "summerize" their RV. In many cases the cost of





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giving away these freebies will be offset when your technicians find additional warranty or customer pay work.

Every effective service retention strategy starts in the finance & insurance (F&I) department. Let's look at how tweaking your F&I strategy can lead to increased service retention.

### F&I Strategy

Dealers have long relied on F&I product sales to bolster front-end profit margins. However, as RV sales slow, it's important to ensure that your F&I strategy aligns with long-term service retention goals. In the current market, F&I is a critical linchpin in connecting RV buyers back to the selling dealership. As a dealer, you can hope your customers return for service, or you can create a reason for them to do so.

At most dealerships, RV vehicle service contracts (VSCs) are top sellers—and for good reason. An RV VSC protects your customers against the rising cost of repairs, but also can contribute to bringing those customers back into your dealership. With less

worry about out-of-pocket repairs, you'll see more customers booking service visits—giving you prime opportunities to increase warranty and customer pay service revenue.

The average penetration rate for VSCs in RV dealerships is above 60%, which is good. But there is always room for incremental improvement. One effective method for overcoming objections and increasing VSC penetration is to have salespeople talk to shoppers about all the new technology

and electronics in modern RVs. In fact, don't just talk about it—show, demonstrate, and have your customers touch and operate all the snazzy new features that utilize technology. Make sure to share repair or replacement costs for these features. Seeing the technology firsthand makes customers realize how important it is to protect themselves against the high cost of repairs.

Another way to increase penetration rates is to focus on the convenience benefits that a customer receives with







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a VSC that can really come in handy on the road—such as roadside service by mobile technicians, 24/7 emergency roadside assistance, towing and winch out services, and a 24-hour concierge phone number to call for questions and problems.

In addition to the VSC, guaranteed asset protection (GAP) and appearance protection products are also popular among RV buyers. However, these products are less likely to create that ongoing link between your dealership

and the customer. You might ask if it's better to prioritize the sale of these products or pre-paid maintenance (PPM) contracts.

Many F&I managers don't like to sell PPM as much as they do GAP or appearance protection because there isn't as much money up front. While it's true that PPM may not boost PVR numbers significantly, they are extremely effective at boosting service retention rates and bringing in bonus revenue if technicians find additional warranty or customer pay repairs while performing a service included in the customer's PPM plan.

Selling PPM in today's inflationary environment should be a no-brainer. With parts and labor rates rising at a rate of 20% to 25% a year, locking in discounted prices for repairs up front makes a lot of sense for the average consumer. Educate them on how they are future-proofing their budget by taking advantage of today's prices for parts and labor. To increase PPM penetration rates, RV dealers might want to consider offering F&I managers

an extra incentive in their pay plan tied to PPM sales to get them presenting to every customer.

Your service retention and F&I strategies merge when it comes time for repairs covered by the products you sell. To maximize your revenue on warranty pay service visits, you should be getting reimbursed for current market customer-pay rates for labor, even if you are charging the customer a discounted labor rate. Partnering with a reputable F&I provider ensures that you get paid what your technicians' time is worth.

In the next two years it's likely that RV sales will return to pre-pandemic levels. As consumers cut back on discretionary expenses, RV dealers will be faced with declining margins. Now is the time to protect these profits by implementing sound strategies to generate more revenue in the sales, F&I and service departments. **RVF**

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**WALTER BURNS V** is an RV brand manager for EasyCare. For information, visit [easycare.com](http://easycare.com).

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# HOW A DEALER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM CAN INCREASE BUSINESS

**Learn how to automate follow-ups to encourage repeat business, and even tighten up RECT.**

**By K. Schipper**

**B**usiness—the RV business included—used to be simpler. At the end of the year, if you'd brought in more money than went out, you were a success. If not, either you tried harder next year, or you stopped being in business.

Both the successful and the not-so-successful business owners and dealers wanted to know why things went the way they did. In the RV industry, it might be better follow-up tactics, a catchy ad campaign, or, on the flip side, a parts manager who never seemed to have the parts needed on hand.

However, while a dealer might have a good idea of what went right—or wrong—it wasn't always easy to quantify. Software programs like QuickBooks and Salesforce helped improve that, but the focus was general business rather than specific to the RV industry.

Enter dealer management system (DMS) software, which tracks metrics for the industry it's written for and eases communications between dealers, OEMs, distributors and customers. The

software is an investment—still, if you've wanted to develop a follow-up program with buyers or determine if your shop rate is sufficient, it can provide an excellent ROI.

## **NATURAL PROGRESSION**

As director of OEM solutions, Jeremy Johnson of Lightspeed DMS says part of his job is to work on new integrations with OEMs and distributors to make their lives easier, as well as provide them with data from the dealers—in aggregate numbers across different brands—that can be turned into marketing or sales initiatives. He notes that Lightspeed is dedicated to the RV space and understands what RV dealers need.

A recent case concerns a call he fielded from one of the big RV manufacturers regarding warranties.

"The buyer wants to pick up that unit today, and the manufacturer wants that warranty to start from the day it's sold," Johnson explains. "Dealers are busy doing a lot of other things, and sometimes it's literally weeks after the sale before the dealership enters that information to the manufacturer."

By conducting the entire sales process through DMS like Lightspeed, data such as the VIN, model, make, price and add-ons, as well as the customer information, are already entered.

"Rather than retyping 50 different fields into another system, we can integrate with their warranty and registration software and send it in real-time," Johnson says. "Say that it pre-populates 90% of the fields ... the dealership can complete the warranty, hit

'submit' and it's done."

Johnson sees the use of DMS software

as a natural progression of technology. Just as businesses have given up the cigar box and the leather-bound ledger, using programs like QuickBooks may not be getting a dealer all the information he or she needs.

"Any DMS system is a complete platform that will help them run not only sales but parts and service and F&I," Johnson says. "They can have one system to do everything, and they can run some awesome reports with it on their business."

That includes industry benchmarks. For an additional subscription, users can receive aggregate data that compares their store against other RV dealers who use the Lightspeed system. And, if a dealer is a member of a 20 Group, it will compile and provide the data the group requires, as well.

The amount of information a DMS can generate for the sales side of the business is impressive. Johnson cites the company's CRM (customer relationship management) software as an example.

"A cool report we have built into Lightspeed allows dealers to look at returning customers, or better yet, nonreturning customers," he says. "We can run the report for any period, but once I've bought a new camper, did I return within a specific period, and did I spend money in the parts department or the service department? Did I come by for another reason, or did I buy another camper?"

Lightspeed works with several manufacturers and can provide information on leads from potential buyers who request a quote directly from those manufacturers. It also tracks leads



Jeremy Johnson



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from the dealership website(s) and other sources, such as RV Trader, Craigslist or a classified third-party site.

"That way, a dealer can quickly calculate the ROI on those leads," he says. "They can make business decisions that answer whether the amount of leads they're getting from a particular source is worth the money, or whether they should look at moving those funds into some other source of marketing."

Since many buyers want to feel they're in a long-term relationship with their dealers, one of the programs within Lightspeed's CRM package is designed to nurture those relationships. Even better, Johnson calls it a "set it and forget it" system built around both email and text templates.

"If you'd like, automatically, after 30 days from the sale, you can send the customer an email just kind of checking in and maybe giving them a 10% discount to come in and buy accessories," Johnson explains. "Then, maybe 60 or 90 days after the sale, you can send a text reminding them to contact the dealership for their first service check."

"I think some dealers are missing that it's not always about that initial sale," he adds. "You want that customer to buy all his parts and accessories from you and bring his warranty and service work to you, and eventually, you want him to buy a new camper from you, and what starts as a \$50,000 sale can become \$250,000 in business."

### **PROFIT CENTER OR BOTTLENECK?**

It's not enough to remind people to service their rigs, however. A demand for performance from the parts and service department can be enhanced by utilizing a DMS system. Or, as Johnson observes, what can be a bottleneck in one shop can be a profit center in another.

"A new report we're offering focuses on the Repair Event Cycle Time or RECT," he says. "It looks at the number of days from the start of the work order to when it's completed and picked up."

Johnson calls it "alarming" that the amount of time required to do the same job by two different dealerships can vary by as much as 10 days. Often, what's holding up a job is the availability of parts. While that can be blamed somewhat on global supply issues, for

the person waiting for his trailer or camper to be back up and working, "You don't want that to negatively reflect on your business."

He adds that the OEMs certainly don't want their units delayed in the shop when there are so many online forums available by manufacturer and model where buyers can vent.

One of Lightspeed's ways of preventing just that sort of issue is a parts locator, which allows the user to check multiple sources for the availability of a part. If you're a dealership with more than one location, it will show by location if the part is in stock.

Another window will allow a shop to check the part's availability within other Lightspeed dealers' inventory.

"It will show the store, the distance to it and how many they have in stock," Johnson says.

And finally, the software allows the user to look at inventory for the part through the distributors the shop uses—in one place without having to log into each distributor's website to look at inventory. Johnson says the latter is a particular benefit for a shop trying to train someone new.

There are other reports available for the shop, as well. For example, take ordering the same part from three different distributors.

"One might be \$7.80, one might be \$8 and one might be \$8.20," Johnson says. "That 20 cents difference on one part is no big deal, but if you sold a \$50 part, that percentage difference over the course of a year could be taking thousands of dollars of profits out of the parts department."

Still another area is shop or labor rates. Johnson postulates a scenario where a customer comes in for a sink replacement. The shop charges \$100 per hour, and the manufacturer sets the time to replace the sink at 0.6 hours, for a rate of \$60 for the replacement, plus the cost of the new sink.

"Or the service manager can quote \$50 for the sink and \$30 for the cost to put it in," he says. "At that rate, the dealer is losing money."

### **MATTER OF INFORMATION**

The bottom line for any DMS system is the information it can give the user, and Johnson says a DMS like Lightspeed will

allow the dealer to dissect the business in just about every possible way.

"It can answer questions like, 'Why aren't we making money in this area?' or 'What do we have to get from our accessories?' and, 'What is B selling versus A?'" he says. "Along with the number of reports we have baked into the system, we have a form and a Report Wizard so the dealer can make any kind of report he can feasibly think of."

Of course, getting into new technology (of any kind) is never easy. Johnson says one of the advantages of Lightspeed is that it's cloud-based, unlike even a few years ago when a server would be required. Transferring information that a dealership might have in another database into Lightspeed is usually simple.

"That's one of the first things we would work on with a dealer," he says. "Some of it depends on what DMS they're currently with, but there are very few that we can't work with."

Typically, it takes about two months from when a customer signs the contract with the company until the system goes live. Besides transferring those databases, the time would be involved in training and some general housekeeping.

"There is a learning curve with that," Johnson says. "But our customer service portion of the program really wants them to feel comfortable. Along with on-site training and direct support, they can go to a help section. They can watch videos on certain things, or call support directly and get in contact with their inside sales rep."

Still, he says, the best learning tool is working with the program on a day-to-day basis. Johnson estimates that a new user will be comfortable with a DMS system in three to six months. However, that comfort level will differ between the person working five days a week and the part-timer. And he adds that occasionally there can be some resistance. He knows of one dealer who still allows a long-time salesperson to handwrite his deals and has someone else enter them into the DMS.

"A lot of it comes down to the owner, general manager or sales manager implementing processes and requiring their employees to use the technology," Johnson says. "Our end goal is we just want to make it easier for them." **RVP**

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EVERY WAY FORWARD

# Eyes on the Summit

A third-generation family-run business, **Hilltop Camper & RV** has its sights set on growth and continuous improvement.

BY JENNIFER KING

**F**amily-run dealerships may be fairly common in the RV industry, but at Hilltop Camper & RV in Minnesota—where all four brothers in the Pearo family work at the dealerships their grandfather started—they've gone a step further.

Mike Pearo oversees finance, sales and inventory and is also the RV Dealers Association chairman of the board. His brother James is the warranty manager; Dave oversees parts and service for all of the Hilltop locations; and Jeffrey is the general manager of the Brainerd, Minnesota, location.

