

Patio & Hearth PRODUCTS REPORT™

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TREASURE GARDEN



FIRE STONE HOME PRODUCTS



DESIGNS BY GARRY

Specialization Breeds Success

By taking pride in its product line and maintaining a high level of customer service, Grill & Patio Solutions has become the largest custom manufacturer of outdoor kitchens in South Florida.

BY CAROL DAUS



From left: Owners Michelle and Lloyd Knevelbaard and Foreman Mark Woodcock.



IN TODAY'S WORLD OF BIG-BOX STORES AND LARGE-SCALE INTERNET SHOPPING SITES, MANY MERCHANTS WANT TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE, BUT GRILL & PATIO SOLUTIONS IN ROYAL PALM BEACH, FLA., HAS FOUND THAT BEING THE BEST IN A SPECIFIC AREA CAN BE JUST AS LUCRATIVE. LLOYD KNEVELBAARD AND HIS WIFE, MICHELLE, OPENED GRILL & PATIO SOLUTIONS IN 2002 AFTER WATCHING A FRIEND SUCCEED WITH AN OUTDOOR-KITCHEN BUSINESS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

"At that time, there was nothing like this in Florida," Lloyd says. "My friend was building them and was doing quite well, so we felt we could be equally successful in Florida." After five years, the Knevelbaards certainly have achieved their goal, but they are quick to point out that it takes considerable planning, hard work and enormous financial resources to make an outdoor-kitchen business succeed. "In South Florida, many outdoor-kitchen businesses have opened and closed in recent years, while Grill & Patio Solutions has grown steadily," Lloyd says.

Although there are many reasons for the Knevelbaards' success, they believe that one of the best decisions they made was to offer a single product line: R.H. Peterson's Fire Magic gas grills and accessories. When Grill & Patio Solutions first opened its doors, it sold a number of different lines, but it quickly found that R.H. Peterson provided what they felt was the best customer support. "Very few retailers choose to specialize in one line, but it made sense for us, and it's paid off well," Lloyd says. "Our biggest attribute is our product knowledge about this specific line."

Other businesses, including large Internet superstores, national retailers and local dealers, carry the Fire Magic line, but often lack sales staff knowledgeable about product details. Not only have the Knevelbaards and their staff installed hundreds of these grills, they have cooked on them, and have even taken them apart to understand how they work. Grill & Patio Solutions also has helped R.H. Peterson enhance specific features of its products. A recent example occurred when R.H. Peterson sought Lloyd's feedback when improving its igniters. "Since it's the only line we carry, R.H. Peterson values our opinion," Lloyd says.

WORD TRAVELS QUICKLY

When Grill & Patio Solutions first opened, the Knevelbaards relied heavily on postcard



OutdoorGrilling



mailers and on advertising in the telephone directory and in local magazines. Since then, the most effective form of advertising has been word-of-mouth promotion. "Our referral business is the best," Lloyd stresses. Many customers seek out the business after seeing a friend's or relative's outdoor kitchen. As an active member of the Palms West Chamber of Commerce, Grill & Patio Solutions also participates in a number of chamber-sponsored cookouts and block parties. They supply the grills at no charge and local chefs prepare the food. In return, Grill & Patio Solutions is able to display business cards and brochures alongside the grills.

A well-designed Web site (www.grillandpatio.com) has also helped Grill & Patio Solutions grow, especially in terms of Internet sales, which now represents a substantial portion of its business. Not only do customers find them on the Web through R.H. Peterson's dealer directory, they also find them through search engines and other links.

Numerous customer testimonials are posted on the site, and this helps customers in making their final purchasing decisions.

Since the bulk of their business is referral based, the Knevelbaards have not had to rely on drive-by traffic for customers. In fact, their 3,500-square-foot showroom and warehouses are located off the beaten track, and there is no splashy sign located in front of them. Fewer than 10 percent of their customers even come to their showroom. "Since everything is built custom, on-site at our customers' homes, we focus on home visits," Lloyd says. "People choose to go with us because they not only appreciate our product knowledge and experience, they like us as people." A large Barbeques Galore is located just down the street from Grill & Patio Solutions, but this has never been a problem for the business. "Customers tell us they appreciate us because we're personable and less overwhelming than large retailers," Lloyd says.

