

Revved Up

5 Ways to Promote and Market Outdoor Power Equipment

This month's Category Spotlight is sponsored by STIHL

As winter melts away and spring kicks into gear, consumers eagerly dust the cobwebs off their outdoor power equipment. Before they can begin reviving their yards, they may realize they need to get their lawn mower tuned up or have their leaf blower repaired.

If the customer bought their equipment at the big-box store in town, they might bring it back to an orange-vested employee for tune-ups or product issues. However, in Memphis, Tennessee, that big-box business is more likely to send customers away to the go-to repair shop in town—Colonial Hardware.

The family-owned business has been serving the community since 1977 and has strengthened its reputation by providing knowledgeable assistance, says office manager Jenny McMaster. Memphis locals and competing big-boxes know customers can find the expertise in outdoor power equipment and the services they need for almost any product at Colonial.

In this article, *Hardware Retailing* showcases Colonial Hardware and Beisswenger's Hardware of New Brighton, Minnesota. Discover five different ways these businesses market and promote the category to draw new and repeat customers to their businesses.

Stock the Right Brands and Products

A successful outdoor power equipment department includes a strong brand presence and a product mix to meet varied customers' needs. Staff at Beisswenger's Hardware knows customers are drawn to the department most often due to brand recognition and loyalty, says Al Morelli, an employee with years of expertise in the outdoor power equipment category. However, while specific brands might draw a customer in, having a wide selection of brands and product offerings to choose from ensures they are able to get the right product, price and performance they need whenever they visit.



Beisswenger's Hardware displays assembled outdoor power equipment to show customers the variety and what the final products look like.

“Brand is very important in outdoor power equipment compared to other departments,” Morelli says. “The recognition different brands have is a major attraction point. However, the sales associates can then decipher the customer’s needs to offer the best suggestion for the project at hand.”

In outdoor power equipment, seasonality makes a big difference in the inventory selection. Depending on the region and climate, many retailers have four seasons to plan. For example, in the winter, a focus on snow blowers and generators is more relevant, while the spring and summer calls for chainsaws, lawn mowers and string trimmers.

Merchandise to Make the Showroom Shine

Having the right products and brands available to a customer is important, but merchandising techniques throughout the department ensure the large variety of equipment and products that are available stand out and impress customers.

The manufacturers a retailer works with are great resources. Many provide display racks and POP signage to highlight their brands.

Since Memphis experiences longer stretches of milder temperatures than other areas of the country, McMaster says Colonial Hardware promotes its products by lining large outdoor power equipment by the entrance. A row of red riding lawn mowers makes a statement that the category is covered.

Having an open showroom is an easy way to display the breadth of offerings in the category, too. Merchandising inside the store is as simple as assembling various products, like lawn mowers, power washers, generators and trimmers and displaying them for customers to touch and handle for reference. Rather than staring at a photo online or a picture on a box, the customer gets a clear idea about the equipment they’re thinking about buying.

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When it comes to merchandising, creativity makes a difference. At Colonial Hardware, one merchandising element has remained a staple over the years. The display is eye-catching and helps spark conversations with customers.

“We have an old tree we uprooted from my grandfather’s property years ago that displays our chainsaws,” she says. “It has been a focal point in our outdoor power equipment showfloor for years. The chainsaw models and technology may change, but this tree is still here.”



Left: Al Morelli of Beisswenger’s Hardware has years of knowledge and experience with outdoor power equipment.

Right: Colonial Hardware chose a creative take on merchandising, displaying chainsaws in an old tree from the family property.





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—Jenny McMaster, Colonial Hardware

Educate and Train the Sales Team

If a customer finds the brand and product they’re looking for and has a chance to touch and hold it, they are one step closer to making a purchase. To ensure the sale of equipment and future services is in the bag, training is vital. Not only should the sales associates know the products inside and out, service technicians need continuous education to be certified to work on the products the store carries.

To offer customers a better experience compared to the big-box stores, training in the category at Beisswenger’s is huge, Morelli says.