"Hilltop is in its 71st year," Pearo says proudly from the main headquarters in Fridley—one of the Twin Cities locations. "My grandfather started the dealership back in 1951 in the city of Hilltop, just outside Minneapolis. In 1951, it was a little, small city in Columbia Heights, out on highway 65, four to five miles north of downtown and surrounded by cornfields. Today, you'd never believe it was surrounded by farm fields."

Hilltop got its start in mobile homes and added travel trailers shortly after, Pearo says. By the 1970s, they'd moved strictly into RVs.

By 1998, Pearo's father and uncle—two of seven children—had taken over the business and that year moved the original location from Hilltop to Fridley. As its name illustrates, the Hilltop location literally was on top of a hill, which posed quite a challenge when moving the product around.



Hilltop Camper & RV prides itself on its technician training and apprenticeship programs for new hires.



Hilltop Camper & RV has locations in Fridley, Brainerd, Rochester and Alexandria.

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**“THE NEW TECHS WILL SPEND A WEEK OR TWO WITH A MORE SEASONED TECHNICIAN, WORKING SIDE BY SIDE. THEY’LL USUALLY WORK WITH TWO OR THREE TECHNICIANS BEFORE THEY GET SET UP ON THEIR OWN BAY.”**

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James McDonald works on a customer's unit.



The Fridley site had more flat space—8 acres, then another 7-acre lot nearby which they purchased soon after the Fridley location opened. Now there was a main business space for customers to visit, and a secondary lot that houses Hilltop's detail and prep shops and storage.

"The display lot may have one of a type [of RV], and then multiples at the storage lot if it's a good model for us," Pearo says.

In 2011, the four brothers bought out their uncle so he could retire.

"My dad and uncle did a great job of growing the business and dealing with the growth and adding personnel," he says.

### THE HEIGHT OF HILLTOP

Not long after the four brothers were in business together as the third generation of owners, they opened the Rochester dealership in 2012, the Brainerd location in 2013, and in 2020, the Alexandria location opened in northwest Minnesota.

With both Brainerd and Alexandria in the lake-filled northwest region, that leaves Fridley and Rochester down in the southeast area of the state. Rochester is a large location, Pearo says of the city where the Mayo Clinic—the largest employer in the state—is located.

"There's a lot of similarities between

the four locations, but the northern stores, a lot more of the customers right there are looking to park something," he says. "They don't have a tow vehicle; they want it delivered, set block leveled, and are using it as their lake home or vacation home, or for extra sleeping.

"We don't see that a whole lot with the Twin Cities; they're looking to go elsewhere. We're making sure they're set up to tow it properly and they're going places all the time."

The Fridley store is the largest with 60 employees; Hilltop has about 120 employees total.

"With the growth of our business and stores, we've added a full-time human resources employee," Pearo says, stating she handles recruiting, hiring and onboarding. "She sets employees' expectations and checks in with them, making sure they're getting the resources they need."

Pearo says they've developed internal training at Hilltop, especially homing in on the service side.

"One gentleman, 'Professor' Dave Aguilar, is very knowledgeable. We sent him to RVTI's train the trainer [program] and he continues to work with them," Pearo says, referring to the RV Technical Institute's training. "He has the ability to train technicians to the levels he's at, and he's Master certified. He'll work with them one on one and

get them on a training program, move them up to the next level and get them to Master certification."

Since Professor Dave can't be with new hires all the time as he travels from location to location, Hilltop has also set up an apprenticeship-style system, pairing a new technician with someone who has more experience.

"The new techs will spend a week or two with a more seasoned technician, working side by side," Pearo says.

"They'll usually work with two or three technicians before they get set up on their own bay.

"Our technician training is something I'm real proud of and our apprentice program has worked really well."

For other departments in the company, Pearo says they've hired a service writer and manager specialist who works with new service writers to make sure they understand and follow the processes they've developed. This especially includes keeping in contact with the customers.

"Our philosophy is we'll service anybody, whether you bought from us or not," Pearo says. "We have to, at times, prioritize our own customers, but our goal is to provide service to everyone."

Hilltop has been working hard to reduce its RECT—Repair Event Cycle Time—meeting with experts on the subject like Garry Enyart, a leader with the RV Industry Association and former Cummins executive who worked a short distance from Hilltop's Fridley store.

"He works with the service writer and manager and warranty manager," Pearo says. "He's helped us refine our processes a bit; it's been a good experience seeing the roadblocks we run into."

The parts side of the business also includes one-on-one training to help employees get familiar with the parts and how to take care of the customers.

And, when it comes to sales, Pearo says they'll have new salespeople go to the Fridley store, where there's generally more action as a store in a larger city.

"They'll watch and shadow a salesperson for a day or two to get an idea of our process and how we treat the customer," Pearo says, adding



Pearo Family



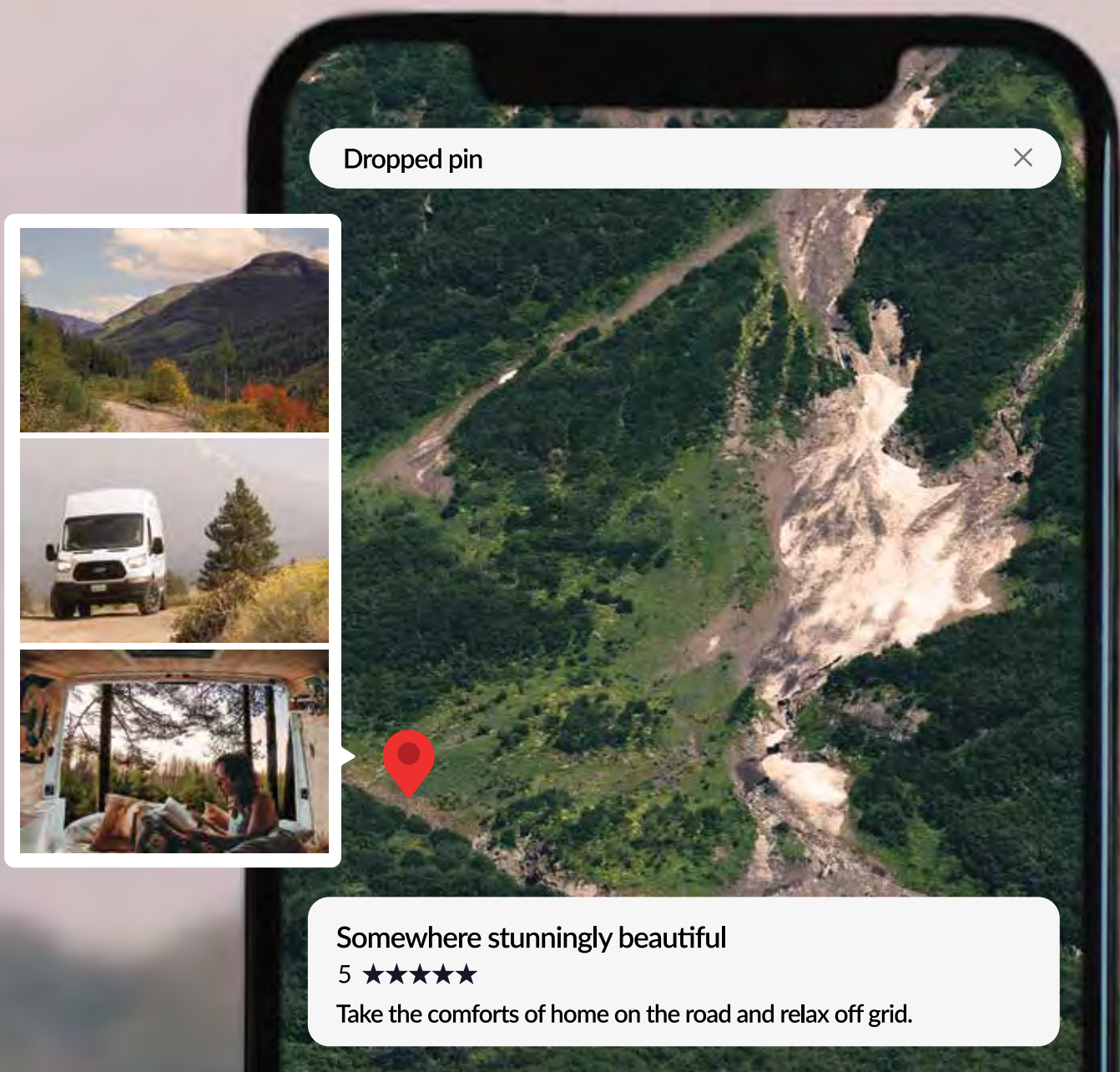
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Mike Pearo



Stacy Lemke

their salespeople also do training with manufacturers reps as well.

In addition to that training, a “product walkaround” is something each salesperson takes turns leading. This involves taking the sales team to a particular model and demonstrating all of its features. Pearo says the salesperson who leads that week’s walkaround will spend usually a week studying to prepare to teach everyone else.

“It’s interactive,” Pearo says. “Someone might jump in if there is anything the person missed, or we often hear someone say ‘Oh, I didn’t know that.’ Then we know ‘boom!’ this training was worth it.”

Hilltop’s finance team has also grown its processes as the company has grown, Pearo says. Every two weeks, they have an all-hands call with finance and sales managers. They go over wins or exciting news, and then try to resolve any problems that have come up.

“We’re making sure we’re all using the same forms and doing the paperwork the same way, completing the paperwork properly so we’re compliant,” Pearo says.

Hilltop works with Vision Management Group and a rep from the company visits Hilltop twice a month to do one-on-one training and review paperwork to make sure everything is squared away.

“Especially on those finance meetings, it’s fun to hear them patting each other on the back,” Pearo says. “Of course, they want to be the best; it’s a competitive nature but no one is keeping knowledge from one another.

“Everyone is in it together and we have different goals, but we do it together as a team,” Pearo continues. “It’s

really cool to see the stores start to work together really well.”

One supportive measure Hilltop has put in place for its customers starting in 2018 has been the sales call-in line and a service line. This team of three employees at Hilltop takes incoming phone calls, live chats and texts, so they can be timely about answering questions.

“It’s worked really well; we needed to do that in service,” Pearo says. “Service writers are dealing with people in front of them, then the phone keeps ringing. By the time you call customers back, they’re frustrated because it’s taken a while.

“The window of time that customers want to hear from someone is shrinking.”

## THE FAMILY’S FUTURE

As for what lies ahead for Hilltop, Pearo says that while they’ve seen a little decline since the height of sales during the pandemic, it hasn’t been substantial.

“There’s still really good activity out there and a lot of buyers out there,” he says.

He mentions that a wide range of products are selling. A year or two ago, dealers couldn’t get enough of the entry-level trailers, he says.

“That’s one segment we are stocked up on and probably have a little more than we need,” Pearo says. “But we are seeing strong fifth wheel sales.”

He adds that the motorized RVs are still in high demand, but the supply is still at a disadvantage because it’s difficult for the manufacturers to get the chassis.

“The used market is very strong—we added a used buyer in place because back in 2020 and 2021, we were so short in inventory, we went to buy some used,” Pearo says. “Especially the motorized product because it’s hard to get new motorized product.”

Pearo confirms that they’ve seen a younger demographic purchasing units—a trend he noticed before the pandemic began.

“We were seeing a trend even before the pandemic, the average age of the RV buyer decreased,” he says, “but then it got even more young once the pandemic occurred—it fast forwarded that age dropping once the pandemic hit.

“The ability to work from home or work from anywhere has been huge. Seeing families who decided to homeschool children, and some neat things where families are taking the RV if they’re going to teach about U.S. history. To be there and see it would be amazing.”

As for working with family, Pearo couldn’t be more positive about it.

“It goes really well, and I have to credit my grandfather and my dad. They did a really good job about preaching how to work with family members and not strain your relationship,” he says. “My grandfather put in place a ‘no spouses allowed’ rule, and that’s something we’ve carried on and I think that helps keep the peace well.

