



Bucking Tradition

Hardware and Outdoor Goods Business Grows Customer Loyalty

Growing up in Croghan, New York, Jake Buckingham enjoyed spending time outside, especially if it meant he was hunting, fishing or camping. During high school, he worked part time at his cousin Todd Buckingham's hardware and sporting goods business in town, Buckingham Hardware & the Great Outdoors. While working, Jake discovered his other passion—helping people solve problems. While working at the store, Jake had the opportunity to talk with other serious outdoors people, but he also enjoyed helping customers figure out how to tackle their home improvement and repair projects.

Through high school and college, Jake continued his part-time position at the store, eventually working full time before starting a job working in forestry for the state. However, his journey with retail was not over yet. After a few years, his cousin approached him with an opportunity he couldn't pass up.

"Todd asked me if I would be willing to help him open, operate and manage a second location he was considering purchasing," Jake says. "Even though I had been out of retail for a while, I was ready for the challenge."

A New Opportunity

On Christmas Eve 2013, the Buckingham cousins closed on the space where they would open up shop in Blossvale, New York. They immediately began renovation projects, yet they remained open for customers through it all. However, coming up with a name for this second location took some time and a little extra creativity, Jake says.

"Like the other store, the new location was going to offer a mixture of sporting goods products and hardware," Jake says. "In the community, hunting and fishing are really popular, and our hardware goods are needed all year. Todd, my wife and I wanted to incorporate the hardware and outdoors aspects in the name. After lots of brainstorming, we came up with Bucks & Bolts Hardware & Outfitters."

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—*Jake Buckingham,
Bucks & Bolts Hardware & Outfitters*

With the last name Buckingham, and a love for hunting, among many outdoor adventures, Jake knew it was the perfect name. Although Todd owns the business, it is completely managed and run by Jake.

“Todd has given me full range of the store,” Jake says. “I like making the hard decisions and figuring out solutions to challenges we face. Running the business works with my personality,

because I don’t enjoy doing the same thing day in and out. No day is the same here!”

Jake didn’t have previous experience as a manager, but with the help of Chad Hirschey, manager of Buckingham Hardware & the Great Outdoors, as well as his cousin, Jake was able to learn the ropes by asking questions. However, he learned the bulk of his new position by educating himself through books and on-the-job learning.

“Even though I had worked in the other hardware store, I didn’t realize how much goes in to managing a business until I took on the responsibilities,” Jake says. “I handle billing and receiving, I’ll set up the employee schedule, and if technology is acting up, I act as the tech guy to troubleshoot a problem before calling someone to the store.”

Bucks & Bolts Hardware & Outfitters has a staff of eight people, and Jake says they are a very tight-knit group. To help the team do their job to the best of their abilities, Jake says he is always on the hunt for a variety of tools and resources they can use.

Attracting Customers, Rewarding Loyalty

Like many places with extreme changes in weather, the seasons in central New York make a big impact on which products will fly off the shelves, especially when it comes to sporting goods and outerwear.

In the winter, ice fishing is the sport of choice and fall is when the hunting crowd gears up for a new season. Summer brings hardware product demands along with a larger customer base—the population doubles in the summer with an influx of tourists who visit Sylvan Beach, Jake says.

“Our business is very busy in the summer with tourists, but because we have hardware and sporting goods that cross all the seasons, the departments balance each other out,” he says.

At Bucks & Bolts Hardware & Outfitters, most of the store’s customers are extremely loyal. With the help of a company that specializes in handling retail rewards programs, the business launched an app for users to track loyalty points and get special in-store deals.

To continue to improve the business, finding new products and niches is a priority. Recently the store added a greenhouse, selling annual plants in the fall, and live Christmas trees and wreaths in the winter.

To keep customers coming back, both stores share a loyalty program that started organically and has become a database with thousands of members, Jake says.

“In the beginning, we collected everything for our loyalty program by hand,” Jake says. “However, by the time we had 6,000 members in our program’s database, which was plugged in manually on spreadsheets, the monthly rewards took a large chunk of time to go through. We looked into many different systems and found one that works for us. Through that program, we introduced an app to customers as well.”

With assistance from the rewards company they began working with, the app was designed to allow loyalty program holders to sign into their accounts to review transactions and manage their loyalty points.

At both stores, Jake says the rewards program has helped increase sales, and it allows them to target specific customers and demographics. They send out coupons and rewards to customers for their loyalty, which in turn leads to store visits and more money spent at the store.



Bucks & Bolts Hardware & Outfitters is Todd Buckingham’s second store, which his cousin Jake Buckingham manages. The store serves local customers as well as seasonal vacation tourists who make a point to visit the store every summer, Jake says.



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Staying Social Online and In-Store

Not only does the Bucks & Bolts team stay in touch with customers through the rewards program app, but social media is another avenue Jake says they’re continuing to explore.

“Social media is free, so we do what we can to create a presence online,” Jake says. “My wife is very active on social media, so she’ll help with the Facebook page. We’ve also been testing out Google’s My Business, which is a service that shows you how many times a month people search key words, in our case ‘Bucks & Bolts.’”

In addition to his wife’s ideas, Jake also brainstorms with his employees on how to best use their Facebook page. From an employee’s suggestion, they began posting polls to get customer feedback on things they’d like to see in the store, or other questions they come up with.

After the first year of business, they held a grand opening in May and had a great turnout. The event went so well that it’s become an annual customer appreciation day, held every August.

“Our customer appreciation event is really an entire weekend of festivities,” Jake says. “We offer deep discount sales, we bring in vendors, we’ll have book signings and we have a free barbecue, which is a big draw as well.”

Just as the loyalty program has drawn more business, the annual customer appreciation event always boosts sales, especially in a time when seasonal tourists head home and business starts to slow, Jake says.

Jake says they have hosted other events at the store, like a Christmas tree celebration, and a Small Business Saturday event, but they’re continually looking for new ways to attract customers.

“We would like to increase our business with contractors,” Jake says. “No matter what, we want our customers to know we’re a hometown store.” ➔



In August, Blossvale, New York, residents visit **Bucks & Bolts Hardware & Outfitters** for its annual customer appreciation event, which is a weekend celebration offering in-store discounts and free barbecue.