“Everyone who works in the outdoor power equipment department needs to be knowledgeable about the products and brands we sell,” Morelli says. “When a manufacturer offers sales seminars on their equipment, we take advantage of that opportunity and send employees to those educational events. It helps them understand the products and do a better job selling.”

Many Colonial Hardware employees take initiative to learn, McMaster says.

“Outdoor power equipment sales are the backbone of our business,” she says. “Because of that, understanding the equipment is very important. Our employees often take equipment home to test it out and get a feel for it. This hands-on experience gives them a better understanding of how different products work and unique features.”

Sales associates also stay in the know by taking brochures of product lines home to read. On a slower day, they might even go to the store’s repair shop, observe what the mechanics are working on and learn about the inner workings of equipment.

To take product knowledge one step further, both McMaster and Morelli say employees attend distributor markets and other industry-specific shows to scope out new products and talk directly with a wide variety of manufacturers.



Top: Colonial Hardware prioritizes training so they can assist any customer.
Bottom: Assembled equipment is a great way to promote the department.

“Every year, we send a few of our associates to the Green Industry & Equipment Expo (GIE+EXPO),” McMaster says. “The show is beneficial as it gives our team a chance to see what products are trending in outdoor power equipment and it helps us with our buying strategy.”

Create Repeat Customers

The outdoor power equipment category can attract a mix of DIY customers and a wide variety of professionals. To best serve the whole range, a retailer needs to have strategies in place.

Beisswenger’s Hardware has an audience of about 80 percent DIYer to 20 percent commercial customer in the category, Morelli says. Some of the commercial accounts they manage include snow equipment and lawn and garden equipment required by the city. They also work with schools and municipalities.

To keep the pros happy, Morelli says employees need to have strong product knowledge. Having a business with a parts department and a service repair shop is a reason pro customers will return.

Hosting events at the store for commercial contractors and professionals is another great way to boost business.

Howard Brothers Outdoor Power and Hardware, a chain of stores in Georgia, is another business that has earned its reputation as the go-to source among pro customers. In 1989, Howard Brothers Pro Day began, which became a popular event in the southeastern part of the country. To learn more about the annual event and how the store takes care of pros today, read the article at TheRedT.com/howard-bros-event.

Hosting a pro-focused event can expose them to new products and attract potential customers. Make the event attractive by offering food and refreshments and introduce the guests to different vendors who demo products on-site.

Colonial Hardware serves an equal amount of DIYers to pro customers. Its pro business kicked into gear when landscaping companies grew in popularity in Memphis. McMaster says they meet the needs of both demographics because they have strong product knowledge.

M Kay Supply Events, Demos Attract Variety of Shoppers

In the small town of Benton, Missouri, locals no longer have to travel miles away from town to purchase new outdoor power equipment. After four years of discussing opening a much-needed hardware store in their small town, Malinda and Jarrett Milam opened M Kay Supply in December 2014.

One of the most popular and top-performing categories in the store has been outdoor power equipment, as DIYers, local farmers and pro customers can find everything they need to get the job done, Milam says.

To spread the word about their outdoor power equipment offerings, the M Kay Supply team has collaborated with their primary dealer, STIHL, to host events and give customers the chance to demo different equipment. Some of the events the store has hosted include a ladies’ night, obstacle courses and other fun events where outdoor power equipment is often in the spotlight, putting the tools in the customers’ hands.

“STIHL has great brand recognition among our customers, and getting the products in their hands takes it one step further,” Milam says. “We always allow customers to pick up and feel the equipment, but the events we’ve hosted are where they can learn more and have fun.”



Complete the Department

Businesses that do well in outdoor power equipment sales understand offering parts and services helps turn a single power tool purchase into a repeat business opportunity.

In order to provide service on-site, retailers must have a certified team of mechanics.

“Our service technicians need to be qualified to work on all the brands we sell,” Morelli says of Beisswenger’s Hardware. “Whenever a manufacturer has a new certification course, which is an annual requirement in most cases, our technicians need to attend. These courses allow them to work on equipment, like products on warranty.”