“My father did a really good job teaching us how to work. So, the fact that we’re all hard workers and do our jobs, it really helps. We don’t have big issues because everyone is pitching in and doing their part.” **RVF**



Serious classic campers love old signs, furniture and other fun items that add to the nostalgia.

## CLASSIC IN THE FRONT, Party in the Back

The vintage trailer market is growing in popularity.

By Tony Thacker

*This article originally appeared in RV PRO's sister publication, THE SHOP. We bring this to you as a fun look inside the aftermarket potential for vintage trailers and campers.*

**A**s a kid, I grew up taking family vacations in a trailer. The U.K. can be cold, wet and damp; nevertheless, I have fond memories of those carefree, simple times.

Maybe that's what attracts people of all ages to the burgeoning vintage trailer scene.

Lately I've seen them all over the freeways, but only when I followed a nice 1963 Chevy truck loaded with two-wheelers towing an aluminum Airstream

can to Bonelli Park in California did I discover just how big the scene really is. There were dozens of vintage trailers, and almost as many classic cars and trucks towing them.

### ADD-ON AND GO

The trailers themselves may not offer huge potential for the conventional aftermarket shop as we know it, but there are opportunities. For example, located in San Diego is Southern California Vintage Trailer (SCVT), a shop that can restore your trailer or find you a trailer to have restored. They say,

*by phone, Skype or in person, they'll guide you through the restoration process, from design and spec to build.*

By their nature, trailers are compact, and, like tiny houses, they need careful planning to maximize the use of available space. I examined one trailer that had an open-plan toilet that might be a little too much for people who like their privacy. Hence the need for thoughtful preparation if a total makeover is planned.

SCVT quotes construction budgets from \$3,500 to \$6,000 per linear foot—yes, per foot—making the restoration

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of a 16-foot trailer around \$56,000 to \$96,000—not an unsubstantial amount.

I point this out because there might be businesses out there that have an underutilized shop and/or staff and this could be profitable work, albeit somewhat specialized.

Besides full restoration shops that are located across the country in places as far and wide as Brainerd, Minnesota; Townsend, Montana; and Panama City, Florida; there are also numerous companies that supply trailer components, from aluminum to awnings, solar systems, tires and wheels, plus all the requisite furnishings, fixtures and fittings. I even found Vintage Trailer Gaskets in Walnut, California, that specializes in, well, gaskets and associated products for doors and windows.

There's a boot camp for learning about restoration techniques operated by Caroline and Paul Lacitinola, who also publish Vintage Camper Trailers magazine.

Hand in hand with the trailers goes a requirement for vintage furniture and props to add to the nostalgia. Obviously, these aren't items necessarily distributed through the automotive aftermarket, but occasionally things such as vintage coolers, bicycles including electrics, signage and even furniture might pop up as part of your inventory or could be something easily acquired to make a customer happy. It's all about customer service.



Bob and Peggy Beck use a 1956 Chevrolet wagon to tow their trailer.



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While not always a direct fit, vintage trailers can lead to relationships that bring in new business.



The relaxed vibe of camper life blends well with the classic vehicle market.

We spoke to Greg Dravis, who services this community with new, vintage-inspired signs of various designs.

“Original trailer-related signs are few and far between,” he says, “so the market is quite happy with a new sign, painted or neon or a combination thereof, that looks old.”

## UPFRONT

Back at the park, beyond the actual trailers, I’d estimate that 50% of them were towed by some kind of classic car or truck, and that’s where I think this group offers the aftermarket some potential. As I said earlier, most of these families own multiple vehicles and are, therefore, prime prospects.

Obviously, tow vehicles are all different, so if a shop specializes in one brand, it’s not going to be able to service everybody. For example, well-known West Coast race announcer Bob Beck and wife Peggy use their ’56 Chevy wagon to tow their trailer—a setup that differs from, say, a Dodge pickup truck full of motorcycles.

“The vintage trailer hobby is a continuation of the old car hobby,” says Bob Beck. “Car people are gravitating to the trailers, as it opens up new challenges as well as new friends. Besides, if you sleep in your old trailer, nobody cares. Try that in your car!”

You can see that there’s a market here for any number of modifications

and upgrades to make these vehicles tow-worthy. Everything from hitches and receivers to helper springs, air-bag suspensions and air conditioning. Also, most of them have been hot-rodded to some extent with bigger, hotter engines, transmissions and rear ends.

And, of course, all these vehicles need wheels and, very importantly, tires. In fact, Bob’s ’56 Chevy was highlighted in a Vintage Camper Trailers story about tires and the need to monitor and care for them because of the extra loads on the tow vehicles and that the trailer tires sit, sometimes for months, in one spot and can deteriorate long before the tread wears out.



When you see a vintage trailer, it’s often being towed by a classic or specialty vehicle.

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One aspect of the tow vehicle that definitely needs attention is the brake system. Most cars of the 1950s and '60s had drum brakes. For towing, they'll require a disc brake conversion, preferably vented, that can be enhanced with a power booster, power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering, and possibly a front end swap with all-new suspension components.

That type of package should be easy to sell and install for most reputable shops. Service and service parts such as brakes, plugs, wires, coils, etc. are likewise important aspects of the scene. Drivers might also benefit from extra engine and transmission coolers, as well as electric fans.

Think it through, and there's no end to the list of ways you can help an old vehicle pull an old trailer.

## A COMMERCIAL COMPONENT

A final aspect of the vintage trailer phenomenon is to look beyond the

pleasure-seekers to see the practical use of these old tow-behinds as vending machines.

Companies from mom-and-pops to large corporations have all seen the benefits of an interesting trailer converted into a retail outlet, be it for coffee, food, clothing or furniture. It's another side to the business that typically demands professional conversion, as it would be beyond the skills of many DIYers or wannabes.

Some enterprising people are even parking trailers, particularly Airstreams, on their properties and renting them out as temporary accommodations on Airbnb. That old trailer sitting in a nearby lot could be someone's vacation home.

Vintage trailers are a growing market that you might never have considered as an adjunct to your main business, but if it appeals to you and makes sense, then it's worth investigating. [RV2](#)



Born in England, Tony Thacker is an accredited automotive journalist, author and book publisher, and served as marketing director at the famed SO-CAL Speed Shop.

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# TRAINING FOR THE INDUSTRY'S FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

**Service advisors—and other fixed operations positions—are a key focus of the courses provided at the Mike Molino RV Learning Center.**

BY JENNIFER KING



**T**hey call them “soft skills” and as anyone who uses or has organized training for them knows, “soft skills” are in no way easy.

Soft skills are interpersonal and behavioral skills that help you work well with others, according to Indeed.com, a top job search website. These skills are considered nontechnical and include communication, teamwork, problem-

solving, empathy and more, Indeed says.

These skills have become a top focus for the Mike Molino RV Learning Center, an arm of the RV Dealers Association (RVDA).

As a not-for-profit with a mission to inform and educate industry professionals to “achieve superior performance,” the learning center is a resource for dealers to access publications, certification programs,



Phil Ingrassia



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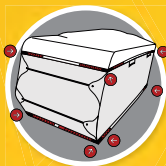


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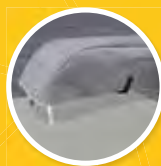
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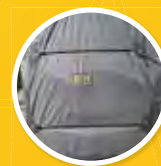
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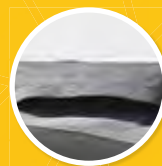
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2021 Society of Certified RV Professionals Convention/Expo scholarship recipients: (l to r) Steven Davis, Lynn Kemp, Chris Roy, Anna Freeman and Denny Holmes.



Karin Van Duyse

person that could increase satisfaction with the dealership.”

Ingrassia says this makes sense—if a customer buys an RV and then comes back in for service, it’s that service advisor who is going to be the customer’s point of contact.

“If they’re happy with the way they do things, and they listen to you and do a competent job, the satisfaction goes up,” he says about the customer.

In addition, there’s an entire team of people who work together with that service advisor to make the customer’s experience top notch.

There are five certifications available for that team: Service Manager, Service Writer/Advisor, Warranty Administrator,



Martin Onken, Bert Alanko and Scott Krennek offered rental education during the 2021 RVDA Convention/Expo.

online learning, live workshops and more. According to the learning center’s website, [rvda.org/rvlearning](http://rvda.org/rvlearning), “the professional development and educational resources offered by the learning center help dealers maintain professionalism and efficiency even as markets change.”

The need to provide training for one

of a dealer’s frontline employees—the service advisor—was the impetus behind a recently launched online course, says Phil Ingrassia, president of RVDA.

“Over the years, the industry was doing research on how the industry could do a better job serving customers,” he says. “On the service side, we found that the service advisor was the No. 1

## 12 SOFT SKILLS

Source: [Indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com)

1. Integrity
2. Dependability
3. Effective communication
4. Open-mindedness
5. Teamwork
6. Creativity
7. Problem-solving
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9. Adaptability
10. Organization
11. Willingness to learn
12. Empathy



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Parts Manager and Parts Specialist.

Mike Molino RV Learning Center Executive Director Karin Van Duyse says they worked with the Ohio State University's Center for Education and Training for Employment in the early 2000s to develop the courses offered for these five fixed operations positions in a typical dealership. Those courses have since been updated by working with top-performing employees, and many have been converted to online courses.

For example, the Parts Specialist course takes about four hours to complete, each module consisting from 15 to 30 minutes. Users can bookmark content as they go, and they will complete several assessments, a quiz and a comprehensive final exam, which is timed. If a user passes with an 80% or higher, they qualify for a certificate of completion for that course.

On the learning center's website, information on "how to prepare" for certification is available, including an explanation that "certification includes a rigorous testing process that ensures dealers their certified staff are knowledgeable in their field according to industry standards, as well as what is displayed in each position's competency profile and form the basis of what is covered on the certification tests."

Ingrassia says it was imperative to bring the courses online so that more people have access—there aren't barriers of travel to prevent people from completing it now. Initially, the learning center held more in-person, regional workshops, but as tools have improved, online has become critical.

"Especially in fixed operations where you're not necessarily turning a wrench, you're doing role-playing or working on

customer interactions, or it's a marketing issue, and that's more amenable for online, so we've been taking advantage of that," he says of the online courses.

"They're ideal for bringing in new hires who have little experience, or for someone with more experience," he says, adding that as important as these positions are for a dealership, this type of training, and even a refresher course for people who've been in the business a while, should be a top priority.

"We hope our dealer principals are big proponents of getting their people certified," Van Duyse says. "The employee satisfaction people get [is a factor], since your boss is encouraging you and paying for you to get trained and be recognized. As you see when you go into dealerships, they'll have the certification plaques on the wall or a photo of the technician holding the certificate.

"It's all very important, and it's another opportunity for how you can encourage your people, your employees, and support the industry."

Ingrassia agrees, adding that people who enter the RV industry want to feel there's a career path there for them.

"When you're able to become certified by a national body, there's a certain amount of satisfaction in the job," he says. "Service advisors, they really deserve to get that kind of training; they're the front-facing people at the dealership. They have to deal with all kinds of situations, when people are on vacation or waiting for a part ... that can be a very stressful situation at times.

"You want to train your people to not only handle that customer and set expectations and provide a good experience, but for the service writer

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**"THERE'S THE HUMAN ASPECT THERE, MAKING THEM FEEL EQUIPPED SO SOMEONE ISN'T SO STRESSED OUT."**

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themselves, so they feel like they can handle whatever comes at them and they'll just do a better job.

"There's the idea that certified people will do a better job, be more efficient," Ingrassia continues, "but there's also the human aspect there, making them feel equipped so someone isn't so stressed out."

Part of the service advisor training, in addition to the technicians, is reducing RECT, or Repair Event Cycle Time.

"If you have the greatest service advisor but the technicians aren't trained—everyone has a part of that whole RECT time," Ingrassia says.

The Mike Molino RV Learning Center offers workshops to bring all the departments together to work as a team.

