

# Smoke the Competition

Cook Up Interest in the Grilling Category Through Events and Demos

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**W**hether it's showing his customers how to whip up a delicious meal on the grill or welcoming hundreds from the community to an annual cookoff competition in the parking lot, Bill Murff uses his passion for grilling to attract customers to his store.

When Murff and his wife Susan, who together own Cypress Ace Hardware & Feed in Houston, decided to expand their business a few years ago, they invested heavily in the grilling category.

"We followed our passions with the remodel. One area we wanted to grow was our grilling category, so we added a large grill center inside a portion of the store addition," Murff says. "We believed adding a dedicated grill center would grow the category by using it to offer in-store demos and cooking classes, and even allow our customers to try a grill before they buy it."

Murff has become an expert at using grilling events to keep his customers coming back all year long, and his strategy offers lessons other retailers can learn from.

To give you a better idea of how to either start or improve events in your grilling and outdoor cooking department, *Hardware Retailing* sought out insight and advice from three retailers, including Murff, Joe Wannemaker of Wannemaker's Home and Garden in Downers Grove, Illinois, and Gerrod Brasseux of Brasseux True Value Hardware in Abbeville, Louisiana. Each has established their business as go-to locations for customers to not only buy grills and accessories, but to find both information and fun.

In the following pages, learn about specific ways these retailers promote their grilling category, and also strengthen relationships with their communities.

Then, head to [TheRedT.com/grill-sales-tips](http://TheRedT.com/grill-sales-tips) for advice on how to best sell products in the category.



# Grilling for Good



Grilling and barbecue vendors come to **Cypress Ace Hardware** for the store's annual Grill Your Ace Off event. When customers aren't trying food from the competition, they're walking through vendor booths, talking and learning more about the products showcased.

**C**ypress Ace Hardware & Feed has made a name in the community with its annual charity event, Grill Your Ace Off. Not only does the sight of a packed parking lot and the scent of mouth-watering food draw people in, but the meaning behind the event warms hearts as well as stomachs. And while the Grill Your Ace Off event is something many retailers in the co-op host across the country, each store, like Cypress Ace, leaves its own impression.

"We host our big event in the fall, usually the third weekend in October," Murff says. "Through this event, we raise money for the Children's Miracle Network Hospitals®, which all ends up back here in the community at the Texas Children's Hospital."

Murff says the event has become a well-attended community gathering every fall since it started

seven years ago. It is a cookoff competition, with 20 teams of four people each signing up to participate.

"Each team has to pay \$125 to compete against other teams," Murff says. "They have to cook on one of our grills, and they can cook anything they want. The meat has to be raw before they start at 8 a.m."

At the end of the day, the teams submit their meals to a panel of four judges, who name the first-, second- and third-place recipes, Murff says. The winners each receive a grill from the store.

Everyone from the community is invited to come and taste test.

"We have a people's choice award, and throughout the day, people can come sample all of the food from the various teams," Murff says. "They pay \$10 for a plate and vote for their favorites, which is a lot of fun."

**“Last year, we had 1,200 people in and out of the parking lot throughout the day. We have had people come from all over. Last year, someone even flew in from Hawaii to attend.”**

—Bill Murff, Cypress Ace Hardware & Feed



During Cypress Ace Hardware's 2016 Grill Your Ace Off competition, three teams walked away with bragging rights and new grills.

In order to have a good turnout, the store spreads the word by partnering with a local TV and radio station, sending emails to their customers and sharing on social media. Word of mouth and passersby who see the action in the parking lot and stop in are also big contributors to the turnout.

“Last year, we had 1,200 people in and out of the parking lot throughout the day,” he says. “We have had people come from all over. Last year, someone even flew in from Hawaii to attend.”

On top of the tasty treats in the parking lot, attendees can also pop in the store and get a good deal on merchandise, he says. During the day, the store has a blue bucket sale. Customers can donate \$5 or more for a bucket to receive 20 percent off items that fit in the bucket.

At last year's event, the store was able to raise \$66,000 for the Children's Miracle Network Hospitals, plus donations from other local companies helped the store to raise those funds to total more than \$100,000. Children's Miracle Network Hospitals is a nonprofit organization that raises funds and awareness for 170 member hospitals that provide 32 million treatments each year to kids across the U.S. and Canada.

With this major event, and the grilling demos, cooking classes and customized service, customers turn to the store for much more than products on the shelves.

## Education, Entertainment and Mouth-Watering Food

### Grill Center Takes Category to Next Level

When a customer stops by Cypress Ace Hardware & Feed for the first time, they may be surprised at what they find. A few years ago, co-owner Bill Murff says he and his wife decided to implement a 12,000-square-foot expansion to the store, and with that space they wanted to focus on four categories: gifts, animal health care, a homemade fudge bar (with fresh fudge made and sold daily) and a grill center (pictured at right).

