

EVERGREEN SPAS AND SAUNAS



FUN OUTDOOR LIVING



PRISTINE POOLS & SPAS



SWIM FITNESS

VISCOUNT POOLS,
SPAS & BILLIARDS

HALCYON SPAS



PREMIERE HOT TUBS



COMBINED POOL & SPA



THE BEST THING I DID FOR MY BUSINESS

THIS YEAR'S RETAIL STARS REFLECT ON THEIR MOST SIGNIFICANT DECISION.

BY MEGAN KENDRICK

When we asked our Retail Stars what made the biggest difference in their business over the last year, we were amazed at the similarities in their responses. These weren't the typical industry coded answers — each retailer had thoughtful, unique ways to describe how they bettered their business. But while the way each implemented these choices might have been different, the concepts themselves were incredibly alike. We found seven key approaches that, across the board, transcended store size and location:

EXCEED YOUR CUSTOMERS' EXPECTATIONS

EMBRACE THE FLEXIBILITY YOU HAVE AS A SMALL BUSINESS

ENGAGE YOUR EMPLOYEES

WELCOME THE RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING ASPECT OF YOUR JOB

DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF YOUR PASSION

BRAND YOUR STORE AND VALIDATE YOUR POSITION

SIMPLIFY YOUR PRODUCT OFFERINGS SO YOU CAN BE THE EXPERT

Like our Stars, how you accomplish these things will be customized to your customers and situation. But if these concepts have already proven successful for our Stars, they're surely worth a closer look for your business, too.



EVERGREEN SPAS & SAUNAS
EVERGREENLEISURE.COM
LOCATION
Mishawaka, Indiana
OWNERS
Joyce and Dennis Dudycha

Pictured clockwise: Dennis Dudycha, Wendy Boyer, Joyce Dudycha
Photo: Chris Davis

TO OUR CUSTOMERS WE SAID, LOUDER THAN ANYTHING, WITH COMPLETE CERTAINTY, WE'RE GOING TO BE HERE. WE ARE ABSOLUTELY DEDICATED AND DETERMINED TO BE HERE WHEN EVERYTHING GOES BACK TO NORMAL.

WENDY BOYER, SALES MANAGER
EVERGREEN SPAS & SAUNAS

EVERMORE

BRANDING, EMPLOYEE DEVOTION DEFINE RESILIENT INDIANA HOT TUB STORE.

MISHAWAKA, IND.-BASED Evergreen Hot Tubs has been in business for almost a quarter century. The company has spent those years building its reputation in the community, but during the recession the Evergreen team truly saw the value of its staying power.

Sales manager Wendy Boyer has worked at Evergreen for 17 years and says it is now “laser focused” on the brand.

“We were a little shy about [branding our own business] before and probably answered more about the differences between our product versus their product,” Boyer says. “Through the recession, a lot of customers have realized it’s more about the relationship, about how we’re going to stand behind the product and find the product that’s suitable for them.”

As Boyer watched her high-achieving, overextended clients seek relief, it proved an opportunity. “To me, the recession is just a bigger stage where that stress played out,” Boyer says. “We saw people more catalyzed than ever to go forward and find something that would help them reduce the stress in their life.”

While the hot tubs offered customers physical comfort, working with Evergreen gave them peace of mind.

“There is so much credibility in saying — in the right way at the right time — ‘Hey, I’ve been doing this for 17 years, Evergreen’s been here for 24 years. We have weathered storms before; this one will be no different, and we will be here. We have the track record to show and prove it,’ ” Boyer says. “And that’s huge. But it has to be timed well so it comes across as credibility and not bragging.”

Prerecession, Boyer says many of the hot tubs Evergreen sold were in the upper echelons of the Hot Spring line. But during the recession, mind-sets changed, she says; customers wanted to justify the purchase. “They wanted to come in and say, ‘Show me your most expensive,

EVERGREEN IS A DEALER WHO HAS A HEART FOR THEIR CUSTOMERS. EVERY CUSTOMER WHO VISITS THEIR STORE WALKS OUT WITH A SMILE BECAUSE THEY KNOW THAT THEY MATTER — THEY ARE TREATED LIKE FAMILY. THE TEAM AT EVERGREEN IS PROFESSIONAL AND KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS AND THE INDUSTRY. EVEN WITH ALL THIS EXPERIENCE, WE APPLAUD THEIR COMMITMENT TO CONTINUING EDUCATION. THEY TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ALL THE TRAINING THAT WATKINS OFFERS IN ORDER TO GIVE THEIR CUSTOMERS THE BEST EXPERIENCE.

— MIKE DUNN,
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, HOT SPRING SPAS

show me your least expensive, and I’ll buy something in the middle,’ ” Boyer says. “So we started to look at what we offered in that range and became very competitive with our pricing in the middle.”

Evergreen saw the necessity of selling to everyone, and its closing ratio reaped the benefits. Boyer says she would discuss strategies on “how to hang in there during a presentation” with owners Joyce and Dennis Dudycha.

“We began to use things that underlined our credibility, like iPads on the sales floor,” Boyer says, adding that she gives full credit to the Dudychas for the company’s success during tough times.

“They held on to their beliefs and their philosophies like a life preserver in a storm,” she says. The Dudychas also created an environment where the employees took ownership of the company’s success, hiring people for whom the company vision resonated. “We realized the survival of the company was not on the backs of the owners — it was on all of us,” she says. “It was going to take everybody to accomplish what we needed to accomplish.”