"The most successful dealerships that we've seen are really dealerships that offer a full line—they're strong in sales and fix operations and repair coordination," he says. "It's not an easy job to keep those parts running smoothly.

"The full-service dealerships that really elevate sales and fixed operations and F&I do the best."

Van Duyse adds that even before the rush of customers over the last two years, the dealerships that performed the best paid attention to service—dealerships that neglect this will come from behind, she said. **RV2**

## EXAMPLES OF COURSE OFFERINGS

### Parts Specialist

- Store merchandising
- Inventory management
- Online and over-the-counter sales
- Seasonal promotions
- Marketing parts and accessories

### Service Writer/Advisor

- Improving customer satisfaction and community relations
- Organizing and managing appointments and workflow
- Generating additional services and revenue
- Coordinating with technicians and other departments
- Building trust and rapport

In addition to these fixed operations courses, Karin Van Duyse and her team develop the workshops available at the RVDA Convention/Expo, which will take place Nov. 7-11 in Las Vegas, Nevada. For more information about what will be offered, turn to page 55 or visit [rvda.org/convention](http://rvda.org/convention).

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The convention/expo brings together dealers, manufacturers, suppliers, and RV industry business partners for the premier dealer education and networking event of the year. For 2022, the RVDA Convention/Expo Committee and staff are working to provide a diverse education program that will have content segmented based on dealership size, management structure, and revenue in addition to focusing on things dealers have in common. Here are just a few of the topics that will be offered this year:

#### Parts & Service

- How top performing service departments improve RECT - Repair Event Cycle Time
- Text messaging
- How to sell parts & accessories online
- Unconventional hiring strategies
- Turning an RV buyer into a lifetime advocate of the dealership

#### Digital Marketing

- Content marketing and online reviews
- Digital audits
- Cross-platform marketing communications
- Leveraging Go RVing digital assets
- Working with digital marketing vendors

#### Dealer/GM (Leadership, Management)

- New employee orientation and onboarding
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- Economic outlook for talent

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- Legal considerations regarding dealer warranty reimbursement
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- Mediation

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# DEALING WITH OSHA

More inspections and  
greater citations ahead.

By Phillip M. Perry

**E**mployers trying to avoid costly Occupational Safety and Health Administration citations are facing new challenges in the form of heightened enforcement activity and greater liability for workplace COVID-19 infections.

To lessen their exposure, businesses are retooling their operating environments to ensure compliance with state and federal standards. Here's a look at where some experts expect the agency to focus its attention in the coming months.

## COVID-19 RECOMMENDATIONS

OSHA has issued guidance for the

mitigation of the spread of COVID-19 in all workplaces. The intention is to reduce the chances of contracting COVID-19 by employees who are unvaccinated or otherwise at risk of infection because of conditions such as a prior transplant, or prolonged use of corticosteroids or other immune-weakening medications.

As a general rule, OSHA does not suggest employers take steps to protect fully vaccinated people, unless other federal or local laws apply. For unvaccinated or at-risk workers, OSHA recommendations include the following:

- Separating from the workplace all infected people, all people experiencing COVID symptoms, and any unvaccinated people who have had close contact with someone with COVID-19
- Implementing physical distancing
- Maintaining ventilation systems
- Properly using face coverings or personal protective equipment (PPE)

Recently OSHA added the following two recommendations:

- Fully vaccinated people should wear masks to protect the unvaccinated in

# RVDA EXPO/CONVENTION

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- areas of high community transmission
- Fully vaccinated people who have close contact with people with the coronavirus should wear masks for up to 14 days unless they have a negative coronavirus test at least three to five days after such contact

While OSHA observers have long expected the agency to issue regulations for workplace disease mitigation in the form of a so-called Emergency Temporary Standard (ETS), the above guidance is only advisory in nature and, in the words of the agency, “creates no new legal obligations.”

(Early in 2022, the Supreme Court struck down OSHA’s vaccine-or-test mandate for employers with more than 100 workers, while letting stand a similar mandate for health care facilities. Employers in all industries must continue to comply with pre-existing mandatory OSHA standards.)

Observers see the recent OSHA activity as indicative of a more robust regulatory fervor in general.

“I think you’re going to see much more aggressive OSHA enforcement under the Biden administration,” says former OSHA head Edwin G. Foulke Jr., now a partner in the Atlanta office of Fisher & Phillips (fisherphillips.com).

The new federal posture may also include a larger OSHA oversight staff.

“The Biden administration says it wants to double the number of inspectors,” says William K. Principe, partner in the Atlanta office of Constangy, Brooks, Smith & Prophete (constangy.com). “While we don’t know if they will hire that many, it’s reasonable to assume there will be some increase. During the last administration vacancies weren’t always filled, so OSHA ended up being below the number of federal inspectors that had existed for a very long time.”

#### MORE INSPECTIONS

More inspectors mean more boots on the ground. OSHA observers expect an increase in the rate of inspections, along with more citations and higher penalties.

The agency is expected to pay increasing attention to building sites.

“Construction falls are among the most frequent causes of workplace injuries or fatalities,” says Mark D. Norton, director

of Norton Safety Services in Tucson, Arizona. “Because of that, OSHA tends to focus inspection activity on that area.”

Observers cite an influx of new workers as a key reason for the spike in accidents.

“In the economic downturn of 2007 and 2008, many employees left the construction industry,” Norton says. “When the economy rebounded, people were hired without the same level of experience and knowledge. Fewer trained workers and an increasing demand for construction is a recipe for more accidents.”

OSHA is also taking greater interest in machine shops, another environment with high accident rates, according to Gary Heppner, a California-based independent OSHA safety advisor (riskmanagementaudits.com).

Here COVID-19 is having an effect. Workers, long required to wear safety glasses while using drill presses or hand drills, are now expected to add face shields and maintain appropriate distances from others in locations with unvaccinated or at-risk workers. That can be difficult in restricted environments where people are working in close quarters.

Any resulting laxity in safety considerations, however, can spark illnesses and OSHA citations.

#### OSHA RULES

Most employers want their workers to be safe and healthy. And, given the higher OSHA profile, businesses will be making a special effort to meet state and federal standards.

That means conforming to the General Duty Clause of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, requiring workplaces to be “free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to employees.”

While the imprecise nature of the clause allows leeway for employers to account for varying local conditions, it also leaves plenty of room for inspectors to find unexpected violations.

“One thing I think you’re going to see during the Biden administration is a focus on musculoskeletal disorders (ergonomics, repetitive motions, lifting) and combustible dust,” Foulke adds.

Employer organizations will likely litigate any onerous OSHA rules.

“Trade associations have been

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## CONTROLLING THE OSHA INSPECTION

While OSHA has the right to conduct inspections of business premises, employers need to know and exert their own rights.

“Just because a person has a government badge, that doesn’t mean they get to do whatever they want,” says former OSHA head Edwin G. Foulke Jr., now a partner in the Atlanta office of Fisher & Phillips.

During an opening conference with inspectors, Foulke suggests employers set out guidelines such as the following:

- At least one management person needs to be present when OSHA inspectors visit the worksite
- One other management-level person must be present when OSHA inspectors interview any supervisor or manager
- The employer must be allowed to bring in their own industrial hygienist, as well as be present if OSHA does any kind of monitoring of air or noise

During their inspections, OSHA representatives will look for the following evidence of violations:

- There was a hazardous condition
- The hazard was recognized
- The hazard was causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm
- There was a feasible method to correct the hazard

Finally, businesses should treat OSHA inspectors with respect while not offering more data than the law requires.

“Some employers think that if they tell OSHA everything they know and they give every document they have, that somehow that’s going to make things better,” Foulke says. “It never does.”

successful in the past in getting injunctions against OSHA regulations deemed outside the agency’s jurisdiction or overly burdensome,” notes Douglas E. Witte, who represents businesses in labor and employment law matters at Madison, Wisconsin-based Boardman & Clark (boardmanclark.com). “Sometimes the regulations are modified, or simply delayed for a year or longer.”

## WORK-RELATED ILLNESS

If an employee comes down with COVID-19 and misses work time or goes to the hospital, is the illness recordable as work-related? The answer is often murky.

“Up until now, OSHA has not been pushing too hard on employers who claim COVID-19 infections occurred outside the workplace,” Witte says.

Employers have been operating under fairly liberal standards, thanks to OSHA guidance issued in the spring of 2020 that allowed COVID-19 illnesses to be categorized as not work-related if an alternative explanation could account for the infections.

Unfortunately, the term *alternative explanation* is vague, and OSHA does not provide examples.

“The guidance is being interpreted, by some, as indicating that if the employer can point to some exposure away from the workplace, then the case can be deemed not work-related,” Principe says.

Some take the position that, because COVID-19 is spread everywhere, an infection is not work-related unless the employee has commuted in their own car, stayed in their own house and not gone to a grocery store or interacted with the public.

That kind of liberal interpretation, though, skirts the edge of justice.

“I think you need more concrete evidence that the employee was exposed to an infected person away from work,” Principe cautions. “Perhaps their spouse, children or people they socialized with have COVID-19, or perhaps they attended a super-spreader event.”

Faulty categorizations can be costly.

“OSHA issues citations to employers who fail to properly record or report cases,” Principe says. “The agency is often tipped off by whistleblowers, or

they get word of infections through hospitals or public health departments.”

Penalties for serious violations start at \$13,653, although the amount can be reduced with good faith history. Citations for willful or repeated issues start at \$136,532.

Certainly, there is no need to record cases that are not work-related. While an employer may do so out of fear of a citation, being too inclusive can backfire.

“Over-reporting can spark an OSHA inspection when the entries from an employer’s logs are entered on their 300A Summaries,” Foulke says. “Those are available for review not only to OSHA but also to plaintiff’s lawyers and community activists like Common Cause. Skewed numbers can impact a business’s ability to get future work from clients.”

So, how about those cases that fall into a gray area?

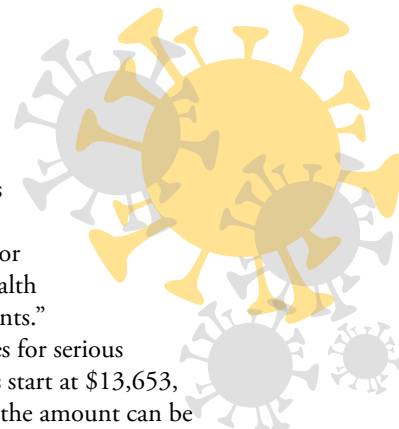
“My advice to employers would be that in the case of doubt, record or report the event,” Principe says. “You can always explain the facts, saying that you don’t believe it is work-related for the following reasons, but that you are including the case out of an abundance of caution. This will protect you from a citation.”

Many OSHA observers believe the Biden administration will tighten criteria, determining more infections occurred in the business environment. There may be a return to earlier CDC guidance, which said an illness is work-related if the employee had been within six feet of another COVID-19-infected worker for at least 15 minutes.

“The agency may start tracking infections down to employer facilities if they can do so and support the change by claiming they are trying to halt the spread of COVID-19,” Principe notes.

## FINDING HELP

While the prospect of an OSHA inspection and citations can disturb any business owner, the federal agency can



## OSHA WORKPLACE GUIDELINES FOR COVID-19

OSHA suggests a multilayered approach to the protection of workers who are either unvaccinated or otherwise at risk of COVID-19 infection. Here are some suggestions:

- Grant paid time off for employees to get vaccinated
- Instruct any workers who are infected, unvaccinated workers who have had close contact with someone who tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, and all workers with COVID-19 symptoms to stay home from work
- Implement physical distancing for unvaccinated and at-risk workers in all communal work areas
- Provide unvaccinated and otherwise at-risk workers with face coverings or surgical masks, unless their work task requires a respirator or other PPE
- Educate and train workers on your COVID-19 policies and procedures using accessible formats and in a language they understand
- Suggest that unvaccinated customers, visitors or guests wear face coverings
- Maintain ventilation systems
- Perform routine cleaning and disinfection
- Record and report COVID-19 infections and deaths
- Implement protections from

retaliation and set up an anonymous process for workers to voice concerns about COVID-19-related hazards

OSHA has provided additional guidance for unvaccinated or at-risk workers who are likely to be in prolonged, close contact with other workers or the public. Employers may access the complete guidelines in the document “Protecting Workers: Guidance on Mitigating and Preventing the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace,” accessible at [osha.gov/coronavirus/safework](https://www.osha-slc.gov/coronavirus/safework).

also be helpful.

