



Success, by Any Other Name

Leonard Wagner finds success in part by letting each of his four dealerships keep their own names and identities. The business also finds success tapping into the growing market for toy haulers.

BY MIKE HARBOUR

The team responsible for making Wagner's RV Center the powerhouse dealership that it is includes: (l-r) Joe Kealiher, service manager; Brian Beno, sales manager; Leonard and Julie Wagner, owners; Gene Kopetsky, sales manager at the dealership's Milwaukee store; Ralph Wagner, general manager at the Cleveland, Wis., store (Wagner's Trailer Sales); and Barbara Dorn, controller for all four dealership locations.

Photos by Jim Matthews



What's in a name? Enough, says Leonard Wagner of Wagner's RV Center, that none of his four stores has the same sign out front. It's a philosophy that goes against the conventional wisdom of today's big-box retail chains.

"I purposely kept it separate for the main reason that people don't feel that they're shopping the same place," says Wagner, a veteran of the RV business who

got his start in 1981. "Otherwise, they shop Wagner's RV here, they go two hours south of me, if they see it's Wagner's RV there, they won't even bother going there. They'll just go someplace else."

The name game has paid off for Wagner. His dealership sells more than 1,000 units each year from locations scattered around Green Bay and Milwaukee, Wis., making it the top seller of travel

trailers and fifth wheels in the Badger State. Successful, yes, perfect, no.

The arrangement can lead to some issues when customers are comparing units at two of Wagner's stores and employees are vying for commissions. Wagner tries to head off potential conflicts by making sure all of his 26 staffers are on good terms through team building, such as regular dinners and holiday parties.

"It's a lot harder for (a salesperson) to take something from the other person because they know they have to face them the next time," he says. "Being a team is the biggest thing."

That's a mindset all dealerships with multiple locations whose staffs rarely come together, except, perhaps, at RV shows or rallies, should consider adopting.

Like other industries, finding good

employees is a continual challenge, especially when it involves technicians, a perennial problem throughout service bays from coast to coast.

"The problem with the RV industry is it's not like the car industry, where you can just put an ad in the paper and get any mechanic," Wagner says. "Here, you almost have to have a handyman, a jack of all trades type of person, because

that's exactly what the job requires.

Wagner's key to retaining employees: "Making it a pleasurable place to work," he says. "You can't just find those people off the street anywhere, and when you do have some good ones, you've got to keep them."

Some good people, not to mention some good opportunities, have definitely helped Wagner's grow from what started

Dealer Profile:



Wagner's RV Center has grown from one mom-and-pop shop to four locations in the Green Bay and Milwaukee area in large part due to the leadership of co-owners Leonard and Julie Wagner.



Parts Department employee Kris Krause checks on an order for a customer. Although parts and service are a small part of the business, the dealership is looking at growing those areas to make them bigger profit centers.



Wagner's RV has printed up shirts, sold in the dealership's small retail showroom, celebrating the company's 40 years in business.

as a true mom-and-pop operation to what it is today.

In the Beginning

It all started in the late 1960s, when Wagner's parents, Earl and Mary Lou Wagner, started Wagner Trailer Sales, once a front-yard affair offering folding camping trailers in the family's front yard in tiny Mishicot, Wis., located between Green Bay and Lake Michigan. Earl and Leonard decided to sell boats as well as trailers, but later got out of the boat business. Leonard and his wife, Julie, opened a Jayco dealership – Wagner's RV Center – in 1989 in Suamico, just north of Green Bay. Just five years later, the elder Wagner sold his dealership to Leonard, who called on Ralph Wagner, his brother, and Geno Kopetsky, a brother-in-law, to manage it.

In 2000, Wagner relocated his parents' former dealership to a new location to Cleveland, Wis., on I-43, a major interstate connecting Green Bay and Milwaukee. Not long afterward, Wagner purchased Rapids RV in Wisconsin Rapids. Last year, Wagner bought the Jayco franchise for the Milwaukee market and built a store – Freedom RV – in Slinger, which sits between Wisconsin's biggest city and the Fox Cities to the northwest.

"The only way I can have something like that is to have somebody else have some investment in it. Otherwise, you can never keep an eye on everything," Wagner says. That's why Rapids RV and Freedom RV are run by partners who also happen to be family friends.

Wagner also learned a thing or two about business from his family, in particular, his dad.

