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CROSS MARKET TO INCREASE SALES

With the summer season winding down, many people are contemplating the coming fall and the changes it brings. As winter approaches, their thoughts are far removed from unpacking the outdoor furniture and are now considering where to store it until next spring. A few consumers may look for end-of-season sales at their local patio shops, but others are most likely preparing for the heating season ahead. For the forward thinking dealer carrying both patio and hearth products, the changing seasons signal a shift in focus without a slowdown in sales.

“They complement each other very well,” said Madison Fireplace’s Tommy Stallings of carrying both patio and hearth products. “We buy the products at different times of the year so it’s not a strain on cash flow. Currently we tend to sell both products equally as well year-round.”

In addition, Stallings noted that contemporary outdoor fireplaces and fire pits with tumbled glass replacing logs as well as outdoor lighting are popular, too.

For John Crump of Hickory Fireplace, diversification is the key to success. “I’m always looking for a new product category to level the ups and downs,” he said. Originally a hearth dealer, Crump added a patio line to offset seasonal sales.

But, he cautions, “Be careful not to get into something that’s not a good fit for your market.”

Although opening in 1968 as a hearth shop, Bassemiers brought in patio furniture in 1975 as a counter-season product, said John Bassemier of Bassemiers Fireplace, Patio & Spas, Inc.

“We used to sell one in one season and one in the other,” he said, adding, “but nowadays it’s all at once.”

The Casual Living Fireplace Center began as a patio-only dealer and added hearth products to survive in the short outdoor season markets of Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky. “Fireplaces seemed to be the most natural product to add to offset the winter sales slump,” said Carl Vice, manager. “You can only sell patio furniture in this market for six months of the year,” he said.

His four locations now carry about a dozen different hearth products including accessories. While it is often easier for an existing hearth dealer to pick-up and learn a patio product line, going from patio to hearth requires a technical understanding of the products. However, learning the ins-and-outs of fireplace, stove and other hearth technology is easily done through the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Education Foundation (HPBEF). Specific appliance training is offered by many manufacturers.

“We teach the concepts and principals of what makes these products function properly,” said Rick Vlahos, senior manager training, HPBEF. “The first thing someone new to the industry should do is either purchase and study the Hearth 101 manual or take the course online, either live or on-demand. This class gives a broad picture of the hearth industry, and I think it is the most critical class that we offer.”

Once you’ve familiarized yourself with the different hearth products, i.e., gas, wood, or pellet-burning, you can choose which path to continue down. “But the first thing you need to understand is the broad choices before narrowing it down,” said Vlahos. “We’re talking about



Bassemiers’ show floor with fireplaces and patio furniture.

building a fire in somebody’s living room. Let’s be sure we do it right.”

Moving beyond Hearth 101, there are many classes that new dealers should take to not only learn about the products, but how to sell them as well as manage and market their business. Many of these are lessons that seasoned professionals continue to stay abreast of during HPBExpo and their affiliate meetings.

Once you understand the broad business of heating appliance operations, manufacturers can provide you with the product specific training.

“We worked with a patio store that tried to do everything themselves and failed,” said Glen Spinelli, vice president of North American sales, Regency Fireplace. “Patio retailers typically have a great customer base, but a dealer has to understand hearth merchandising. Until the owner and staff learn how to install a hearth product properly, they need to partner with an installation company.”

Like all hearth product manufacturers, Regency Fireplace wants their dealers to succeed. To that end they provide hands-on product and sales training and will also connect new dealers with an experienced installation company until the dealer and staff are trained and certified to install hearth products.

“A dealer has to find a manufacturer who is willing to spend the time to teach them the business. And, the dealer has to have a desire to stick-with-it and also, hopefully, form a relationship with a manufacturer who has the patience to teach the business and not just sell the dealer products, hoping more sales will follow,” said Spinelli.

While many hearth dealers have found that adding a line of patio furniture draws sales in the warmer months, patio dealers will find the opposite to be true at the onset of, and during, the heating season. “Cross marketing,” said Spinelli, “can be easily done.”