“Many businesses believe that every interaction with OSHA is negative,” Norton says. “They don’t realize that OSHA also provides consultative services at both the federal and state levels.”

At the employer’s request, Norton says, OSHA will inspect the workplace for problem areas. While there is no charge for the service, the employer has to agree to fix whatever OSHA finds.

“It’s all confidential, so nothing uncovered by the inspectors gets shared with the compliance side.”

That proactive approach can prevent costly citations down the road.

“It’s very important to take the right steps to reduce the risk of infection in the workplace,” Principe says. “This will keep employees from getting sick and the employer out of trouble. I encourage businesses to track the OSHA and CDC websites on a regular basis. Know what the recommendations are. Then, if OSHA shows up at the door, everything will be in order.” **RVF**

New York-based journalist Phillip M. Perry publishes widely in the fields of business management and law.

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# Aftermarket Conference



## *Returns to Texas*

A large, shiny gold trophy is positioned on the left side of the page, partially cut off by the edge.

Highlights include the annual awards luncheon and a keynote session on direct-to-consumer marketing.

A large, shiny gold trophy is positioned on the right side of the page, partially cut off by the edge.

BY TONY KINDELSPIRE

**S**an Antonio, Texas, was the site this August for the **51st annual RV Industry Association (RVIA) Aftermarket Conference**, an annual gathering held to support a great parts and accessories purchasing experience for consumers, which will ultimately benefit and improve the RV aftermarket supply chain.



The 2022 Distributor of the Year award was given to NTP-STAG.

**A**ttendance was strong at this year's event, as 2021 was subjected to the lingering after-effects of the pandemic and the 2020 conference was forced to go virtual. According to RVIA, this year's gathering featured some 2,000 individual meetings between attendees in what resembled a speed-dating format. Aftermarket suppliers, distributors, manufacturer's reps, state associations, industry associations and RV industry media all attend the conference, which for many is one of their most important business weeks of the year.

Aside from deal-making and the traditional golf outing, this year's event



Susan Carpenter (L) accepts the Chairman's Award with Steering Committee Chair John Tinghitella of RV Designer.

also featured a keynote presentation by John Jantsch, a marketing consultant and best-selling author of "Duct Tape Marketing" and three other titles, who also moderated an afternoon workshop on direct-to-consumer marketing.

There was also a session co-hosted by Garry Enyart, former director of RV business with Cummins, and Curt Hemmeler,



Darrell Higgins of Dura Faucet accepts the Supplier of the Year award from John Hawkins of BAL (L) and Bob Brammer of Stromberg Carlson.

executive director of the RV Technical Institute. The pair talked about Repair Event Cycle Time (RECT) and the ongoing efforts to get more technicians trained in RV repair. The pair highlighted the key role that aftermarket parts and accessories can play in delivering a positive experience for the RV owner needing a repair or upgrade.

As always, a highlight of the annual gathering is the RV Aftermarket Awards, recognizing outstanding individuals, suppliers, distributors, rep groups and products. This year, the conference debuted two new awards: one recognizing the Rep Group of the Year and a second special award from the Aftermarket Committee Chair. The event was emceed by Bob Brammer of Stromberg Carlson and John Hawkins of BAL.

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This year's Lifetime Achievement Award went to Donna Martin of NTP-STAG.

Award winners include:

- Chairman's Award: **Susan Carpenter**
- Lifetime Achievement Award: **Donna Martin** of NTP-STAG
- Supplier of the Year: **Dura Faucet**
- Product of the Year: **Pace International** for its TravlFi Journey1 LTE Mobile Hotspot



The 2022 Product of the Year award went to Pace International for its TravlFi Journey1 LTE Mobile Hotspot.

- Distributor of the Year: **NTP-STAG**
- Rep Group of the Year: **Tom Manning & Associates**

According to the RV Industry Association, the RV aftermarket contributes 3,187 jobs and more than \$750 million in total economic output on a yearly basis. For information on the

2023 RV Aftermarket Conference, which will be held Aug. 7-10 in San Diego, California, visit [rvia.org](http://rvia.org) in coming months. RVIA membership is required to attend. [RVIA](http://rvia.org)



The Rep Group of the Year award was won by Tom Manning & Associates.

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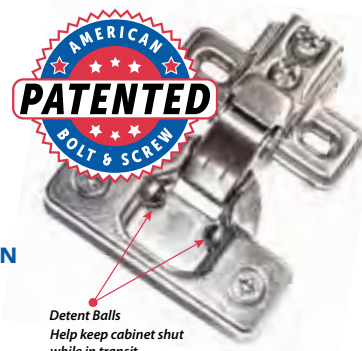


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# THE DEALER DYNASTY

The upcoming RVDA Convention/Expo has dealers' eyes on Las Vegas for a week of expanded training, education and networking, along with the chance to take home new products, services and insight.

BY JORDAN BENSCHOP

**T**his November, RV dealers will have a chance to experience the royal treatment: a week of training and networking opportunities at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.

Following a successful return of its in-person convention/expo last year, the RV Dealers Association (RVDA) has expanded the goal of its annual event to provide "exceptional" education experiences to positively influence the industry's dealer network.

Leadership training, improving Repair Event Cycle Times (RECT), vendor-specific education and a sold-out exhibit hall are just a few things on the menu for the 2022 RVDA Convention/Expo.

"The No. 1 reason attendees said they attended the convention last year was 'networking.' That's not a surprise based on how long it had been since we were all able to get together as an industry, due to the pandemic," said Mike Pearo, RVDA's chairman of the board, on the association's website. "It also shows that, while we continue to value education, it's the personal experiences we have during the event that make the convention such a valuable part of what RVDA provides to members and the industry."

**Nov. 7 - 11, 2022**

**Caesars Palace**

**Las Vegas, Nevada**



The association touts its event as an opportunity for companies to connect with top motorhome and travel trailer dealers across North America. Getting ideas to improve business was the reason 40% of dealers said they attend the expo, RVDA reported, while 20% said seeing new products and services was high incentive.

"The RVDA board recognizes that not everyone attends the convention for the same reason. This revised plan sets a path for the convention to evolve by providing segmented content based on dealership size, management structure and revenue, in addition to focusing on things dealers have in common," Pearo said on RVDA's website.

As inventory levels normalize and an anticipated slowdown settles in, the RV marketplace continues to evolve post-pandemic. Being fearless in the face of change at work is essential, and the reason why RVDA chose Molly Fletcher—an entrepreneur, speaker and author—as this year's keynote speaker.

Her talk during the convention's opening session will kick off the week by addressing how to overcome an obstacle to success: fear.

In addition to the event's education tracks and Vendor Training +Plus sessions, a sold-out exhibit hall will give attendees the chance to find new products and services.

"The convention is also one of the best places to reconnect with existing business partners and find new ones," Pearo said on RVDA's website. "As our dealerships grow and get more complicated, so do the systems we use to run our businesses. The convention offers an opportunity to take a deeper dive into education that helps our employees get the most out of vendor relationships."

The 2022 RVDA Convention/Expo is slated for Nov. 7-11 at Caesars Palace. For more information, and to view the tentative schedule of events at 2022 Schedule at a Glance, visit [rvda.org](http://rvda.org). [RV](#)



Above: Representatives from marketing agency Own the Open Road meet with dealers on the expo floor in 2021.

Right: RV PRO's 40 Under 40' honorees Kristina Shrider (L) and Monika Geraci receive awards as part of the Class of 2021.



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# The Class of 2022



RV PRO is thrilled to return with its annual **40 Under 40 awards** event during the RVDA Con/Expo. Scheduled for **7 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 8**, our publication will spotlight the industry's up-and-coming leaders across all RV market segments. The Class of 2022 will be recognized among nominators, colleagues, loved ones and 40 Under 40 alumni for their professional success and influence in an ever-changing RV industry. This event is invite-only for chosen honorees and company representatives.

## Must-Know Info

Numerous workshops will be offered at the Con/Expo to keep dealers prepared and prosperous.

Here's a sneak peek:

- **John Spader**, RV business instructor and 20 Group facilitator, will examine the post-COVID world with a workshop addressing practices dealers should scrap versus restore.
- **Pete Smith**, personal and professional development coach, will talk challenges every manager will encounter and how to have strategic conversations during a Gulf Stream-sponsored workshop limited to 50 dealer attendees.
- Professional trainer **Peter Chafetz** of Protective Asset Protection will present sessions on F&I and to help sales staff build rapport and communication with customers.
- Veteran RV industry trainer and consultant **David Spader** will present a workshop and super session addressing the transition from frontline employee to management in one's career.
- Professional speaker and customer experience consultant **Theresa Syer** will offer multiple sessions about how customer-centric companies get employees in all locations to consistently deliver exceptional customer experiences.
- Investment strategist **John Augustine** will review the changing nature of global markets as part of the dealer/GM track.
- Renowned marketing and advertising expert **Tanya Miller**, president of Secret Weapon Media Agency, will present two workshops as part of the digital marketing track.
- And many more!



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Special Product Focus

# Business Services

Running a successful dealership means evolving with the industry itself. Fortunately, there are plenty of business solutions that help dealers increase efficiency and profitability in today's market. From dealer management systems and financial solutions to digital merchandising and computer software, this month's product spotlight features something for every RV dealer's business needs.

For more information on the products in this section, type the website address that appears below a respective product listing into your web browser. Viewers of the magazine's digital edition can click on any listing to be taken to the respective company's website.

## Protective

### F&I SOLUTIONS

Protective Asset Protection, Chesterfield, Missouri, presents its F&I products and solutions focused on enhancing dealer profitability and customer satisfaction. The company serves thousands of U.S. dealerships with F&I products, training, dealer participation programs and technology. This year, the company is celebrating its 30-year anniversary as the exclusively endorsed service contract provider of the RV Dealers Association.

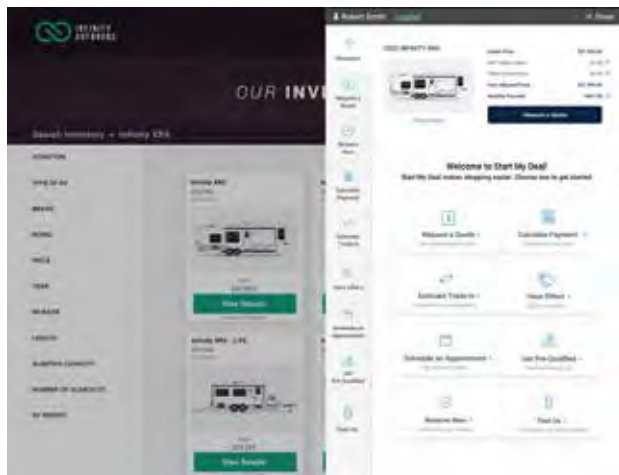
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### TIRE AND WHEEL SERVICE CONTRACT

American Guardian Warranty Services (AGWS), Warrenville, Illinois, presents the Compass RV Tire & Wheel for motorhomes and trailers. The Compass RV Tire & Wheel Motorhome and Trailer Vehicle Service Contract covers motorhomes and towables including single-axle, double-axle, multi-axle, new and used vehicles.