BRANDS CARRIED

- HOT TUBS:** Hot Spring
- ACCESSORIES:** Hot Spring Necessaries, Leisure Concepts, Covana
- CHEMICALS:** ACE Salt System from Hot Spring, SilkBalance, Leisure Time, Hot Spring’s Freshwater products
- OTHER PRODUCTS:** Gazebos, Patio furniture, Saunas



Photos: Chris Davis



OUTDOOR EVERYTHING

TIRELESS MARKETING, AND A PLETHORA OF BACKYARD PRODUCTS AND SERVICES, PRIMES FUN OUTDOOR LIVING FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE.

WHEN MONEY IS TIGHT, it can be tempting to slash the marketing budget first. But for Fun Outdoor Living, that wasn't an option.

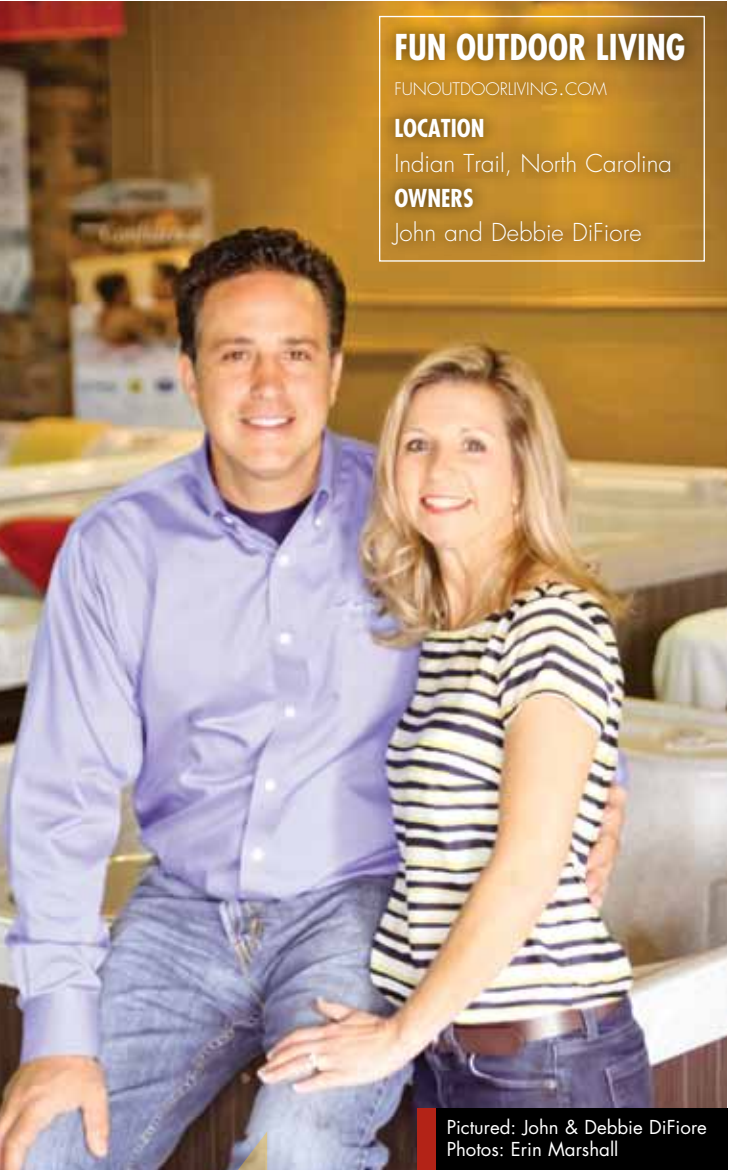
"Before the recession, we would simply have a high volume of hot tubs sold and not a whole lot of effort put in to move that product," says John DiFiore, owner of the Indian Trail, N.C., store. "The buyers were coming to you. During the recession, we really had to knuckle down and get into some grassroots marketing campaigns in order to help stimulate demand in the marketplace."

DiFiore would advertise with road signs, classified ads, even fliers in mailboxes they had printed themselves. "We couldn't even afford to have them professionally printed," DiFiore says. "You can never stop marketing; you just need to find more cost-effective ways to get the message out when times are tough."

The approach worked, and in 2009 the company moved from a warehouse concept to a retail approach. At the end of 2012, DiFiore says they "graduated" into the Hot Springs marketplace and began selling the high-end brand.

In 2004, DiFiore's wife, Debbie, purchased the company from friends. Although she had no experience in the hot tub industry, she had done plenty of retail and sales work. By 2006, the business was doing well enough that John left his work in the home-remodeling industry to work with her. His experience has proved useful, as Fun Outdoor Living can provide its customers complete backyard construction.

"We went from being just a straight-up warehouse hot tub — load it on the back of your truck and take it with you — to full-



FUN OUTDOOR LIVING

FUNOUTDOORLIVING.COM

LOCATION

Indian Trail, North Carolina

OWNERS

John and Debbie DiFiore

Pictured: John & Debbie DiFiore
Photos: Erin Marshall

WE'VE MONITORED RESULTS FROM EVERY ADVERTISING PROGRAM SO WE CAN INCREASE BUDGETS FOR THOSE THAT WORK, AND ELIMINATE THOSE THAT DON'T.

JOHN DIFIORE, OWNER

FUN OUTDOOR LIVING



BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Hot Spring Spas,

Premium Leisure

ACCESSORIES: Hot Spring
Necessaries, Essentials, Leisure
Concepts

CHEMICALS: ACE Salt System
from Hot Spring, EcoOne, Hot
Spring's Freshwater, Spa Frog

OTHER PRODUCTS/SERVICES:

BBQs, Fireplaces, Landscaping,
Outdoor kitchens, Patios,
Pergolas, Room additions

service, white-glove delivery," DiFiore says. "We'll put new mulch and plants around your hot tub, build a deck or pergola, and that grew into complete patios, outdoors kitchens and fireplaces."

