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RV PRO

FOR THE RV PROFESSIONAL

Forest River Expo Turns 10

CEO Pete Liegl and his executive team share insights on the upcoming Open House Week event.

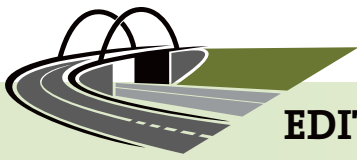


Also in this Issue:

- RV Makers Gear Up for Open House Week
- Suppliers Embrace Employee Wellness
- RV By Life Makes a Clean Sweep
- RV Care & Winterization Product Showcase



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EDITORS NOTE:

Open House Week Marks 10 Years



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Elkhart Open House Week isn't so much an "event" as it is a force of nature.

Today, it accounts for more than \$1 billion in sales, it brings more than 5,000 dealership personnel from across North America to northern Indiana to preview the latest RV models, it includes most of the major RV manufacturers, and it has shaken up the established order of RV trade events. It also seems to get a bit bigger every year.

Forest River CEO **Pete Liegl** is the first to admit he never imagined Open House Week would evolve into what it has become today – 10 years after Forest River singlehandedly launched the event.

Liegl says the goal he and his executives originally had for the event was much more modest: To host a casual event in which company representatives could sit down with their dealer partners to listen to one another's challenges and needs, while also emphasizing Forest River's financial strength. Getting dealers to place orders at the event, which they dubbed the Expo, was secondary.

In an exclusive interview with *RV PRO* for this issue, Liegl acknowledges he was initially less than thrilled when rival RV manufacturers jumped on the bandwagon by pitching tents across the street from Forest River's event at the Dynamax facilities in Elkhart in an attempt to draw off Forest River's dealers. In fact, at the time he referred to those companies as "squatters."

Today, with the passage of time, Liegl has mellowed somewhat on his critique of competitors hosting their own events coinciding with the Expo. In his insightful, extensive interview with *RV PRO*, Liegl discusses a range of topics related to Open House Week, including what he thinks of suppliers hosting their own coinciding events, what impact he thinks Open House Week has upon the National RV Trade Show, why the timing of the Expo works so well, and what his expectations are for this year's Expo. Be sure to check out the feature, which starts on page 12.

Speaking of Open House Week, just as the event has gotten bigger every year, so has *RV PRO*'s pre-event coverage in this issue as we strive to provide a comprehensive overview of what all the major RV makers and suppliers are planning. In fact, the amount of space dedicated to providing a sneak peek of this year's event is three times larger than just four years ago. Be sure to check out this month's sneak peek coverage beginning on page 24.

Welcome Aboard, Chuck

While this month's issue is dedicated largely to Open House Week, there is plenty of other good editorial content. In particular, be sure to check out "Principle-Based Problem Solving" by columnist **Chuck Marzahn** starting on page 130, for thoughts on how dealers can move past excuses to implementing best practices in their stores.

I'm happy to announce that, starting with this issue, Marzahn will become a monthly contributor to *RV PRO*. For those who aren't aware, Marzahn is a partner in Marzahn & King Consulting, a well-regarded training and consulting firm that's been providing industry expertise to dealers for more than two decades, and he is a sought-after speaker.

Needless to say, we're honored and thrilled to share his expertise with our readers every month.

As always, thanks for reading.

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Principle-Based Problem Solving

Dealership success comes from moving beyond excuses to implementing best practices that are rooted in doing what's best for customers, employees and the business.

A lot of time and effort in business goes into the search for best practices. Some businesses do so much better using best practices than others. Some are side-tracked thinking there must be a “silver bullet” or a “whiz-bang trick” that solves all problems. Some simply give up and tell themselves, “This is the way it’s always worked.”

I am intending to use articles like this one to explore principle-based ideas that are proven to work every time. Further, I hope this will develop as a dialog. I welcome your comments and experiences.

I have now spent more than four decades working in or on dealership businesses and

have seen the good, the bad and the ugly. In a cruel twist of irony, I seem to spend more time looking at the businesses that have challenges and are failing than those that are wildly successful.

I have an excuse. In the cases where I am hired as a consultant, it’s because folks are paying me to look at problems and offer solutions. But I see a larger segment of owners and managers who are improperly focused. It’s a perspective I desperately want to change.

Unfortunately, altogether too many businesses never see a better way. Those businesses are strife-ridden with beaten-down employees and higher than average turnover rates.



By Chuck Marzahn

Chuck Marzahn is a partner with Marzahn & King Consulting, a well-known, Virginia Beach, Va.-based consulting and training firm specializing in the RV industry. He can be reached for comment and questions at Chuck@MarzahnAndKing.com.



Success for dealers comes when they focus on doing what's right and what benefits all three stakeholders: customers, employees and the business.

Have you ever heard that phrase: “Where there is no vision, a people perish.” That statement is an example of an axiom. That is, it’s a phrase or saying you can accept as true without having to go through a process of proving it. You should do a search for that text if you don’t know its source.

Success happens when dealers look toward what can be done well – specifically, when they focus on the best ways, on doing what’s right and best for all three stakeholders: the customer, the business and the employees.