[agws.com/extended-warranty-service-contracts/rv/rv-t-w-mh-tow](http://agws.com/extended-warranty-service-contracts/rv/rv-t-w-mh-tow)





## DIGITAL RETAILING SOLUTION

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## RV ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE

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[partner.coach-net.com](http://partner.coach-net.com)



## DEALER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Integrated Dealer Systems (IDS), Raleigh, North Carolina, is the leading provider of complete software solutions for RV, marine and trailer dealerships. Trusted by 1,100-plus dealers, IDS says it has set the standard for technological innovation and solving dealer challenges since 1987. IDS says it is not just a dealer management system, it's an ecosystem of business intelligence, dedicated professionals, strong industry partnerships and a passion for helping dealers.

[ids-astra.com](http://ids-astra.com)



## RENTAL INSURANCE

MBA Insurance, Scottsdale, Arizona, provides RV and powersports rental insurance in all 50 states. MBA has insured dealer's RV rental operations for 42 years. MBA's policy covers the dealer, the renter and the vehicle, and offers a wide variety of rental insurance coverage options given that "one size" may not fit all. The agency offers a broad range of liability and deductible options along with seasonal rating to help keep costs down.

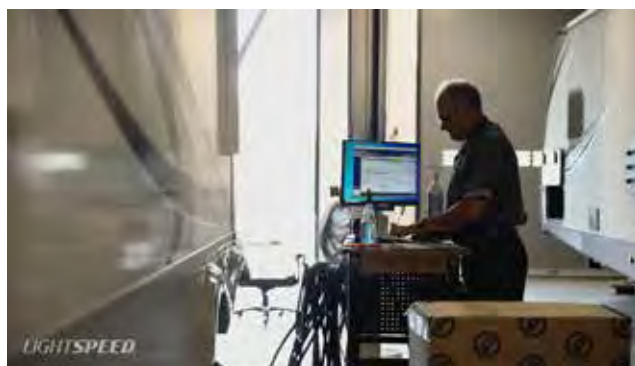
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Lightspeed, Salt Lake City, Utah, offers the LightspeedEVO, built to help manage RV dealership profitably by tracking and storing data from every department, then delivering information that will help make strategic decisions. With integrated departments, user-friendly interfaces and mobile functionality, LightspeedEVO empowers users to find new revenue opportunities, eliminate unnecessary costs and bring more customers into the dealership.

[lightspeeddms.com](https://lightspeeddms.com)



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## RV DEALER NETWORKING PLATFORM

RVEM Mastermind, Orlando, Florida, offers RV industry-exclusive networking. As a peer-to-peer network exclusively for RV dealers and their teams, RVEM helps transform the lives of those who transform the industry. The organization is a support network of like-minded leaders throughout the U.S. and Canada. The company says it helps dealers achieve their full potential through business/life-enhancing connections, shared experiences and collaborative learning.

[rvemastermind.com](https://rvemastermind.com)



## SERVICE AND PARTS TRAINING

DealerPRO RV Training, Columbus, Ohio, presents its Service and Parts Training. The company has the largest and most experienced RV service and parts training company in the U.S. and Canada, founded by former RV dealer Don Reed. The company's training is designed for advisors, service and parts managers and all fixed operations personnel who want to achieve higher technician productivity, better customer service and increased gross profits. They provide dealership training across the U.S. and Canada, quarterly workshops for advisors and managers at the Training Center in Columbus and interactive, online training 24/7 from any device.

[rvdealerprotraining.com](http://rvdealerprotraining.com)



## TRADE-IN VALUE WEB TOOL

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## CLOUD-BASED RV DEALER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

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[cirrussolutions.com](http://cirrussolutions.com)



## MANUFACTURER REPRESENTATIVES

RVLI, Peachtree City, Georgia, is a national manufacturer representative agency and partner to 12 leading brands serving the RV market. The company's sales specialists cover regions throughout the U.S. and Canada, calling on distributors, dealers and retailers. RVLI's core principles are rooted in the tradition of routine face-to-face connections, product training and marketing support.

[rvli.com](http://rvli.com)



## RV SERVICE CONTRACTS

United States Warranty Corporation (USWC), Cleveland, Ohio, offers an expansive range of coverage at affordable rates on new and used RVs, powersport vehicles and marine watercrafts, with no minimum quotas. USWC goes back 20 model years and now serves dealerships in Ontario, Canada. The Eagle Infinity-Timeless Protection Plan for new units features no expiration date and no expiration mileage. USWC offers a menu selling platform and unique exclusionary contracts with 24/7 claims.

[uswceagle.com](http://uswceagle.com)



## INSURANCE, INCOME DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS, F&I TRAINING SOLUTIONS AND MORE

Diversified Insurance Management, Plano, Texas, specializes in the RV industry, providing proven dealership solutions since 1981. Diversified's capabilities range from custom business insurance like open lot, garage and package policies; to F&I programs such as reinsurance, service contracts and GAP; to F&I performance development and training solutions. Plus, as a Higginbotham partner, the company offers a full menu of EE benefits, financial services and HR capabilities. All backed by the company's "Day Two Services."

[higginbotham.net](http://higginbotham.net)



## SALES AND MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Sobel University, Tacoma, Washington, has provided RV-specific sales training for more than 65,000 students at more than 500 RV dealerships across the U.S. and Canada since 1991. The university offers more than 300 courses online, webinars monthly and quarterly, support materials to facilitate ongoing learning and one-on-one tutoring. Sobel's bestselling, week-long Comprehensive Sales Course is now offered nine times a year in Tacoma, Atlanta and online. Courses are designed to help salespeople to stay current and relevant in the industry.

[sobeluniversity.com](http://sobeluniversity.com)



## Medallion BANK

### CONSUMER FINANCING

Medallion Bank, Salt Lake City, Utah, is a market leader in the nonprime lending space. The company often finances credit-challenged customers that other lenders won't. People have unexpected events in their lives, and the company specializes in financing fun when those events are in the past. With its fast, friendly and focused service, Medallion Bank can help recreation dealers get customers approved and the deals done.

[medallionbank.com](http://medallionbank.com)



## OnTarget<sup>®</sup>

Digital Services, LLC

### DIGITAL MARKETING SOLUTIONS

OnTarget Digital Services, Canyon Lake, California, offers full-service digital marketing solutions for RV dealerships, parts and service centers, parts and accessory retailers, business service providers, campgrounds and more. OnTarget's reputation management solution includes the Send A Survey mobile app. OnTarget also provides pay-per-click advertising, social media management, manufacturer's survey customer follow-up, website design and consultation, graphic and logo design, email marketing and point-of-sale printed materials.

[ontargetdigitalservices.com](http://ontargetdigitalservices.com)



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## REINSURANCE AND F&I

Portfolio, Lake Forest, California, offers its reinsurance, which it says helps America's RV dealers build personal wealth while maximizing F&I production. Dealers own their reinsurance company and 100% of the underwriting profits and investment income it generates. Portfolio says it forms and manages a dealer's reinsurance company in exchange for fully disclosed fees and keeps dealers informed with industry-leading reporting and support, all backed by a full lineup of customizable RV protection products.

[portfolioreinsurance.com](http://portfolioreinsurance.com)



## 360 WALK-AROUNDS AND DIGITAL MERCHANDISING

Impel (formerly SpinCar), New York, New York, presents its 360 WalkArrounds and digital merchandising. The company says its industry-leading digital merchandising platform turns online RV shoppers into buyers.

[impel.io/specialty-retailers](http://impel.io/specialty-retailers)



## COMPLIANCE AND RISK SOLUTIONS

Better Vantage Point, Norfolk, Virginia, presents its compliance and risk solutions services. The company's expertise includes areas such as dealership disputes, compliance audit and action, claims and risk mitigation. Better Vantage Point's lead consultant and founder Tom Kline brings more than 30 years of experience in the auto and RV industry to the company's services.

[bettervantagepoint.com](http://bettervantagepoint.com)



## SUPPLIER EDUCATION AND MERCHANDISING

ARC Representation, Newberry, Florida, assists dealers to make more money in their parts departments, and suppliers to place more product in the market. They do this through merchandising, education and representing the highest quality products in the industry. Check out the company's website for more information on how ARC Representation can help make more money.

[arcrepresentation.com](http://arcrepresentation.com)

# RV Partfinder



## DISTRIBUTOR WHOLESALE RV PARTS CATALOG

RV Partfinder, Redding, California, presents an easy-to-use web application that enables quick cross-reference of RV parts from distributor warehouses. It also includes appliance breakdowns, schematics and an extensive document library with interactive images and notes. RV Partfinder also provides more than 6,400 owner manuals, troubleshooting and installation guides. Proven to be an essential tool for parts and service personnel, technicians and retail stores, RV Partfinder is used throughout the industry by RV businesses, mobile technicians, distributors and suppliers.

[rvpartfinder.com](http://rvpartfinder.com)



## MANUFACTURERS' REPRESENTATIVES

Tom Manning & Associates, Coldwater, Michigan, employs 16 individuals who have served more than 340 years of expertise directly related to the RV and manufactured housing industries, including both OEM and aftermarket accounts. All accounts are routinely serviced on a national level, providing sales training as well as technical education seminars for key retailers throughout the territories on a regular basis. Tom Manning & Associates was awarded RVIA's Representative of the Year award.

[rvrep.com](http://rvrep.com)



## DEALER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM SOFTWARE

Motility Software Solutions, Maitland, Florida, offers its MotilityAnywhere, which it says empowers dealers of all sizes to drive better insights and achieve peak performance from virtually anywhere. Motility is committed to unique customer challenges for a variety of dealer functions including CRM, finance and insurance, parts and service, unit inventory, rental, accounting and reporting.

[motilitysoftware.com/products/motilityanywhere](http://motilitysoftware.com/products/motilityanywhere)

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# Q&A With Wells Fargo's Chad Lyon

With more than a year under his belt, the leader of Wells Fargo's RV commercial lending business discusses what's happening now and what lies ahead for the RV industry.

BY RONNIE WENDT



**C**had Lyon has more than a year under his belt as the commercial leader of Wells Fargo's RV and marine division. In this role, he has his finger on the pulse of an industry hit by waves of change.

Though storms rage across the industry, the 28-year commercial lending expert pins his hopes on a sunny future. He stresses the RV industry continues to grow and that he expects this trend to continue. The

pandemic, he says, has permanently reshaped how people travel and pushed more people into full-time and recreational RVing.

RV PRO caught up with Lyon to gather his views on the state of the industry and what lies ahead.

## **What is the current state of the RV industry?**

**LYON:** In our customer base, we saw a significant increase in the dollar standing of our loans. As the supply

chain righted itself, shipments picked up in the fourth quarter of 2021 and in the first quarter of 2022. The units being shipped were at a higher price point than historically. The number of units we're financing are below pre-COVID levels, but the dollars exceed it. There are some expensive units going to dealerships. We also started to see principal balances grow and inventories ship into camping selling season, where typically we would see balances start to fall off. Seasonally, shipments

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continued to be strong. Inventory in terms of units is in a good spot. The market continues to grow. But dealers and manufacturers have slowed ordering and shipments. Our volume has fallen over the last two months. We're seeing a material retrenchment in shipments. We also are seeing improvement in our liquidation. We think we may see better retail numbers over the next month on the SSI report. We're seeing improvement, and we're getting paid up. The industry had about seven weeks of inventory in Q2. Now there is about 23 weeks of inventory. We're close to normalized units, but dealers are making sure they do not return to pre-COVID levels. They're finding a healthy balance.



**Do you think transaction prices will return to normal as things normalize?**

**LYON:** The average transaction price is up 20% to 30% on invoices. But I don't think prices will come down. We're in a higher price point environment. But the rate of change will stop. I'm not expecting further increases. There will be some retrenching in pricing units. But overall, price points will remain sustainably higher. We also will see a return of incentives. But I don't see any long-term repricing that will bring average unit price back toward 2019 levels. Prices are permanently higher.