Colonial Hardware has also built its reputation in the outdoor power equipment category by thinking beyond the initial purchase. The store has at least three mechanics on-site year-round who work on commission, McMaster says. The team provides service, repairs and tune-ups on almost any brand, including all of the brands the store sells. This service has been a major advantage for the store because customers who have purchased equipment from other stores, including big-box retailers, are welcome and can rely on the service team to solve their problems.

“Even Lowe’s and Home Depot send their customers in our direction to have work done rather than having to ship it out to other repair businesses hours from town.”

—*Jenny McMaster, Colonial Hardware*

“If someone has equipment and needs it to be repaired, they come to us because we fix pretty much anything,” McMaster says. “Even Lowe’s and Home Depot send their customers in our direction to have work done rather than having to ship it out to other repair businesses hours from town. The community knows we have the best service employees in the city.”

After a purchase, retailers should encourage customers to keep their investment in working order.

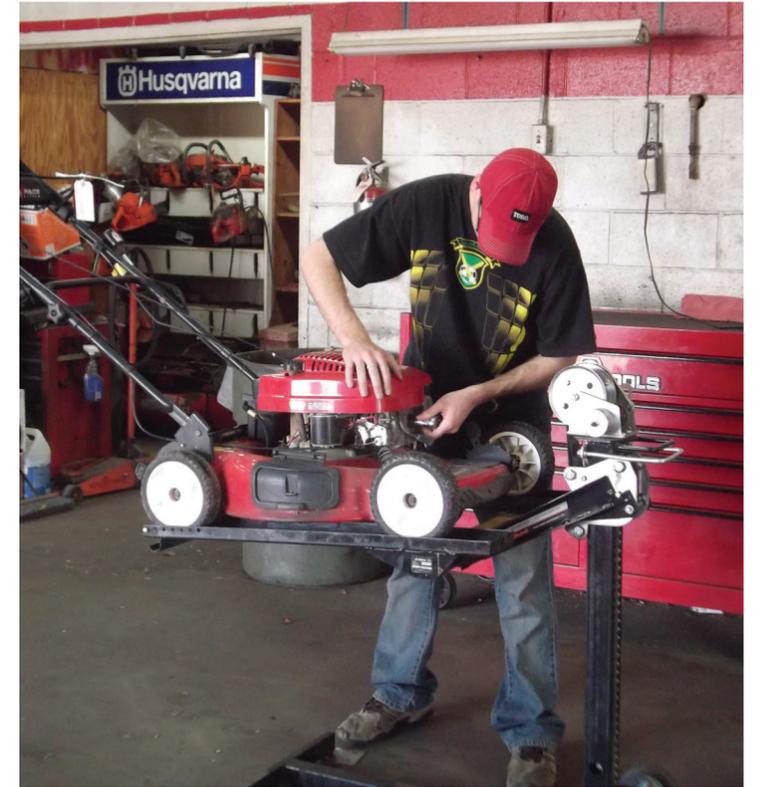
“We assemble and service the product and let them know they can return for warranties and tune-ups in the future,” McMaster says.

In addition to the importance of a service department staffed with experienced professionals, Beisswenger’s Hardware has also made parts sales a driving factor in its outdoor power equipment department.

“We have a very large offering of parts,” Morelli says. “We make sure we have pieces for all the brands and products we sell, and we carry as many fast-moving parts as we can. If we don’t have something in stock, we’ll special-order it.”

Having a well-rounded outdoor power equipment department is key for success. Providing customers with the right equipment; drawing them in to the department through inviting merchandising; giving them the knowledge they need; building a genuine relationship; and having a dedicated parts and services offering to round out the category is what sets stores like Beisswenger’s Hardware and Colonial Hardware apart from their competition in outdoor power equipment.

“Equipment sales, services and parts work hand-in-hand to ensure our lasting success,” McMaster says. “Customers choose us because our reputation as the trusted and best-equipped dealer of outdoor power equipment in Memphis puts us ahead of all of our competition.” ➔



For many retailers that repair outdoor power equipment, certified mechanics are needed on staff. Annual training is required from many manufacturers.