I regularly wish for a magic wand that can be waved in order to get service writers to understand that not using and managing the expectations on a promise date is the cause for dealers to fail every time. The better shops commit to customers and manage the inevitable slippage in the date the work will be done. Not doing so will always and forever lead to displeased customers and stressed out writers. The same principles apply to the OEMs when dealers order parts and units. That’s the funny thing about principles ... they always work.

Ask yourself a few questions: Do you often hear people blaming others or making excuses? Is the common response that the problem is based in some part on someone else? Are you and your people taking responsibility for your actions and results? Or, are you accepting what happens in your business life as simply “the way it is?”

Examine the two forms of internal dialog. First, listen to the conversations between employees or between yourself and other employees. Hear not only what is being said, but listen to the way it’s being said.

Second, listen to the running dialog that plays inside your head. Have you as the leader “given up?”

Instead, you ought to spend every moment looking deeply at what the great businesses do to become successful. How do you find businesses that are successful? Membership in the RV Dealers Association is one path. The Association has a terrific education track

at the annual RVDA Con/Expo. Also, think about 20 Groups. If you aren’t in one, you are missing a very rich and profitable experience.

The answer to the significant problems you face will be principle-based and reasonably simple. And as Einstein said, they won’t be solved at your current level of thinking. Notice that I didn’t say “easy,” I said “simple.”

Those problems you face stem from one or more of three things. It is either attitude, communication or judgment at the root of the problem. But the solution will always be in the basics. For almost 30 years now I’ve referred to that as “Marzahn’s Law of the Way Things Go Wrong.” I should take my own advice and call it “Marzahn’s Way to Fix Problems.” It is clear where the problems originate. The trick is seeing what basic step is being missed, ignored or circumvented.

For more than 20 years now, those in the RV business have said, “Well, you know we’re 20 years behind the car business. Isn’t it time to stop making excuses and do what’s right for your businesses, customers and employees?”

However, I’m not so much interested right now in the tweaks you may give your business from a 20 Group Best Idea session. I’m more interested by now in the principles and time-tested truths that serve as the foundation for good business. I’m talking here about a culture that is focused on a vision that is so compelling that it would be totally unacceptable to fail or to make an excuse for not performing at the highest levels.

Having a clear purpose is key.

It’s been said recently that we seem to be a people who are fascinated by the next shiny object. I’m not making that up. You can Google it. It’s called “shiny object syndrome.” So many people have become so very distracted that they can no longer seem to focus on what is known to produce results. That distracted vision is stunting the growth and productivity in dealerships.

Having the right people is key.

If you are a typical business, some of your people are toxic. They need to go. Everyone knows it.

And your general manager is being held accountable as measured by a lack of respect from those who see that leader as tolerating someone who clearly isn’t working for the best interests of the dealership. Worse, they see themselves as victims of your ineffectiveness as their leader.

As an example, many dealers tend to let themselves be held hostage by improper staffing. When a dealership is understaffed in productive techs and salespeople, dealers often live under that fear that one of them will leave.

The better way to approach staffing is to have an organization that is so much better than others in your marketplace that you have a line of candidates looking for a chance to come to work with you. When you are the best, you can recruit the best. If you’re looking for validation, ask if the Yankees or the Red Sox have trouble finding players.

Conversely, when you’re sloppy and poorly run, you get the dregs. After all, 10s won’t work for 5s and 6s. And 2s, 3s and 4s tend to work for 5s and 6s!

Don’t ignore the point that better staffing of productive personnel results in higher revenue. When you have good people in production positions it is as if by some form of magic they find a way to get that sale or finish that job. And it’s a culture changer. Imagine a business where your people are focused on getting the job done instead of accepting excuses from each other and placing blame on someone else.

Having solid, effective processes is a key.

Without a plan, you plan to fail. Without a process that is clearly designed, accepted by those using it and well-executed, you will always be in a reactive process instead of being proactive.

Is your sales process clearly defined? Is it being executed as intended? Are there employees who think themselves “except-

tional.” That is, they believe they have an exception that allows them to follow their own process. Do they think they are smarter than you? Perhaps they are.

Having a performance culture is a key.

Do your people see the job as an entitlement or an opportunity? So many today think the good life is owed to them. And we perpetuate that outlook when we allow ourselves or our employees to coast through the day.

It's the receptionist's desk that's become the social hub for the salespeople. It's the techs who rely on a QC check to catch an error they've made. In the worst cases of that example, the tech may actually leave a problem unsolved to see if it gets caught. It's the salesperson with his feet up reading his smartphone instead of making calls to prospects and customers.

What level of performance are you accepting? Do your players think their seat on the bench is a cinch, or do they have to prove themselves worthy of that position on the team every day. Do you have a “minor league” player in the wings who is itching to take over that position?

As author Dan Heath has said, “In times of change, we instinctively ask, ‘What’s the problem and how do I solve it?’ But we tend to ignore a question that is every bit as useful: ‘What’s working already and how can we do more of it?’”

This column is intended to step in that gap. I want to give you a set of proven and effective tools for your business’ toolbox.

Don't you think it's time to look for solutions instead of being ground down. There is usually plenty of input indicating what is wrong or broken. I'd much rather focus on solutions rather than problems. Wouldn't you? **PRO**

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RV PRO COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

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