DiFiore is able to give customers a "grand plan"

with the option to complete sections as they can afford. "We're able to give an estimate on the entire project and offer the opportunity to do it in phases," DiFiore says. "For example, we'll get the hot tub and flatwork installed today and then do some stone-surround steps next year. We'll add landscaping into it as we move forward."

Not losing sight of marketing, Fun Outdoor Living has increased its budget for home shows and events and closely monitors the results.

"I see the American public starting to loosen up from where we were in 2009," DiFiore says. "The general public is much more open to the idea of buying something."

ONE OF THE PRIMARY REASONS HOT SPRING SPAS HAS SUCH TREMENDOUS CUSTOMER LOYALTY IS BECAUSE OF THE EFFORTS OF DEALERS SUCH AS FUN OUTDOOR LIVING IN INDIAN TRAIL, N.C. THE EXPECTATION OF EXCELLENCE IS DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN THEIR BUSINESS CULTURE. FUN OUTDOOR LIVING NOT ONLY DEMONSTRATES EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE, BUT ALSO A SINCERE COMMITMENT TO MEETING THE NEEDS AND PREFERENCES OF THEIR CUSTOMERS.

— MIKE DUNN,

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, HOT SPRING SPAS



PRISTINE POOLS AND SPAS

PRISTINEPOOLANDSPA.COM

LOCATION

Boise, Idaho

OWNER

T.J. Brown

Pictured: Chris Allen
Photo: Submitted by store

WE'RE NOT GOING TO DOWNSELL THE COMPETITION'S PRODUCT. WE'RE GOING TO SELL OUR STORY AND WHAT MAKES OUR TUBS AND STORE UNIQUE. WHEN CUSTOMERS COME IN TO BUY THE HOT TUB, IT'S NOT A TRANSACTIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR THEM; IT'S A RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE. WE WANT THEM TO COME BACK AND ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE WITH PRISTINE.

CHRIS ALLEN, RETAIL STORE MANAGER

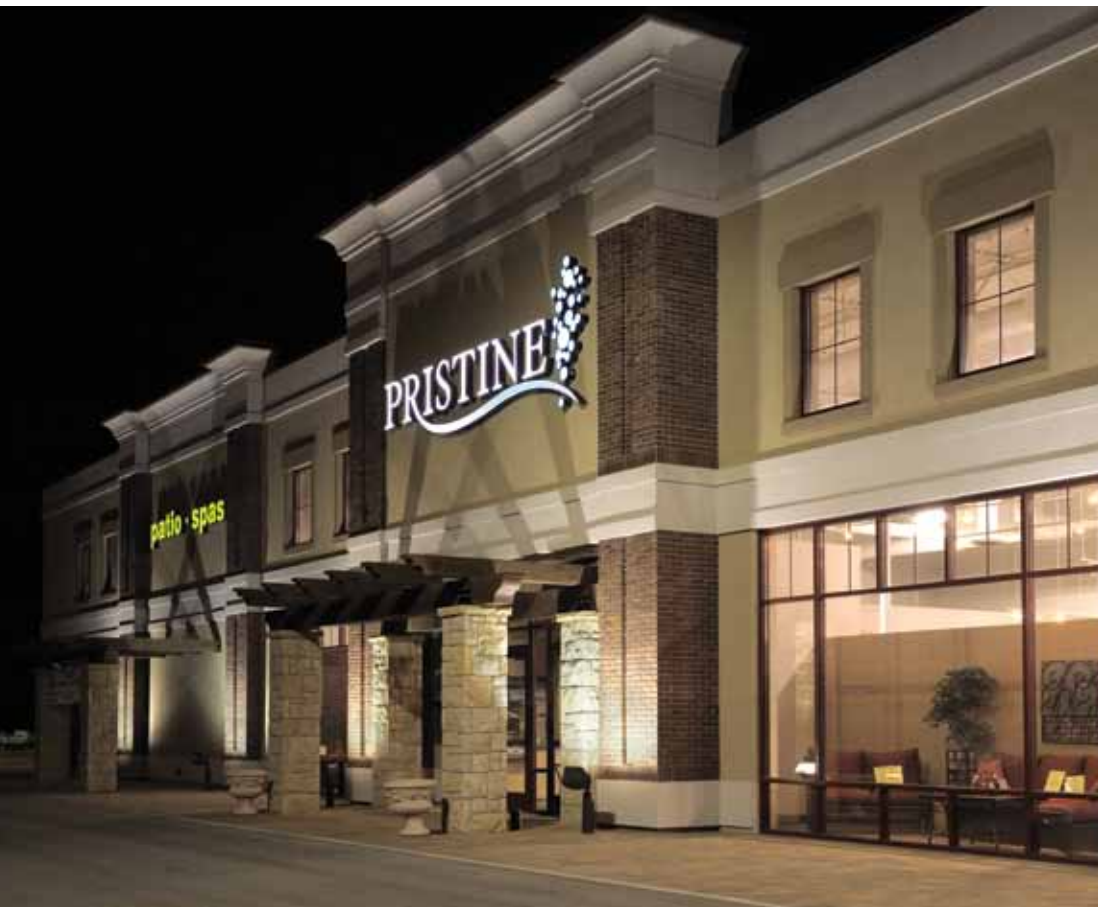
PRISTINE POOLS AND SPAS

TOP TO BOTTOM

CHASING A FRESH APPROACH TO BUSINESS, PRISTINE POOLS AND SPAS JUMPSTARTS ITS COMPANY CULTURE.

IN MAY OF 2010, Pristine Pools and Spas moved into a 20,000-square-foot showroom, 18,000 square feet larger than where it had been. Store manager Chris Allen says Pristine enjoyed the growth the new location brought, but now is turning its focus to customer service and employee satisfaction.