### A Place for Food Enthusiasts to Gather

The grill center is very unique, with a restaurant-grade vent to make grilling indoors easy and safe. To allow more people to engage with the grilling demos without crowding, the store has two flat-screen TVs that show the chef in action. The department also features a display of a wide range of grills from various brands. Also in this section is a wall of seasonings, salts and rubs that customers can browse as they walk through or up to the grill station.





# Uniting Vendors and Customers



Photo Courtesy of WGN Radio

For **Wannemaker's** second annual Grill Extravaganza, the company paired up with Operation BBQ Relief, an organization that raises funds for those facing disasters in the United States. The store raffled prizes to donate to the group.

**W**annemaker's Home and Garden has evolved over the years from a hardware store to a high-end lawn, garden and home decor retail location.

The store has held a widely attended annual garden show for the past 25 years, establishing the business as a place to find experts in outdoor living and all the category encompasses, says Joe Wannemaker, co-owner of the business. Through this event, customers come to the store and meet vendors face-to-face. These interactions help all parties involved: Customers learn about new product lines from the companies producing them, those companies get feedback and opinions directly from consumers about their products and Wannemaker's is able to introduce the two and interact with both.

The event features around 30 to 40 vendors in the lawn and garden category, and recently, it has grown to include vendors representing the grilling category. The event's success encouraged the team to take its knowledge of planning and hosting a massive annual event for outdoor living and apply it to their grilling category, Wannemaker says.

## Serving Customers What They Want

### A Place to Find Outdoor Living Must-Haves

About 20 years ago, Wannemaker's Home and Garden shifted its focus from a traditional hardware store to its current niche of a high-end home and garden store. According to co-owner Joe Wannemaker, the store's goal is to offer customers the complete package in outdoor living, and grilling completes it. While the grilling category makes up about 8 percent of sales, the store has built a strong following of barbecue enthusiasts who come in to buy the latest grills, seasonings and accessories.

### Consulting With Community Grill Masters

One of the ways the store has taken its grilling category to new heights is by partnering with competition grillers, Wannemaker says. He talks to those involved in the barbecue industry, asking them what they would recommend the store carry. However, Wannemaker and his grill department manager, Steve Kras, are both passionate about the category, which is key to success.







Photo Courtesy of WGN Radio

Wannemaker's had 14 grill and barbecue vendors on hand to showcase new products at booths in their parking lot. Customers could learn from vendors and taste-test products.

**“We also raffled off five different grills and grill gift basket sets. In total, we raised about \$5,000 for the organization.”**

*—Joe Wannemaker,  
Wannemaker's  
Home and Garden*

“The popularity of our garden show snowballed, and our manager in the grill department, Steve Kras, suggested we do a similar grilling show,” Wannemaker says. “Hundreds of people have been in attendance in the past two years.”

In June, Wannemaker's Home and Garden welcomed community members to attend its second annual Grill Extravaganza. The store invited 14 different vendors, including grill manufacturers, as well those offering grilling accessories, like sauces and rubs.

The vendor booths were set up in the parking lot, with the smells of sizzling food wafting to browsing customers. Not only could attendees taste test the food being prepared, but they could also learn and see products in action to get a better idea of what they might want when grilling in their own backyards.

Planning with vendors was a fairly simple task, Wannemaker says. “Since we’ve done our garden show for so many years, our vendors have a good understanding of how these types of events work. We give them the date and the setup they’ll need.”

To generate even more attention for the event, Kras suggested inviting Lou Manfredini of WGN Radio's Mr. Fix-It to host

his radio show during the Grill Extravaganza, Wannemaker says.

A popular radio show host in the Chicago area, Manfredini also owns two Ace Hardware stores and is active with the national hardware co-op. Manfredini often hosts his DIY-centered radio show at businesses that request his presence during sales events. Since Manfredini is known for his entertaining, practical and useful home improvement advice on his show, he was able to give Wannemaker's event both an educational and fun twist.

As an added bonus, Wannemaker also invited Operation BBQ Relief, an organization that raises funds for those in the United States who have been affected by disasters, to come cook food and spread the word about the organization. The event was able to bring awareness and raise money.

“Grill masters cooked barbecue that customers could purchase for a donation to Operation BBQ Relief,” Wannemaker says. “We also raffled off five different grills and grill gift basket sets. In total, we raised about \$5,000 for the organization.”



Photo Courtesy of WGN Radio

Customers who stopped by **Wannemaker's Home and Garden** for the Grill Extravaganza were able to listen to WGN Radio's Mr. Fix-It show live and ask questions about different home improvement projects.



