

## Back to School

## Learn from others' mistakes



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**I**t's hard to believe that summer is nearly over and the kids are just about to return to the classroom. In honor of back-to-school time, I thought I'd go back to school myself. Rather than answer questions, I decided I'd ask the question and become the student.

I talked to dealers from a wide array of different backgrounds, affiliations and regions. All have one thing in common: they've learned memorable lessons they were willing to share.

There are two ways to learn: from your mistakes or from someone else's. It's a lot less painful to learn from someone else's mistakes. Here is what some colleagues have learned.

**Q.** What's one of the biggest lessons you've learned as a mobile tool dealer?

**A.** Don't trust only one WD with a critical order.

"One lesson that I've learned is to not rely on one WD to deliver a tool that you need the next day. Always order from two WDs if it's a critical order," says

independent dealer and eight-year veteran Bridget Lankford of Central Carolina Tools & Supplies in Durham, N.C.

"What do you do when you end up with two of the same tool?" I asked.

"Put one on the shelf for a month and a half, and if it doesn't sell, send it back," says Lankford. "I always put the higher priced one on the shelf — just in case."

**A.** Being dumb is, sometimes, smart.

"It's about sales and how we can make sales," says Richard Benitez, a newbie Cornwell dealer in New Braunfels, Texas, with only seven months experience who has managed to shoot up to Cornwell's top 20 dealer list. "The sales tactic that I guess works best for me is what I like to call my 'ignorant' sales tactic.

"I am somewhat ignorant as to how to use some of these tools. I'm not a mechanic. I don't come from that background," Benitez explains. "The best asset I have as a salesperson is the customer himself. I can walk in and say 'Can you tell me how this tool works?' The more and more people you can get involved in telling you how that tool works, the more and more people are going to buy it."

Often, Benitez says, if that customer doesn't know the answer, he'll find a tech who does. And someone in the shop will likely buy one — often the person teaching him how it works.

"It's okay to be ignorant about

something," says Benitez. "They may laugh at you a little bit. And that's okay. As long as you're making the sale, they can laugh at you a little bit."

**A.** Your flag wants you to succeed — really!

"The biggest lesson I learned was probably 'listen to corporate,'" says 25-plus year Mac Tools dealer Tom Neamon in Arcade, N.Y. "They're there to help you. They're there to make you successful — and if you're successful, they're going to be successful. So, basically do what they tell you to do."

"For example?," I asked.

"I thought I could work four-day weeks," Neamon explains. "I tried it twice and almost lost my business twice. You've got to go out there and put in a full day and a full week. There are guys out there I know that are doing four days, but I don't know how they're doing it. Probably doing 12-hour days or something like that."

Neamon now works five days a week and thanks his current regional manager who he credits with helping him turn his business around many years ago by pointing out missteps.



**A.** An ounce of skip prevention is worth a pound of the cure.

Former logger and current Cornwell dealer Tyler Neuenschwander in Medford, Ore. says keep a short leash on how much credit you extend.

"He (the dealer) just needs to be very careful with who he extends credit to and how much credit," says Neuenschwander, drawing on his five years experience. "There isn't a dealer out there that hasn't been burned. It's part of the mobile tool industry. And that is one thing I'd say to every dealer in the country [that is] until you have good rapport with your customers — just be careful.

"With technology, there are all sorts of ways nowadays to track people down," Neuenschwander says about handling a skip. "As far as the Internet, you can use Facebook, you can use collections. There's all sorts of options

for getting that money back. It's just a matter of how much time you want to invest in trying to get that money back versus going forward and saying, 'I'm not going to worry about it, I'm just going to worry about the money I can collect and my good customers.'

**A.** You're not just selling tools; you're selling yourself.

"I'm not just interested in the sale, I'm interested in the relationship," says Paul Murray of Lexington, Ind., who's gone from independent rep to dealer in his 20-some odd years in the tool and equipment business. "It has nothing to do with product. It has nothing to do with brand name. It has nothing to do with anything except getting a customer to believe that you bring some sort of value to the relationship."

"In that same vein, it doesn't do me any good to sell something that I don't personally believe in," he continues. "Take drill bits, for example. There are a lot of good drill bits out there, but I found a line I think are the 'be all and end all,' and I can go in with a missionary-type zeal when I call on these guys because I feel like I'm bringing the best possible mix to the party, which is a high-quality item that's going to work for them."

"If I've got relationships, whether I sell something or not I can go into a place and have a productive meeting," Murray says.

"I can sleep at night knowing that I've got relationships. If somebody hears my name, there's going to be good feelings associated with that for the most part," Murray adds, with a laugh.

What's the biggest lesson you've learned? ■

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