"After the first couple years of growth at the new retail location, [Brown] wanted to restructure his approach to the retail floor," Allen says.



Brown’s and Allen’s approach included honing in on which products to sell and trying to reset the company’s internal culture.

Pristine’s 20,000 square feet encompasses multiple backyard elements — including pools, spas, patio furniture and fire pits — and multiple brands within those categories. “The problem with carrying too many brands is it begins to be confusing for customers and difficult for the salesman to effectively learn their products,” Allen says. “So we carefully selected which brands met our customers needs.” They started to weed out products that didn’t do well or cluttered the selling process, and went from carrying five spa brands to two.

“We want customers to come back and enjoy the experience with Pristine, not just their hot tub,” Allen says. “When they come in to buy the hot tub, it’s not a transactional experience for them — it’s a relationship experience. Their experience with us is why they’ll come back and buy again, or refer their friends and neighbors.”

A big part of that experience — and an area much harder to refresh than products

— is the company culture. The overall feel of the store is reflected by the attitudes and passion of the employees, Allen says, so he and Brown began the difficult task of making sure they had the right people in place. (This included having to let a few go.)

“We wanted the people who had the long-term goals in mind and wanted to be part of that long-term team,” Allen says. Attitude and teachability, not experience, were paramount. “There are a lot of new products on the market that are efficient and effective, and have changed the industry,” Allen says. “We need people with open minds to look at the products we’re going to carry and be excited about them. If we don’t have those types of people, it’s hard to gain traction.”

Having the right employees wasn’t the end of the culture

BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Dimension One Spas, Nordic Hot Tubs

ACCESSORIES: Cover Valet, Leisure Concepts

CHEMICALS: Natural Chemistry, Zodiac

OTHER PRODUCTS/SERVICES:

BBQs, Patio furniture, Swimming pools

Pictured: T.J. Brown
Photos: Steven Paul

journey: Now they had to keep them happy.

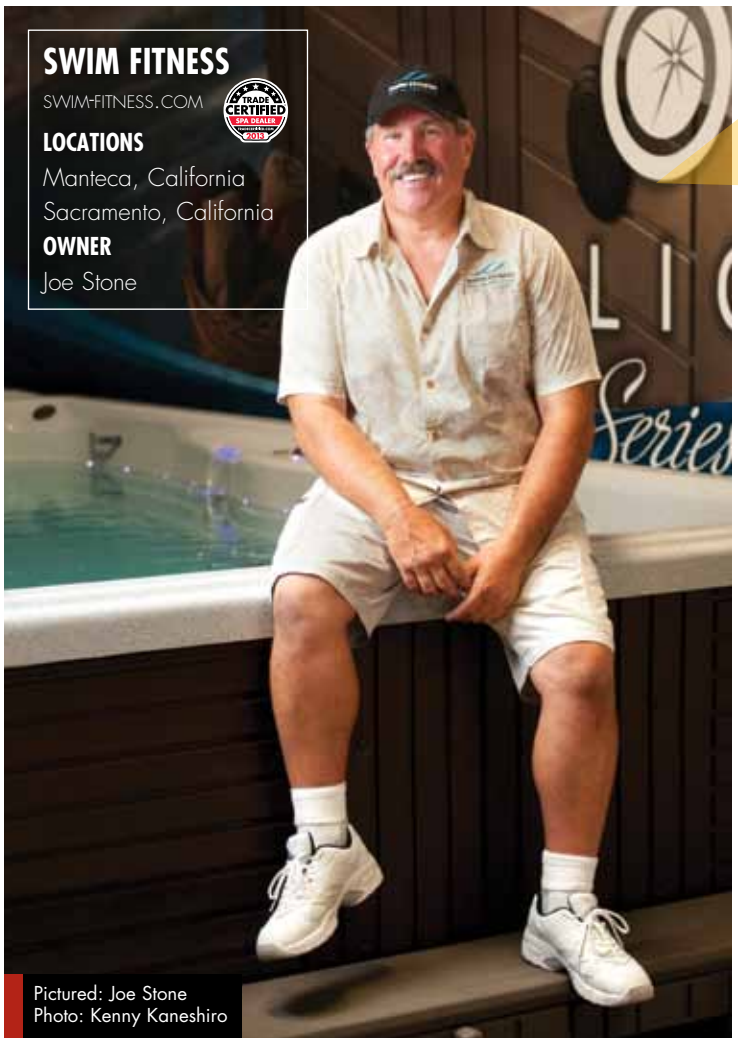
These days, regular open-forum discussions let employees know their opinions and talents are appreciated. The meetings, along with encouraging and participating in community and charity programs, have helped to shift Pristine towards a collaborative culture.

“Once our employees began to feel that they are part of a team here, we’ve seen dramatic changes,” Allen says. “Whether it’s policy changes or anything that comes up, we reason together, we come up with a solution and we come out as a team.”

To help gauge how it’s doing, Pristine now participates in Best Places to Work in Idaho, a program developed by local human resources firm POPULUS and *Idaho Business Review* magazine. Pristine’s employees are surveyed anonymously on their job satisfaction. “It’s nice to get their true feedback and see our employee satisfaction increase,” Allen says.

PARTNERING WITH A PREMIER COMPANY LIKE PRISTINE POOLS AND SPAS MAKES IT VERY EASY TO SHOW PEOPLE WHY WE STAND APART IN THE INDUSTRY. FROM THE AESTHETICS OF THE SHOWROOM AND THE PROFESSIONALISM OF THE STAFF TO THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE, PRISTINE IS A SUPERSTAR.