**With limited inventory, we saw dealers shift to selling into the pipeline and keeping fewer RVs on their lots. With availability returning to normal levels,**

**will dealer floorplans also return to previous levels?**

**LYON:** No, they will be somewhere in between. The industry requires a certain amount of inventory and floorplan availability on different models. This important part of the selling cycle will not change. But dealers will desire more efficiency and fewer units. They will want a good breadth of inventory, but not at pre-pandemic levels. Dealers have realized they operate better with less inventory. There is less discounting and greater efficiencies. They will want to retain that.

**What are you seeing for interest rates on floorplan financing compared to a year ago?**

**LYON:** The Federal Reserve fights inflation by raising the prime interest

rate. It's already up 2.25 basis points, year over year. With a higher interest rate, the cost of financing is increasing. Dealers are carrying more inventories than they did a year ago. It's a double hit from a profitability standpoint. Unfortunately, we're going to have higher interest rates for a period of time.

**How will higher interest rates affect floorplan financing?**

**LYON:** It will be an additional carrying cost to the dealers. But floorplan financing is also a typical cost of business. Retail financing is interesting, however. We've seen long-term rates go up. But they're still at a historically low number. I don't think consumers will be as sensitive to interest rate increases. But just as we have seen with housing, as interest rates go up, housing loans go down. It will be a factor. But I don't think it will be as big a factor as you would expect. We forecast short-term and long-term interest rates will come down slightly. That will help the retail side.

**What risks are there before dealers as they face off against higher interest rates, inflationary pressures, inventory challenges and more?**

**LYON:** There is a lot of uncertainty. I've never had more demand for economic insights than I have had over the last 12 months. Every customer I have is asking what Wells Fargo sees coming. There are a lot of questions around economic conditions. But dealers have had a strong, two-year run. Sales were



up. Demand for products was up. Margins were up. They generated a lot of cash over the last couple of years. Even as unit sales slide, they will be OK. Unit sales are down about 20% this year, but revenue is only down about 7%. Dealer earnings are materially better than in 2017, 2018 and 2019, which were good years. The industry is in great shape to weather the upcoming economic storm as long as there's not a big systemic shock. People want to be outdoors. That will contribute to strong product demand.

#### Where do you think demand will head in 2023?

**LYON:** We think unit sales will be down slightly next year. With all the uncertainty, it's going to be challenging to grow unit sales. But there are still healthy dollar amounts flowing into the market.

#### How should dealers adjust their floorplans for 2023?

**LYON:** Dealers have an opportunity to rebuild inventories right now. Now is the time to assess what is selling and getting the right inventory mix. With the short supply of the last two years, there was a desire just to have products. Dealers often bought product without a discerning eye. As inventory levels return to normal, they need to reflect on what is the right mix for their retail footprint. Dealers need to ask: What is the right product mix now that availability is back? How do I make sure I stock the right units and get the right floorplan?

#### What are you seeing in terms of optimism for the future?

**LYON:** If you remove the uncertainty, there is a lot of optimism about the industry. There's optimism about technology advances, and a strong desire to take part in the outdoor lifestyle. The industry has a very long-term bullish outlook. Everyone feels very good about it. It is hard though. Dealers have to rebuild their inventories amid economic uncertainty. There is a level of complexity to work through. But long-term, the prospects feel very good. The industry is very healthy.

#### How does the RV industry compare to the other markets Wells Fargo serves?

**LYON:** The two most relevant markets are motorsports and marine. The RV industry normalized faster and sooner than those industries did. RV supply chains and OEMs got their act together in Q3 and Q4 of 2021. Powersports and motorsports still lack a consistent supply. Those industries still seek to ramp up inventories. But the RV business is already back to normalized inventory levels. That is consistent with what we've always seen historically. The RV market cycles sooner than the other industries. It's not surprising that it recovered quicker than the other markets.

#### How is Wells Fargo supporting the RV industry as it goes through the season change?

**LYON:** We are in it for the long term. This consistency is important. We are a consistent provider that supported dealers in the whipsaw of the last two years. There's been higher demand for economic data. We have been trying to share what we're seeing and what our bank economists are forecasting. There are so many things happening in the macro economy and things change daily. We try to give insights into what we're seeing or forecasting to help dealers make informed business decisions. **RV**

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# Creating Partnerships That Count

How to choose long-term partners that are mutually beneficial.

**W**here are the guardrails to keep you on the right path with your business partnerships?

It has never been more important to have solid relationships in business than it is today. But how do we forge those business partnerships? How should we

pick the best business partner? What criteria should we think about when choosing those with whom we enter into those special arrangements? How can we maintain them?

To start, we ought to agree on this point: A good partnership is one where the other party brings something to the table that you don't already have or



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know. Complementary relationships are the most valuable. Given that they are doing something you cannot do, or choose to have someone else complete, they should be better at providing that service or product than you are. If you can do it yourself, they aren't needed.

Forgive me the personal departure for a moment to make a point. There are plenty of things my wife of almost 50 years can do so much better than I could ever possibly do. I can count on that. In my only experience with a true business partner, I truly "lucked out." Tom did many things better than I ever could. And I like to think I added something to the relationship as well. Understanding the complementary nature of my roles in both marriage and business was instructive.

With that point made, what makes a great partnership? Both parties must commit to the other to be reliable, honest, loyal and to do the work.

And they must perform on that commitment.

Along those lines, here's a quick piece of advice regarding internal partners filling roles as employees. President Lincoln famously had a cabinet made up of rivals. He actively sought out those with a different point of view to gain their counsel. Managers should show high levels of buy-in to the mission. They should whole-heartedly believe in company goals. They should also be encouraged to voice a differing opinion or solution. If you both agree on everything, one of you isn't needed.

### **'Ya Gotta Do the Work!'**

Prospective business partners must be dependable. In my retail experience, when someone would arrive making an effort to sell me something new, I'd most often blow them off. My typical response was "I don't have time right now." And I'd see if they came back. That may seem a little callous. But it cut down on a lot of the distraction from the latest flash in the pan. And, for the most part, it eliminated what we've come to regard as the "new shiny object" syndrome. Blowing them off the first time was also a test of their own commitment to the product or service they were presenting. Dependability or reliability are essential in any partnership.

Honesty is the prime driver of business partnerships. Where there is no level of trust, there can be no chance for a long-term business relationship. What's the point of having someone in your circle, internal or external, who must constantly be at question. Will they do what they say? Is what they are telling you true? Can I believe the assertion they are making? The same is true for you. Let your "yes" be "yes," and let your "no" be "no."

Closely associated with honesty is loyalty—that quality where the business partner puts your best interests in clear focus and helps greatly in the attainment of them. The underlying premise in that is, of course, that you have a clear understanding of the

direction your company is heading. Also, that you have aggressively communicated that direction both within the company and to external partners.

Partners in business don't function well with adversarial underpinnings. Manufacturers whose only goal is to shove units to dealers without regard to inventory aging or turns will not make long-term and successful business partners. Nor will dealers who play games with orders and cannot be relied upon to do as they have said they would.

The relationships you forge must also match in culture. Think about it this way: If your salespeople are extolling the quality of the products you offer, you will have little success if you partner with a brand who clearly does not care about the condition of the units they ship to you.

It's a poor choice to predicate a business relationship on the force of one party's personality. By extension, if you are only buying product from a manufacturer because it "looks good," you are likely headed in the wrong direction. It is very likely that there is a clear lack of substance under the façade.

Finally, a great business partner will not last if they cannot successfully perform the task or provide the product that you agreed on. They must deliver what you need. There are only two kinds of performance—excuses and results. Do not put up with those who offer only excuses. I might add that this is also very true of the internal partners. That is, those managers who are helping you to achieve the company goals.

In the end, we are left with a characterization of a business partnership based on a need to fulfill a gap in our own skills or products. We look for those who are dependable. Partners must be honest and worthy of our trust. The best partners are those who tie their own success to your success. And they must be able and effective in fulfilling the tasks or providing the services that are required. [EVA](#)



# Is Your Business ETDBW?

How to provide an A+ experience for customers that keeps them coming back.

In the late 1990s, I was a presenter at Harley-Davidson University. When not busy facilitating my workshop, I attended some of the other workshops and some of the presentations by the keynote speakers.

One of those speakers introduced the term ETDBW (Easy To Do Business

With) as a method of enhancing customer experiences within a business. He suggested that the Harley dealership owners and managers could improve their customer retention if they reviewed their business practices to determine if these processes provided an efficient, positive experience for their customers.



Mel Selway is the president of P.A.R.T.S. Inc., an Arizona-based firm providing business management analysis and training to retailers. He can be reached at 520-336-8606 or melselway@aol.com.

## How to Achieve ETDBW

I believe that a consistent process is a method that could encourage your customers to grade your operations as ETDBW. And, as many of you who have been reading my columns will know, I also believe that this procedural consistency can be achieved by developing detailed written procedures (DWP).

DWP provide several benefits that enhance your opportunity to smooth your parts and accessory department processes. These include:

- Minimizing errors, which could improve the customer experience
- Providing a consistently performed process
- Saving time—since the process would not have to be reworked
- Training personnel who could feel more comfortable in performing their duties because they understand the procedures

Each of these four benefits contribute to the efficiency of your processes, which could enhance your customers' experiences when visiting your business or when contacting it via phone, text, website or other media.

## What About the Internal Customers?

During my retail parts management career, I was hired to fix broken, unprofitable parts operations. When commencing my role in each of these parts departments, I observed that the personnel in other departments were occasionally treated as “the enemy.” I contacted the managers of these other departments and asked how we (the parts department) could improve our services to them.

I shared these requests with my parts associates and advised them that the personnel from the other departments were “proxies” for our external customers.

I suggested that by improving our procedures that interfaced with those of the other departments, that we were actually enhancing the experiences of our external customers. And, by making our processes ETDBW for our sister departments, it might encourage

more efficient procedures within those departments. This would be a win-win for our dealership team.

## Are They Only Parts Customers?

Some RV dealerships have developed a process within their Major Unit Sales departments that provides a tour of the dealership for customers who purchase a coach, towable or fifth wheel. This introduction is designed to make the customer familiar with each of the departments and with some of the personnel in those departments.

By knowing who to contact for coordinating a service appointment or who to contact to discuss accessory add-ons to their RV, hopefully customers will feel more comfortable returning to the dealership for all of their RV needs.

So, do the parts associates offer an introduction to the other departments to their parts customers—especially if that customer is new to the area and/or the dealership? Your parts associates could ask a simple question such as: Would you care for a tour of our dealership so that you know where to go and who to speak with when you want to schedule a service appointment or if you are interested in speaking with an RV sales associate?

## Other Opportunities for ETDBW

How else could you apply the ETDBW concept in your RV business? Perhaps one or more of these suggestions could provide you with options to improve your operations and to enhance your customers' experiences with your business.

1. Look at your operations from the customer's perspective. What do they see and feel when they walk into each of the entrances to your facility? And, more importantly, what do they want to see and feel?
2. Learn what your customers want to see and feel when they enter your facility or when they call to request an accessory or to schedule a service appointment. You could gain this knowledge by

## STUDIES ON PRODUCTIVITY

Studies on staff productivity indicate that most workers operate at 80% of their potential. By applying the concept of DWP to your processes, you could offer your associates the opportunity of operating at their full potential. How could that benefit your operations and your customer service? Consider this example:

**OBJECTIVE:** achieve 400% productivity

**ASSUME:** personnel operating at 80% efficiency  
 $400 \div 80 = 5$  persons

**ASSUME:** personnel operating at 100% efficiency  
 $400 \div 100 = 4$  persons

This yields a better return on your personnel investment; and, in the situation where many businesses are seeking employees, perhaps less need to hire.

- inviting some of your customers to participate in one or more focus groups.
3. Determine who should facilitate these focus groups and what open-ended questions should be asked to initiate discussion and to obtain information that could be used to modify procedures or to change policies.
  4. Schedule time each day for a week or two to observe customer-employee interactions in each of your departments. What actions are you willing to implement if you learn that it isn't as easy as you thought it was for your customers to do business in your business?

