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First-Time RVers: Perils and Promise

This latest wave of RV sales is from first-time buyers. How dealers handle these RVers will have a huge impact on customer retention moving forward.

It's like being a bear in a salmon run, isn't it? I certainly never thought we would be in a market where the main concern is the ability of the OEMs to supply dealers with inventory. Dealer sales lots are as clean as they have ever been. Great times! And the icing on the proverbial cake is that we have an influx of new, first-time customers.

I see that as both a huge opportunity and as a threat. The opportunity an expanding market brings is obvious. The concerns raised by my perceived threat is a bit more subtle.

One of two elements to that concern is that we aren't selling to the first-timers in an appropriate way. The second element has to do with creating and meeting expectations in the minds of the new RVers.

While the sales process itself has remained virtually unchanged since time immemorial, the way you sell to a first-time RVer is quite different from selling to someone who already owns an RV and enjoys the RV experience. It's the difference between selling the experience or the equipment.

If you are selling the experience, you will

talk about the thrill and the experience. You will work to overcome the fears and objections, but you must be aware that they are a different set of objections if the prospect hasn't been RVing.

When you sell the equipment, you respond to technical questions more about what features and benefits distinguish the construction or components. The typical first-timer isn't technically competent enough at this point to care about those things.

The reason that anyone develops an interest in the RV lifestyle is to enjoy the freedoms of the road. It certainly harkens back to the times when many of us went camping as kids and we could smell the bacon on the open fire in the morning.

There is an old sales adage that says you must sell the sizzle – not the steak. That old saying is never truer than when you have a first-time buyer as a prospect.

They want to hear about where they can go. They want to understand what they can see. Often, they need to hear about the experience of bonding with the family and



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“Now, more urgently than ever before, dealers must staff up shops to meet the demands of the market. ... If we, as an industry, don't get that right, the sales department's best-intended promises can be waylaid by inadequate shop staffing.”

meeting new friends around the campfire in some picturesque setting. That's what sells to first-timers!

Overcoming Sometimes Unseen Objections

There are several items that will keep first-time RVers from being interested. These are the objections that they typically have. This list exists even if the first-timer doesn't recognize that these objections are a concern.

Early recognition of someone who is a first-timer and adjusting your presentation to cover the points they need to resolve to make a positive buying decision is critical to successful selling. Here is a short list of examples:

1. Payments – What will that unit cost me if that price tag is so high?
2. Insurance – I'll bet the insurance on something that expensive will kill my budget.
3. Parking – I must find a way to store or park it. I can't leave it at my house.
4. Maintenance – I'm uncertain about how much it will cost to manage the upkeep on it.
5. Operation – How will I learn to drive, tow, or to operate one of these? It seems too complicated.
6. Values, re-sales, etc. – What is my exit strategy?

There are responses that salespeople should have at their fingertips. In fact, if the prospect doesn't ask these questions out loud, understand that they are still in the back of the first-timer's mind and must be addressed before they can buy.

Payments. In the case of payments, if you have someone who looks at the prices of RVs for the first time, usually the only way they can compare it is against the price of a car. Auto dealers have certainly stretched the terms out, but they are nowhere near those available in our industry.

The prospect looks at your advertisement for a motorhome price at, say, \$80,000. He does a little quick math. He says, “Let's see ... I spent \$20,000 for my car. The payment for that is \$500. The payment for the motorhome must be almost \$2,000 then ...”

You can see how easily someone might have that thought process. It's an easy one to overcome. Simply start closing on payment. That's where most buyers make the decision anyway. It will likely be a pleasant surprise to the customer that they can make the payment so affordable. By the way, don't forget to work the possibility of a tax break on a “second home” into the conversation. Don't take for granted that they have considered that.

Insurance. Insurance is another one that will compare favorably to the expectation. You should have a couple of examples of insurance bills on typical units to pull out and show. That adds some credibility to the response you're giving.

Again, don't wait for the client to ask. They likely don't know all the concerns they have in the back of their mind. Your job is to get them out in the open and to overcome them so the smell of the bacon can reach their noses.

Parking/ Storage. Most cities have restrictions on where and how to park RVs. You must be prepared to bring up how to handle

that. Maybe you have a storage lot. Maybe you've worked out a deal with someone who does.

In the case of my city, RVs must be parked off the street and behind or beside your house. Know what the local restrictions are and actively approach the solution before the first-timer brings it up.

Maintenance. Our sister industry, boating, has a familiar saying. I'm sure you can fill in the blanks in this sentence. “A boat is a _____ in the water you pour _____ into.”

The first blank is “hole” and second is “money.” Unfortunately, the first-timers may have some of that sentiment hiding in the back of their minds even about RVs.

The way to overcome it is to let them know about the routine costs of any chassis maintenance. Also let them know that, unless they are full-timers, the miles you travel are fewer than your car. So the maintenance is, in the same way, much less per year. Gas prices also work in that same scenario. Every salesperson worth their salt should have a canned response to concerns over the price of fuel.

Operation. Operation is an easy one. You explain the delivery process. Take some pride in telling your prospect that they will always have someone at your store to ask a quick question.

Let them know about the training they will receive at delivery. They should know that, in a couple of years (or so), you will look forward to helping them to move up to another unit if they want to upgrade. You can mention the merits of specific units you carry holding value and the fact that you take trades. That should help them to feel comfortable with the future.

The next time you see this customer as a sales prospect, there will be a different set of questions. They will want to know about



the construction of the sides, the size of the engine, what the satellite system can do, or other such technical concerns.

For the first-timers – sell them on campfire camaraderie and the joys of seeing our great country with the family. That's what they are really buying, after all.

Addressing the Second Concern

The second concern is more complex and nuanced. The main point of the second concern is this: If we don't exercise great care in setting and maintaining expectations during this influx of new RVers, we can squander a great opportunity to place our industry on solid ground for a generation.

The new RVer buying today is, in many ways, more sophisticated than in the past. They are more “dialed in” by current technology,

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more informed by customer reviews and more financially aware than the buyers we had even five years ago.

In that light, it makes sense to be very intentional in your setting expectations at the outset of the transaction. That is, during what is essentially the “indoctrination” into the lifestyle.

The applicable axiom is “a good understanding makes a good relationship.”

The new customer may be unaware they are buying “a house in a hurricane during an earthquake” and not a car. They have no understanding of current production methods that result in virtually no replaceable part inventory at the OEM level.

The art comes in setting those expectations at a reasonable, achievable level while not dissuading the customer from purchasing. Despite the challenges of RVing at present, it is absolutely an enriching experience and one that, post-COVID, so many folks long to have. The “art” I mention speaks to the sizzle of the bacon on the campfire and the connections and camaraderie RVers enjoy.

I’d be negligent if I didn’t also mention the role of service departments to meet the new demand and the accompanying expectations. Now, more urgently than ever before, dealers must staff up shops to meet the demands of the market instead of subsistence-level staffing to meet only the needs of prepping and selling units. If we, as an industry, don’t get that right, the sales department’s best-intended promises can be waylaid by inadequate shop staffing.

It’s important to consider this new customer impact at the dealer level. The future of our industry is, in large part, in the hands of the dealership sales team. How they respond to the wave of new RVers and how they work to build those new owners into permanent and long-term RV owners will determine the industry’s future success.

Enjoy the way of new buyers while it’s washing over us all. Be wary of the damage that might be done by the force and scope of that wave. Remember that the tide and weather change constantly. So do markets. Don’t let bad habits be born out of good times! **RV2**

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