— **RUSSELL MOODY,**
REGIONAL SALES MANAGER, D1 SPAS



Pictured: Joe Stone
Photo: Kenny Kaneshiro

[INFUSIONSOFT] IS THE MOST POWERFUL HIGH-TECH CAPABLE TECHNOLOGY THAT CAN BE ADAPTED TO A BUSINESS LIKE THIS. IT’S A BIG INVESTMENT, BUT IT IS THE SINGLE GREATEST INVESTMENT I’VE MADE IN THE BUSINESS.

JOE STONE, OWNER
SWIM FITNESS

THE LONG HAUL

JOE STONE’S LOW-OVERHEAD, SIMPLIFIED PHILOSOPHY FOR SELLING SWIM SPAS KEEPS BUSINESS BOOMING.

WHEN THE FOLKS AT MASTER SPAS convinced Joe Stone to jump back into the hot tub industry, he knew the times called for a new type of business plan. Stone developed a model he hopes will keep him afloat no matter the economic climate.

“It’s a model where I have the smallest overhead conceivably possible,” Stone says. Not only that, he says, but “it’s a major emphasis on swim spas with a very minor emphasis on hot tubs.”

Stone’s business is a low-volume, high-dollar, long-buying cycle, low-overhead venture — which means he must build long-term, meaningful connections with his customers.

“You have to be prepared to maintain a relationship for a long time,” Stone says. “The gestation period for a swim spa customer can be a couple of months to a year. And most dealers don’t want to spend that much time working with somebody to get a deal.”

Stone has come up with several ways to foster and manage those relationships, but first he has to find his prospects.

“My single largest expenditure is marketing and promotion,” Stone says. “You have to communicate to the world. We have something they need and then you have to create a sense of urgency.”

With the new economy, a skittish public and a whole new world of online selling and marketing possibilities, Stone says there isn’t a script for retailers to follow anymore, so he’s made a new one. He has recently punched up the company’s website with high-resolution images of swim spa installations.

“If people can visualize what they’re thinking about, the decision to do it becomes very easy,” Stone says.

The backend of the website is getting an upgrade too, with Infusionsoft software and technology that Stone says is the best investment he’s made in his business. The software is comprehensive, Stone says, and the other programs he’s used — including Salesforce and Constant Contact — have only pieces of the full capabilities of Infusionsoft.

“It is a technology that automates 90 percent of my communications,” Stone says, adding that Infusionsoft does the job of two marketing people, continuing his philosophy of low overhead. “If I can get someone to my website, it automatically takes over. It’s deeply imbedded through Google’s technology. It’s not a Google product, but it’s so key to understand how much Google knows about you and me. They know where we go, when we go, what we’re looking at and what we’re interested in. That technology is free to the world; you just have to tap into it. When you incorporate a third party like Infusionsoft and build a relationship-management software around the science Google has already developed — man, it’s powerful.”

Stone is experimenting with new things, but it wasn’t the technology that got him back into the business.

“The biggest surprise is to see the facial expression and the real benefits some people experience when they get in the water,” Stone says. “It’s the greatest reward I could’ve dreamed, and I didn’t see it coming.”

BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Master Spas, Michael Phelps Signature Swim Spas

ACCESSORIES: Aquatfix, Leisure Concepts

CHEMICALS: Private label

OTHER PRODUCTS: Saunas



Photos: Kenny Kaneshiro

WITH THE WAY THE MARKET IS TODAY, IT CAN’T JUST BE BUSINESS AS USUAL. THE FACT IS, THE GOOD OLD DAYS JUST DON’T EXIST ANYMORE, AND THE WAY CUSTOMERS PURCHASE IS DIFFERENT. SWIM FITNESS HAS ADAPTED TO THESE CHANGES AND UNDERSTANDS WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED IN TODAY’S DEMANDING MARKET. THEIR CUSTOMER-FIRST ATTITUDE REALLY SETS THEM APART FROM OTHER RETAILERS, AND THAT’S HUGE WHEN MAKING THESE MAJOR PURCHASES.

— KEVIN RICHARDS,
NATIONAL SALES MANAGER, MASTER SPAS



Pictured: Bob Zacharski with customers Nicole and Reagan Brooks
Photo: Submitted by Bob Zacharski

VISCOUNT POOLS, SPAS AND BILLIARDS

VISCOUNTPOOLS.COM

LOCATIONS

10 locations in the Detroit metro

OWNERS

Bob and Kevin Zacharski

EVERY CUSTOMER WHO WALKS IN THE DOOR, WHETHER THEY’RE LOOKING TO BUY A GUMBALL, A \$7,000 SPA, A POOL OR A GAME TABLE, THEY DESERVE WHITE-GLOVE TREATMENT AND RED-CARPET SERVICE. IF YOU THINK WITH THAT MENTALITY, WHEN THINGS ARE BAD, THOSE PEOPLE WILL REMEMBER WHO TOOK CARE OF THEM.

BOB ZACHARSKI, OWNER

VISCOUNT POOLS, SPAS AND BILLIARDS



Photo: Dan Wonsch

AMERICAN RESILIENCE

VISCOUNT POOLS, SPAS AND BILLIARDS OVERCAME THE ODDS TO BECOME A DETROIT SUCCESS STORY.

IMAGINE RECOVERING FROM THIS:

It’s the spring of 2009 and you just spent \$25,000 on a two-week radio campaign. In the middle of one of those commercials, the radio station breaks away with this news: Two of the largest employers in your area, General Motors and Chrysler, are declaring bankruptcy.

For Bob Zacharski, owner of Detroit-based Viscount Pools, Spas and Billiards, “That was like taking \$25,000 and throwing it out the window.” And yet, even more troubles were about to befall both Detroit and Viscount.

The official unemployment rate for Detroit topped out at just below 30 percent in 2009 — triple the national average at the time. But many felt the actual number was closer to 50 percent if you took into account the underemployed and those who had simply given up looking for work. To stay alive, Viscount had to dig deep.