Grill & Patio Solutions has about 10 island configurations on display in its showroom, as well as the complete line of R.H. Peterson barbecue/grill accessories and Real-Fyre logs. The accessory line provides repeat business, since R.H. Peterson has an extensive array of products, including side burners, rotisseries, bar cad-

dies, barbecue cleaners, lights, charcoal baskets, grill covers, cookbooks and carving boards.

HIRE THE RIGHT STAFF

Although specialization has played a key role in the success of Grill & Patio Solutions, Lloyd also credits a dedicated staff for helping the business grow over the years. The eight-person staff has been with the company since it was founded, and each employee understands the importance of providing first-rate customer service. "You have to be a people person to succeed in this business," Michelle stresses. She notes that customers have many questions because they have made a decision to spend a considerable amount of money on an outdoor kitchen. The Knevelbaards have found that many of their customers appreciate the fact that they offer one product line. "They know we've done our research and they feel comfortable using us because they have faith in the product line we've selected," Michelle says.

A focus on quality products and service has also made Grill & Patio Solutions stand out from the competition. The Knevelbaards could cut various corners to save money, but they recognize that this would harm their reputation. "We use the finest products available because we offer a lifetime structural warranty on our kitchens," Michelle says. "This tells our customers that we are committed to this business and we are not going anywhere."

The Knevelbaards believe that there are many rewards in owning an outdoor-kitchen store. When a kitchen is built from the ground up, the Knevelbaards particularly enjoy the customer satisfaction that results. Since everything is constructed on-site, the customer is directly involved in the preconstruction, framing, construction and finishing phases. In some instances, they are even able to make changes during the framing stages at no additional charge. "There are endless choices when it comes to outdoor kitchens, and I enjoy helping customers design something they end up loving," Lloyd says. "There's no better feeling when you observe the finished product and the customer is so appreciative." ■

TWO GUYS GRILLING: FROM HOBBY TO BUSINESS

By Carol Daus

Michael Todd and David Biber were typical Southern California neighbors. They lived on a quiet cul-de-sac and rarely connected with one another, except for the occasional wave when garage doors closed. After they retired (coincidentally, around the same time), Todd and Biber soon noticed billowing smoke and enticing smells coming from each other's backyards on a regular basis. It was clear that both had a passion for barbecue, and that they also had plenty of time on their hands.

"Eventually, we started comparing notes on spices and cuts of meats, and we found that we had a lot in common," Todd says. This then led to regular test-kitchen Saturdays at Biber's house. "We'd come up with a theme and then work together to come up with different recipes," he recalls. Sample plates were distributed to neighbors for critiques. There were very few complaints or suggestions for improvements, however, and the neighbors encouraged Todd and Biber to hold cooking classes. They did this in an informal way at neighborhood block parties and eventually started teaching grilling classes in an upscale kitchen-supply store in San Clemente, Calif.

As their reputation grew, it was apparent that Todd and Biber needed to form a business to protect their interests. Biber's wife came up with the name Two Guys Grilling; since then, things have not been the same for these personable retirees. Their mission is to share their passion for grilling with others and to provide advice that instills confidence in preparing memorable meals. Much of their work involves cooking classes for local companies and nonprofit organizations. Recently, Two Guys Grilling conducted a grilling course at a special event held at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles to raise money for a public radio station. Several hundred people attended the event.

Early in the formation of their business, Todd and Biber realized that they needed to team up with a barbecue/grill manufacturer that not only produced superior grills, but also shared their passion for community outreach. After exploring many different options, Todd and Biber decided to partner with Irvine, Calif.-based AEI Corp., which provided its PGS grills for the cooking demonstrations. "It was very important for us to partner with a company that develops quality products and provides superior customer service, because we knew the people coming to our classes would ask us for



referrals on which grills to buy," Todd says.

This grassroots type of promotion provides excellent exposure for AEI. In some cases, the publicity is targeted directly toward potential buyers of barbecue grills. For example, Two Guys Grilling recently conducted outdoor grilling classes at a local building materials/hardscape-supply store for their customer appreciation day. "We served over 900 tacos hot off the grill, which gave AEI and its PGS grills great visibility because many of these people were considering

building outdoor kitchens," Todd says.

In addition to its grilling classes, Two Guys Grilling also operates an online business, offering its own line of spices and rubs, cookbooks and other barbecue supplies. Between processing orders and teaching classes a few days of the week, Todd and Biber are not living the typical retiree's life, but they agree that they could not have found a better pursuit for this stage of their lives. "We absolutely love sharing our excitement for good food," Todd says.