"The way my father brought me up was as long as we take care of the customer, they'll take care of us, and our customers will sell for us. Really, that's where we get most of our sales from," he says. "We've managed to keep our customers happy and they've told their friends, and they've told their friends. I listen to the people who come in and I hear them all say, 'Well, our friends bought one from you and that's why we're here.' That's what got the business growing and I look at what we're

capable and able to do with the amount of people that I have here."

Wagner's also is a loyal Jayco dealer, earning the company's Founders Award in 2005 and consistently ranking among the manufacturer's top 10 in sales volume and market share. The store his father began recently earned Jayco's 30th Anniversary Award. Wagner believes it's the right brand for him and his numbers seem to prove it.

"This year, probably more than any, it came down to more brands. Certain brands did better than others. That's what I've heard and seen in talking to some of the other dealers in the state," he says. "Some of the other dealers haven't done as well this year as they thought. Some of it has to do with product."

Parts & Service: Room to Grow

While Wagner's stores excel in sales, parts and service remain a small part of the business, accounting for 30 percent of the bottom line.

"We've never been very large in the parts department," Wagner says. "It's a goal that we keep striving for, to become a bigger parts store. Right now, we just handle all the parts necessary to take care of all the customers that we have coming in (from sales)."

He readily acknowledges the days where sales brought in most of the profits while other departments rode on its coat-tails are coming to an end.

"That's not where my bread and butter is; to me, it's always been more of a necessity to have, but through the years, we've been expanding on that and trying to get it to be more of a profit center," Wagner says.

The situation in the service department is similar.

"We'd like to get to the point where we can bring in outside service, people who have never been here before. I know we can gain sales through the service door, but we haven't had the time," he says. "I look at it like, 'OK, I could hire more service techs and try to bring in more service, but where do I actually come out ahead?' All I'm doing is creating more headaches."

Toy Haulers: A Growing Market Segment

Wagner knows change is inevitable, and that's especially apparent in his inventory. Before Jayco brought out its toy haulers several years ago, Wagner didn't sell them. Now, those units account for a small but growing percentage of his fifth-wheel sales. "We're starting to see a little bit of pickup in toy haulers. They are starting to create more excitement around here," he says.

Brian Beno, Wagner's RV Center sales manager, agrees.

"They're becoming more and more popular all the time," he says. "You've got the cost of gas, you've got the wear and tear on your vehicle. Now that (customers) see more and more of these toy haulers out there, and the floorplans in what they like, they're buying them all the time now."

Beno is pleased with Jayco's Talon line. Renamed Recon for 2007, the toy haulers offer gel-coated exteriors, large exterior storage, upscale interior treatments, and modern graphics. Customers have been attracted to them – the 36-foot, two-slide version with separate garage is most popular – for one reason, he says: "Luxury."

"That's just how the product is built. People would rather spend a little bit more money and get a very well-built product that they're comfortable with than save \$5,000 to \$10,000 on something they're not going to like. We've seen that a lot in the market now," he says.

Because Wagner's only offers a limited selection of motorhomes, the sales staff has developed a good way to convince potential buyers of such products of the advantages of a toy hauler.

"Sometimes, you're taking a motorhome buyer, and they already have a truck, and you just show them how they can get a top of the line toy hauler for a third of the cost of what a motorhome's going to cost them, and they still can have their bikes or snowmobiles inside," Beno says.

Other customers consider towing a cargo trailer behind a fifth-wheel or travel trailer, he says, a very popular way to travel in Wisconsin. "Instead of doing that, put the stuff inside the toy hauler, instead of buying a real short fifth-wheel."

One might think Beno's customers are loading up snowmobiles in their toy haulers. After all, Wisconsin has more than 22,000 miles of snowmobile trails, and snow can remain on the ground for almost five months in places. Good guess, but wrong. The top toy of choice, then?

"Actually, motorcycles," he says. "A lot of motorcycles, in general. That seems like it's the biggest market around here. There are some snowmobiles, yes. Mostly motorcycles are what people are measuring for. They want to be able to fit at least two full-dress bikes in there."

Although Wagner and Beno both say toy haulers will never sell as well in Wisconsin like they do in the Western states, they're pleased with Jayco's aggressive take on the segment.

"They build a good product, they've captured a lot of market share," Beno says. "They've changed (Talons) again for 2007, because they've really watched the West Coast market ... and they've adapted to it. They've built a plant out in Idaho to make shipping a lot easier to that target market area."

The benefit, he says, is brand recognition.

"Jayco," he says, "carries a lot of clout in our market area, and all through the Midwest. When you just see the numbers that they're starting to turn out West, it helps us around here as well." PRO

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