“As bullcrap as this sounds, it was this passion, this drive to succeed, that true American entrepreneurial spirit that I’m not going to fail,” Zacharski says. “It was a lot of personal hardship and personally reinvesting money back in the company, and those weren’t fun times.”

What surprised Zacharski, though, was how much smaller-ticket items like chemicals made a big difference. Zacharski recalls a day in May 2009 when Viscount had a ring-out of around \$10,000. Zacharski was excited, but then his son, Rob, looked more closely at the numbers. That day, the store had served hundreds of customers. That same day in 2006, a single customer made a purchase for the 2009 total.

“We’re an upper-middle-class, blue-collar company,” Zacharski explains. “Automobile workers making \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year would come in and buy a new spa cover, [During the recession], you saw them



Photos: Dan Wonsch

BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Emerald Spas, Great Lakes Spas

ACCESSORIES: Leisure Concepts

CHEMICALS: Spa Frog, Zodiac, Private label

OTHER PRODUCTS: Above-ground pools, Game tables

coming in and saying, ‘I think I’ll just take the two-pound jar of chlorine because I need to feed my family.’ ”

Even before the recession, however, Detroit had gone through significant transformation. In 1950, the city was 84 percent white and 16 percent black. By 2010, it was the reverse: Eighty-four percent black and 11 percent white. In his years in business, Zacharski has seen a dramatic switch in demographics.

“Thirty years ago, you were dealing with white Anglos,” Zacharski says. “Today, you’re working with Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern, African American and Latino customers. And they all have different needs, wants and desires.”

Like many hot tub retailers today, Zacharski has also seen an influx of customers wanting help with a failing hot tub that was bought online. While it is frustrating to help those folks, Zacharski encourages his team to not lose the big picture.

“When the guy who bought a spa on the Internet tells his friend that some little old guy who works in the store with a whale on the building helped me out, that is a referral,” Zacharski says.

For this reason, Zacharski doesn’t avoid the Internet shoppers and recognizes that, in general, the relationships Viscount has developed over the years keep customers loyal, a concept Zacharski carries into his vendor relationships as well.

“We’re in bed with really, really good people,” Zacharski says, adding that his vendors have bent over backwards to work with him while things were tough: delivering on demand, making deals on freight, cutting order minimums. “Our vendors make our life easier.”

WHAT WE APPRECIATE MOST ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OWNERS AND MANAGERS AT VISCOUNT IS THE VALUE THEY PLACE ON OUR TOTAL ROLE AS A SUPPLIER-PARTNER. IT’S NOT JUST PRICE THAT DRIVES THAT RELATIONSHIP, BUT EVERY ASPECT OF BEING A VALUED SUPPLIER, INCLUDING CUSTOMER SERVICE, SALES SUPPORT, TAKING FEEDBACK ON PRODUCT FEATURES AND INNOVATION, PROVIDING FLEXIBLE CREDIT TERMS AND RESPONDING TO UNUSUAL OR SPECIAL ‘ONE-OF-A-KIND’ SALES OPPORTUNITIES. WE STRIVE EVERY DAY TO EARN THE LOYALTY VISCOUNT HAS SHOWN US IN THE PAST 20 YEARS.

— PAUL STAGH,
GENERAL MANAGER, EMERALD SPA CORPORATION



Pictured: Duane Hunt
Photos: Think Big Studios

WE USED TO SELL POOL TABLES, BARBECUES, SAUNAS, HAMMOCKS, AND A HUGE RANGE OF LEISURE PRODUCTS. WE WERE A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING. WHAT WE LEARNED WAS TO STICK TO THE KNITTING. WE GOT RID OF A LOT OF PRODUCT THAT WAS FRINGE. WE’LL NEVER LOSE SIGHT OF OUR CORE BUSINESS AGAIN.

DUANE HUNT, OWNER
HALCYON SPAS

SOCIAL CHANGE

CANADIAN SPA COMPANY AMPS UP ITS ONLINE PRESENCE.

MOST WOULD AGREE that 56 is not all that old, but Duane Hunt, owner of Halcyon Spas in Regina, Saskatchewan, likes to joke that he’s “getting a little long in the tooth.” But when it came to the company’s online and social media strategy, he knew he had to jump in with the young’uns.

“This whole social media thing was sort of mysterious,” Hunt says. “But we decided to be proactive because our market and demographic is pretty active with that kind of stuff. Back in the day, it was a big deal when we got our first fax machine. But these kids are born with computers, smartphones and iPads. We just thought it’s well worth doing.”

Over the last year, the company has stepped up its social media presence with giveaways and promotions to grow its online following. And to do that, Hunt says, he had to get over his fear of not being able to control what people say.

“You can’t satisfy some people no matter what you do,” Hunt says. “I was afraid that a customer would make our social media life hell. But I realized that no matter what happens, there’s always a way to deal with things.”

So far, there haven’t been any instances of people being negative or offensive on its social media platforms, and Hunt is pleased with the company’s online image.

“We wanted to make sure that we weren’t the dinosaurs,” he says. “We wanted to be cutting edge in every way. Not only in the products, service, pricing and promotions, but also in the ways that customers can reach out and find us, and that we can reach out and deal with them. It’s a form of communication that you never had before.”

Hunt is also trying to validate the business in the eyes of customers through regional and national accreditations. Halcyon has become TradeCertified (a *SpaRetailer* program) and “Trusted” through TrustedRegina, Canadian certification, similar to Angie’s List.

“I explain it to customers as, ‘Because I’ve been doing this a long time, it’s kind of like our degrees in business,’ ” Hunt says.

“You have some tangible thing you’ve accomplished. We’re very proud of [our certifications and accreditations], so we talk about them in the showroom to make sure the customers are satisfied that they’re in the right place. That’s why we do it.”