Even if you discover that it is reasonably easy for customers to do business with your business, consider a quarterly review of your policies and procedures. Because, to quote Will Rogers, “Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.” **RV2**

# Attract vs. Repel

Does your store have an “ick” factor?

**T**he dreaded “ick” factor is a silent killer of sales. Rarely will a person come into your RV showroom or parts department and exclaim “Wow, this place is just awful!” What they will do is buy what they came in for and find another place to shop in the future. If you’re the only place for miles around, and it’s a choice of shopping at your place or online, they may switch to online because it’s more pleasant than coming into your store.

We humans are mammals, a species of animal. Complicated ones to be sure, but still just animals. As so, we have unconscious reactions to anything that doesn’t feel safe or comfortable.

When an animal enters a space, their senses are on high alert. Does it smell safe? Can I see what’s hiding in the corners? Is it safe to walk through the space? How do I get out without being trapped? Can I relax in here? Am I welcome?

We do the same thing. It’s unconscious, but our reptilian brain—the part of our brain that is associated with self-preservation—immediately takes in everything related to our survival and our ability to thrive in a new environment.

Have you ever walked into a room and just stood there wondering what on earth you came in for? To remember, you must walk back out to where you were, and it may come back to you. This is not something that just happens to older people, it’s a common human experience.

I taught visual merchandising at Parsons School of Design in New York City, and at The Art Institute in Portland, Oregon. My students were always considerably younger than me

and they often had the same experience.

A study done by Professor Gabriel Radvansky, a psychology professor at University of Notre Dame, found that “Entering or exiting through a doorway serves as an ‘event boundary’ in the mind, which separates episodes of activity and files them away.”

Having a mental clean slate when you walk into a new space also allows us to take in all the impressions of that space with our reptilian brains. Safe or unsafe? Sadly, every time I walk into my kitchen and forget what I came for, I eat something.

I did a casual survey of friends and asked them what they considered to be repellent factors in a store. The demographics of my survey group consisted of white people from 50 to 73 years old.

Interestingly, the first thing many mentioned was the phony-feeling greeting. So much for my fascination for animalistic behavior.

But, right on the heels of “Hi, welcome to Whatever, how can I help you?” was the bombardment of the senses. When asked what was the first sense that was assaulted, the answers ranged, including each of the senses. Loud rap or metallic music was a major issue for everyone. Next was a bad odor including mildew, chemicals, backed-up sewer, or someone microwaving a fish taco. A few people—me included—hate fake floral scents. I can’t go into or even near a Yankee Candle.

The light level was another irritation factor. If it felt too dark, people felt they couldn’t see the merchandise well, especially the signage and prices. Messiness and overstocked fixtures came next, along with fixtures filled with cheap grab-and-buy stuff right in the

entry area making it difficult to walk into the rest of the store. Last, disgust with the feeling of grime, dirt and dust.

Luckily, most of the icky things are free to fix. A few are a bit more expensive. But any of these are not the type of thing to put off.

While you and your staff may be used to whatever is going on, a customer isn’t and does not want to shop where at a place they perceive as “icky.”

## *Rethink the dreaded rote*

**“welcome” speech:** It always sounds phony, and customers know that whoever is welcoming them has been told exactly what to say by a team of lawyers, psychologists, and managers and it’s always something safe and ostensibly warm.

People just want to be acknowledged when they come into your showroom or



Linda Cahan is the president of Portland, Oregon-based Cahan & Co., a consulting firm that works with retailers of all sizes and categories to improve their bottom line through creative, affordable and appropriate visual merchandising, store design and renovations. For more information, visit [www.lindacahan.com](http://www.lindacahan.com).

parts store. “Hi” with eye contact and a smile works well. It makes someone feel seen, and a smile is friendly and nonaggressive.

*Cost: Free*

**Nix loud music that doesn't add to the ambiance:** What is right for your sales staff can be horribly wrong for your customers. Years ago, a close friend had a successful crystal store in Westport, Connecticut. Once a week, her 16-year-old son worked the store in the afternoons and, once a week, she had zero sales.

I did some reconnaissance and felt the bass from the music in the soles of my feet, 20 feet from the store. Metallica and crystals are not a match. No customers ventured into the store when that music was playing. The music just didn't work with the products.

Friends often complain about loud rap or techno dance music in stores and restaurants. While it's lovely to entertain your staff, they won't have jobs if your customers are unhappy. Find music that works for people of all ages.

*Cost: Whatever you're paying now to stream music*



**Address the odor in the room:** Mildew is a killer—not just because it smells awful and sticks to everything you sell, but for anyone with mold or mildew allergies, it can make them sick either immediately or over time. It can also intensify asthma and bronchial conditions quickly. It's created by moisture and humidity.

If your store smells like mildew, figure out where it's coming from and using a mix of vinegar and baking soda (Google it), wash down every surface you can to remove the odor.

If you don't smell it, ask customers you know well for their honest opinions.

Also, chemicals, bottled or boxed, often emit strong odors. It's difficult to remove chemical smells from the area where you store and sell them. Consider a fan in that area or a ceiling vent with a fan to suck up the scent and hopefully disperse it out your roof.

*Cost: Varies from inexpensive natural remedies to more expensive electronic remedies including dehumidifiers*



**Avoid fake, cloying scents:** These scents can be as annoying as mildew and may be sales killers for people who are scent-sensitive include fake florals, vanilla and (a true “ick”) patchouli.

Scents that work for most people are food-based—and we're not talking about anything fishy. Citrusy scents are your best bet but use all-natural oils in diffusers around the store. You can control how much is diffused into the air so it feels light and fresh.

With any scent you decide to introduce into the store, please make sure it doesn't repel any of your staff. No scent is better than a repellant one.

*Cost: Natural scent oils vary in price. You can usually find good quality oils in local health food stores. Diffusers come in many price points. But a great-smelling store is worth the money!*



**Make sure your customers can see:** The light level of a store is very important for any human more than 40 years old. Around then, our eyes start losing their ability to see well with low light. As we age, the muscles that control the size of our pupils and their reaction to light lose some strength. This causes the pupil to become less responsive to changes in ambient lighting.

Because of these changes, people in their sixties need three times more ambient light for comfortable reading than those in their twenties. It's as if a 60-plus-year-old is wearing dark sunglasses in the same room as a person in their 20s or 30s. You must light a store so your older customers feel comfortable and welcome—and can read the prices. Younger customers aren't going to complain about the store being too light but older people will complain if it's too dark—either in person or by shopping elsewhere.

One trick to make this more affordable is to light your walls, floor fixtures and spas with attention to the signage. You don't need a lot of light directed on the aisles, unless you have level changes. Level changes require a lot of light for safety.

If you have all fluorescents and if the bulbs are over eight months old, they should all be replaced, as they've faded significantly over that amount of time. Regular fluorescent bulbs will lose 20% to 25% lumen power after 4,000 hours of use. They usually die around 10,000 hours. Interestingly, the longer you keep them on, the better. Switching them on and off causes them to fade more quickly.

*Cost: Depends on how much lighting you need to add. Only add LEDs! They will save you money immediately!*



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**“A disorganized store cuts deeply into the customer’s perception of the quality of your repair work.”**

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**Move cardboard display fixtures near your front door:** These semi-flimsy units usually hold seasonal “pick-up” merchandise. When they’re sitting in the decompression zone where customers walk in and scan the store to see where they want to go, these fixtures often block their view as well as not allowing customers to enter the store comfortably.

*Cost: Free—move them out of the way so people can see your store and where they need to go.*

**Tidy up messiness:** There should never be boxes on the floor waiting to get stocked on the shelves unless there is person emptying the boxes. Boxes waiting for UPS need their own area, out of the customer’s view.

A messy sales desk looks disorganized. A disorganized store cuts deeply into the customer’s perception of the quality of your repair work. It’s unconscious and it’s powerful.

*Cost: Free—do it now; it matters!*



**Eliminate dirt, dust, grime and grease:**

Seriously, this is a no-brainer. There should never be any of these on your merchandise, fixtures, walls, floors,

shelves, counters or your clothing, unless you’re repairing a spa! Just imagine your mother or some very picky friend doing the white-glove test in your store. Almost all women will be repulsed as well as many men.

*Cost: Free. Once again—do it now!*



Each of these things matter to your customers. It pays to have someone neutral come to your store and let you know what they think. Even if you think it’s perfect, stay open minded. It will pay off immediately when you make any of these improvements. Even people who aren’t picky don’t want to feel icky. **RVPRO**



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## advertiser index

ADVERTISER	PAGE
Acuity Brands Lighting dba IOTA Engineering	77
ADCO Products Inc	43
Air Lift Co	41
American Bolt & Screw	54
American Guardian Warranty Services Inc/AGWS	29
Arterra Distribution	3,77
Blue Ox	9
Camco Mfg Inc	5,78
CDK Global LLC	32A
Century Chemical Corp	61
DealerPro Training	49
Design Engineering Inc/DEI	61
Dexter Axle	IBC
Duo Form Plastics	1,78
Eberspaecher	51
Elwell Corp	32B
EQ United	7
Go Power div of Valterra	65
Grand Design RV LLC	21
Haier US Appliance Solutions Inc dba GE Appliances	23,77
Icon Technologies Ltd	13
Integrated Dealer Systems	Barndoor
Lamilux	45
LaVanture Products Co Inc	63

ADVERTISER	PAGE
Marshall Excelsior	24
MBA Insurance	63
MTI Industries	53
Norco Industries Inc dba BAL RV Products	67
NSA RV Products Inc	77
NTP-STAG	IFC, 35
Pace Intl	19
Performance Brokerage Services	48A
Pinnacle Appliances	78
Protective Asset Protection Division	27
Renogy	BC
Richloom Fabrics Group	69
Rieco Titan Products Inc	69,77
Riverside RV	37
RVDA	47
Samlex America	57
Southwire Co	25
Specialty Recreation Inc	78
Thermo-Tec	67
Theftord/Norcold Corporate Headquarters	11,39,78
Timbren Industries Inc	2
TowMate LLC	78
Trim-Lok Inc	17
United States Warranty Corporation	56

# Pit Stop



## Need to Know: The California Air Resources Board (CARB) has begun the rulemaking process to ban the sale of new gas-powered vehicles by 2035.

(Source: RVIA)

- Stricter emission standards for vehicles weighing 14,000 pounds or less by model year 2026
- Goal to reach 100% zero-emission vehicles (ZEV) within light-duty markets (less than 8,500 pounds) by 2035
- Medium-duty (8,501 to 14,000 pounds) and heavy-duty (more than 14,001 pounds) vehicles not subject to same rules until 2045
- 17 states have adopted California's emissions requirements—accounting for nearly 40% of all U.S. vehicle sales
- In 2026, 35% of new car and light-duty vehicle sales must be ZEV; by 2030, 68% is required



## JULY SHIPMENTS

# 29,657

TOTAL of July RV shipments

# 33.4%

 DECREASE  
compared to July 2021

# 2.5%

 INCREASE  
through July 2022  
compared to same  
point last year

"This shipment report aligns with the RV RoadSigns Forecast that showed strong shipments through the first half of 2022, followed by an expected decrease in the second half of the year as dealers across the country manage through their inventory and plan out for 2023," said RVIA President and CEO Craig Kirby. "While below last year's record July production, this month's numbers are in line with typical July shipments, and with consumer interest in RVing still strong we are confident that 2022 will be one of the RV industry's best years for total shipments."

## 5 RV EXPENSES TO BUDGET FOR

(Source: Go RVing, author Michelle Schroeder-Gardner)

- 1. GAS:** to drive the RV and power appliances
- 2. INSURANCE**
- 3. MAINTENANCE AND ANNUAL FEES:** oil changes, tires, repairs, license costs, registration fees
- 4. OTHER EXPENSES:** campground fees, food, entertainment
- 5. THE RV**

## Don't Break the Bank

Many RV models allow a family of four to save up to 64% on vacation costs over other forms of travel

(Source: Go RVing)



**25M +** households planned to camp over the Labor Day holiday last month

(Source: KOA)





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