# Cooking Demos on Demand

**W**hen Gerrod Brasseux decided to trade in his hat as an English teacher to become a hardware retailer, he knew he wanted to take his interest in home improvement and his expertise in cooking and share them with the community. Today, Brasseux True Value Hardware and its employees have become known for offering helpful advice and delicious samples of food customers can enjoy when stopping in the store.

“Food is such an important family tradition in Louisiana that most events revolve around it,” Brasseux says. “Some of my customers get overwhelmed when cooking. I decided I wanted our store to educate them on how to make a variety of recipes and show them how easy it really is.”

Initially, sales associates would start up the grills outside the front of the store. Then people would come by and ask what they were cooking, he says. This interest from those in the area was a simple way to advertise to customers without requiring anything but a grill. To keep up the momentum, Brasseux decided the next step would be to throw meat on the grill to sample.

He partnered with his local grocery store to get deals on chicken and started offering cooking demonstrations for customers to watch and taste.

Then after attending one of his co-op’s buying shows, he was ready to bring his demos to a wider audience. Brasseux spoke with a friend about how he wanted to spread the word on cool new products the store was getting in stock, and his friend suggested he try Facebook Live videos.

“In most of the videos, I’m in front of the camera doing a demo or talking about an item, while the store manager films me,” Brasseux says. “Through our Facebook videos, I’m trying

to educate our customers on how to cook different meals.”

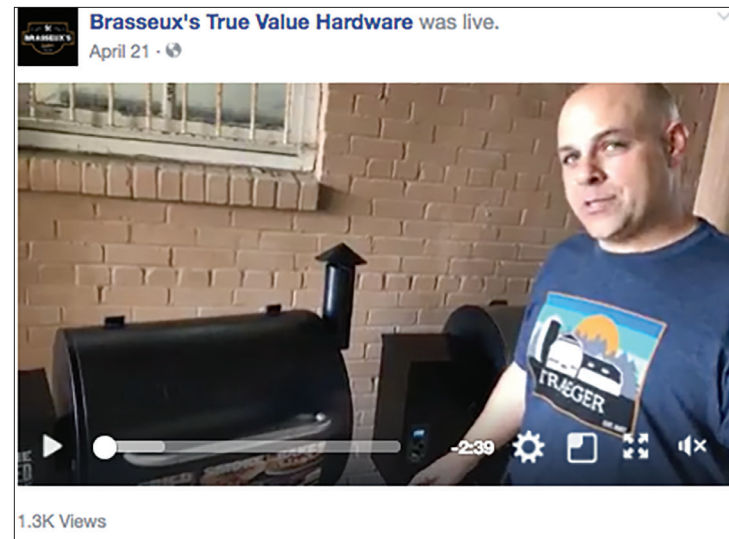
The videos, which are streamed online in real time and then can be replayed later, run from two to five minutes and give viewers a peek at different recipes and items they can make with products found at the store.

To learn more about Facebook Live videos, head to Page 102 for a closer look at the free tool from the popular social media platform.

“We want to keep our customers excited and like to show off new products we find, new recipes we’re trying,” Brasseux says. “We try to mix it up, because we don’t want our videos to be stale. We want to keep people excited, and we are always on the hunt for the next big thing.”

Whether he’s filming or not, he tries to grill something at the store on as many Fridays as he can.

“For us, Facebook has been a very successful avenue to spreading the word about our business and our grill offerings,” Brasseux says. “It’s probably our best form of marketing, and we’ve had a lot of success boosting our posts and getting our ad dollars to stretch to many more people than if we hadn’t spent a couple bucks for it. It’s a great way to generate interest and get customers excited, even when they’re away from the store.” ➔



Brasseux has filmed several grilling demonstrations for his Facebook fans.

## Outdoor Grilling Brings Community Together

### Trying Recipes, Educating Customers

When Gerrod Brasseux started cooking on the grills he sells at his store, those passing by the business would often stop in their tracks. Community members were drawn to the smell of food cooking, making them a great audience to sell to. After seeing how well this went, Brasseux has shown customers how to make many recipes that can be achieved with everything from the store (minus the meat). He says just like any product in a store, the better a retailer knows the grill and what it can do, the better they can sell it.

### For Louisiana Natives, Cooking Is an Art Form

In Louisiana, food is more than finding time to eat three square meals, but is a way to show love for others, Brasseux says. Whether cooking for their immediate family or for a large family reunion, people want to have the best products on the market. Sampling food is a great way to give back to customers and spark up a conversation, leading to loyal returning customers, Brasseux says.



Gerrod Brasseux of Brasseux True Value makes sure his customers walk away from a grill purchase with a positive impression of the store. Associates assemble the grill ahead of time, and in certain cases, they deliver it, carry it and set it up for free. On top of any grill purchase, Brasseux says the store also throws in a free bag of charcoal or pellets. This gesture goes a long way, since customers are more likely to return for more charcoal or pellets from the store when they run out.