Hunt worked in the building supply and construction

BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Maax, Powerpool

ACCESSORIES: Cedarcraft Gazebos, ClearBlue Ionizer Systems, Iroka fragrances, Leisure Concepts

CHEMICALS: Sani Marc, SpaNaturally, Spa Solution

OTHER PRODUCTS: Backyard ornaments, BBQs, Saunas

business before he started his hot tub shop in 1995. Due to the extreme weather in Regina, the year is split with six months being busy and six being slow. Over the years, Hunt brought on various leisure products to sell during the slow winter months. But it didn't work that way.

"It tended to dilute our efforts in our main focus, which was hot tubs," Hunt says. Shortly before the economic slowdown hit the area, he got rid of those fringe products.

Hiring and keeping solid employees also allows Hunt to take time for himself. Next year he hopes to spend the winter in Arizona.

"When my oldest son was learning how to ride a bike, eventually I had to let go of that bike," Hunt says. "It's similar in business: The people who work for me have the freedom to make decisions, to learn and scrape their knees."

Hunt is focused on ensuring that each move Halcyon makes improves both the profitability and value of the business, and hopes that he has created something that can be passed on.

"You have to run a good, smart business and be around for a long time," Hunt says. "You have to care to make that happen. At the end of the day, it's all about customer focus. If you take care of people, eventually you can't lose."

AS A MANUFACTURER, WE RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH HIGH-QUALITY RETAILERS. ULTIMATELY, THE RETAILERS INTERACT WITH THE CONSUMER, AFFECT YOUR BRAND AND DETERMINE YOUR SUCCESS. WE APPRECIATE HALCYON SPAS FOR THESE REASONS. NOT ONLY DO THEY PLAN WELL AND WORK HARD TO GROW IN THEIR MARKET, BUT THEY ALSO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF TOTAL QUALITY IN RETAIL. THEIR OVERALL CUSTOMER SERVICE AND PROFESSIONALISM IS TOP NOTCH.

— KEN MCCARGAR,
TERRITORY SALES MANAGER, MAAX SPAS



THERE'S THIS PARADIGM THAT YOU ALWAYS WANT TO HAVE SOMETHING TO SELL PEOPLE, NO MATTER THEIR BUDGET, BUT IT JUST DOESN'T SEEM TO WORK FOR ME. I FINALLY SAID I'M GOING TO FOCUS ON THE HIGH-END AND FORGET THE LOW-END TUBS.

BILL MEYER, OWNER
PREMIERE HOT TUBS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

AUSTIN, TEX., HOT TUB STORE OWNER REFLECTS ON HIS BUSINESS REPUTATION, OUTLOOK.

WHEN BILL MEYER, owner of Premiere Hot Tubs in Austin, Tex., talks about his focus on closing sales, he wants one thing to be clear: It's not about the hard sell. "We're very educational in the way we sell hot tubs — but we're not in the education business. We aren't charging tuition to walk in the front door; we have to sell hot tubs."

The company's closing rate jumped dramatically last year, and Meyer says there are many reasons why. The store itself is a destination, he says, so it doesn't see many drive-by shoppers. Premiere has made an effort to improve by working on three things: the sales process, showroom visuals and utilizing promotions.

"When I say 'closing,' I'm not referring to closing on the first

visit," Meyer says. He has a joke or expression — all based on truth, he says — related to most all business situations. "You sell the hot tub on the first visit. You may not write a sales order for two years, but you sold it on that first visit."

To improve the sales process, Meyer says it defined why it was selling hot tubs, then taught that process to his employees, expecting them to sell the way he wants them to.

In the showroom, Meyer did a lot of work to make the visuals compel people to buy now utilizing posters from his hot tub brands as well as some explaining the experience of buying from Premiere.

"If I think somebody's ready to buy a hot tub, I will find a reason to convince them that the time to buy is now — that's the whole promotion piece," Meyer says. "It's a sense of urgency, of why it would be advantageous to purchase now."

The reason to buy now may be a sale or what you'd think of as a traditional promotion, but Meyer says it could be anything. He recently did a site survey for a man who was in the midst of building a new home. The customer wanted to put off the hot tub purchase until after the house was built, but since the delivery would require a crane, Meyer suggested it get done now before the driveway was completed. "It was a pretty good reason for urgency, albeit unusual, but I realized it was there," Meyer says. "It's best if your reasons are real."

A relative newcomer to the industry, Meyer started his business in 2006 when he purchased a franchise and moved his life from Southern California to Austin. The franchise relationship didn't work out as planned, but the industry had its hooks in him, so he started Premiere.

"There's a silver lining in every cloud," Meyer says. "It was a big cloud, but it made me learn this business very quickly. I started Premiere with only three years of [industry] knowledge in 2009 in the middle of the recession, but we're more than four years old and still here. We've grown every year."

Since Meyer's not beholden to an industry legacy or operational history, he feels no guilt in abandoning what doesn't work: For him, that's selling entry-level tubs. He says it just hasn't been effective for his business.

"I'm increasingly focusing on what the name Premiere Hot Tubs means in this market," Meyer says. "It does not mean cheap hot tubs. To me it means the best of everything — your best customer experience, your best website, the testimonials and the best value."

Despite his efforts, Meyer simply couldn't move tubs in the low-end price range — which he admits is not a bad problem to have. Low-end tubs didn't fit into the image he's worked hard to create at Premiere.

"It's critically important that you develop an identity for your company," Meyer says. "Why are people choosing to come to you? This is the kind of business where there just aren't that many competitors in a given town. You're not selling pizzas."

BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Bullfrog Spas, Clearwater Spas

ACCESSORIES: Leisure Concepts, Covana

CHEMICALS: Leisure Time

BILL IS ONE OF OUR HIGHEST-QUALITY DEALERS. HE GETS INVOLVED WITH ALL ASPECTS OF OUR PRODUCT FROM THE ENGINEERING TO THE MARKETING; HE IS WILLING TO OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE BOTH. CLEARWATER SPAS VALUES THIS FROM HIS KNOWLEDGEABLE AND PARTICULAR PERSPECTIVE.

— LARRY RICHARDS,
VICE PRESIDENT, CLEARWATER SPAS





COMBINED POOL & SPA

COMBINEDPOOLANDSPA.COM

LOCATION

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

OWNERS

Tom and Rachael Junck;
Jeff Carlson

Pictured: Tom Junck
Photo: Bryon Middleton

OUR FOCUS HAS ALWAYS BEEN ON THE CUSTOMER, SOMETIMES TO A FAULT. BUT WE'RE REALLY WORKING ON SERVICING WHAT WE SELL. WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'RE TAKING CARE OF THE CUSTOMERS WHO ARE PURCHASING FROM US FIRST AND FOREMOST. THEY'RE OUR HIGHEST PRIORITY, AND WE WANT THEM TO FEEL THAT WAY.

TOM JUNK, OWNER

COMBINED POOL & SPA

EYE ON THE PRIZE

STREAMLINING OPERATIONS GREAT FOR BUSINESS AT COMBINED POOL & SPA.

"IF THERE'S A BETTER way of doing something, we're going to do it," says Tom Junck, co-owner of Combined Pool & Spa in Sioux Falls, S.D. That's not always the attitude of an industry "lifer." In fact, Junck jokes that the only other job he had he only lasted at a day. "This is all I've ever known — all I've ever done," Junck says. "I always tell people that I didn't know any better, but it's a unique business."

Junck worked at his parents' pool and spa company in Iowa until he moved to Sioux Falls in 1999 to open a store as an extension of his parents' business. In 2004, he purchased his branch from them and ventured out on his own.

With that history, it would be easy to fall into "this is the way we've always done it" mode, but Junck and his employees are determined to do their best.

"We have a really supportive group here," Junck says. "Everyone in our organization has always been open to change. If it improves the way we do business, improves efficiency and customer relations, everyone has been on board."

The company has recently undergone several changes. Combined Pool & Spa started using Evosus business software two and a half years ago and is now using knowledge gleaned from that to hone in on ways to make the company more successful.

"It's opened our eyes to all the different aspects of our business, especially when it comes to profitability," Junck says. "So we've made a lot of changes — eliminating categories, getting out of certain things and focusing more on others."

For instance, above-ground pools were always a big seller at his parents' store. "I used to set up 50 to 75 of those myself a year when I was a kid," Junck says. "But as we started to analyze the numbers, it just didn't make sense any more. We were able to focus more on our hot tubs, patio furniture and in-ground pool business instead."

Combined Pool & Spa has also taken a closer look at its staff. During the recession, Combined eliminated a couple positions, but Junck is now making sure his key staff are in the right place.

"We've been getting feedback from our employees and moving people around based on their skill set," Junck says. "We try to utilize the capabilities of our current staff. They've started doing more things they enjoy and they're good at."

Junck says the company has made an effort to better document the company's processes as well so employees know exactly what is expected.

Combined also realized how crucial its service department manager is to the overall company's success, so it looked to an outside recruiter to find the right person to fill that position. In order to get what it was looking for, Junck says it recognized the need to make a bigger financial investment in that position. "It's been paid off ten-fold," he says. "The service manager, Brendan Wiseman, has made a world of difference on us as owners because he's been able to deal with it instead of us always having to intervene."

The Evosus software gave Combined a vehicle to track its budget, purchasing and inventory. "It took the emotion out of it," Junck says.

Longtime co-worker Jeff Carlson, a lifelong friend of Junck's, bought into the business in 2006 and became a partner to Junck and his wife. Junck says adding Carlson to the ownership team has helped keep things balanced.

"We truly equal each other out," Junck says. "We're a lot stronger together than we are separate." Carlson is more outgoing and has a passion for customers, while Junck and his wife fit better in the operational side of the business.

Junck believes in partnership at his store and with his vendors, from Olhausen Billiards to Caldera Spas.

"We've been fortunate that the last five years we've been the No. 1 volume single-store retailer for Caldera, which is awesome," Junck says. "But Caldera has a lot to be credited for because they treat us as a partner. They're in business with us, and they've always supported us in anything we've needed from top to bottom." ■

BRANDS CARRIED

HOT TUBS: Caldera Spas, Freeflow Spas

ACCESSORIES: Caldera branded accessories

CHEMICALS: BioGuard, SilkBalance

OTHER PRODUCTS: Bar stools, Billiards, Game tables, In-ground pools, Patio furniture

IN A YEAR WHEN CALDERA IS TRANSFORMING ITS BRAND, TOM IS ONE RETAILER WE KNOW WILL TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF OUR MOMENTUM IN ORDER TO REACH NEW CUSTOMERS. ENGAGED DEALERSHIPS LIKE COMBINED POOL & SPA ARE REALLY THE REASON CALDERA IS GROWING. THEY CONTINUALLY CREATE NEW BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES, AND THAT'S THE TRUE MEASURE OF RETAIL EXCELLENCE. WE'RE SO FORTUNATE TO HAVE COMBINED IN THE CALDERA FAMILY. AND THE FACT THAT TOM AND HIS TEAM ARE SUCH GREAT PEOPLE TO WORK WITH IS AN ADDED BONUS.

— **SHELLY ROBERTS,**
BRAND MANAGER, HOT SPRING SPAS



Photos: Bryon Middleton

