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BLOSSMAN'S WINNING SHOWROOM



Blossman's Winning Showroom:

'WOW!'

Walking through the front door of the new Blossman Gas showroom in Asheville, N.C., customers are tempted by a vast array of propane-fueled appliances that can make them feel like "kids in a candy store." But in this case, it's eye candy for homeowners, who can easily visualize how the many products on display could enhance their lifestyle. Whether it's a new barbecue grill to transform a simple dinner into a feast, a new fireplace and surround to make a

living space cozier, or a new tankless hot water heater to make a long shower more enjoyable, Blossman Gas has thought of everything. And the best way to describe this showroom is “WOW!!”

Blossman’s commitment to propane appliances is nothing new — the company has believed in the importance of appliance sales for more than 20 years. Prior to the completion of its new showroom last October, it had a 1200-sq-ft area devoted to this segment of its business. When it moved into its new, more centralized location, with hopes that the expanded showroom would increase walk-in traffic, little did it realize that sales would exceed budgetary expectations from the day the doors first opened. It appears that the company’s commitment to propane appliance sales has been a hit with consumers.

Talking with David Lipe, branch manager for the new Asheville, N.C. location of Blossman Gas (Ocean Springs, Miss.), you will soon realize out how strongly he believes that propane marketers should sell appliances, and he is likely another reason why this endeavor is so successful. He feels, “If propane marketers don’t sell, promote, and install and service a propane appliance, who will? In other words, we can’t depend on the Lowe’s and Home Depots of the world to sell the products that burn and use the gas that we sell to make a living. I urge every propane marketer in the country to sell appliances.”



As customers enter the front door, it is impossible to not be impressed by the striking 10-ft linear fireplace with 10- to 12-in. dancing flames that welcomes them to the showroom. In front of the fireplace is a long table with two computer touchscreen kiosks that allow customers to find any product in the Blossman lineup. When customers touch a certain category such as grills, the next screen will pop up, letting them select information on eight to 12 grill models. Although only one or two of the models might be displayed for the customer to see on the showroom floor, the kiosk provides information on all the models that the customer can purchase from Blossman.

The kiosks are also helpful if the sales team is busy helping other customers. “In a lot of cases we can direct them to the kiosk and let them explore while we finish up with the prior customer,” Lipe stated. “Then of course they’ve

already seen a few of the things and we can discuss them more in detail. It helps capture their curiosity...and keeps them in [the store] if we happen to be busy when they walk in the door.”



Blossman's outdoor displays (top photo) entice customers before they enter the showroom. David Lipe (above) is branch manager for Blossman's Asheville, N.C. location.

To the left side of the showroom floor is an outdoor kitchen with everything from gas grills, fish fryers, and grill utensils, to rubs, barbecue sauces, and other condiments. A large blue hammock hangs from the ceiling. Another quadrant of this area features a fully functional kitchen with a five-burner, 36-in. cooktop. A selection of ranges, in addition to a well-appointed kitchen, provides builders and their clients, as well as walk-in customers, with an array of ideas to update their kitchens.

In the center of the showroom floor are a number of laundry pairs — some standard white models, another in a granite gray, and yet another in a fanciful cranberry color. When asked why both washers and dryers are on display (since only the dryers utilize propane) the Blossman representative answered that many customers needing a new dryer (or washer) end up wanting a matching set. Because both are available, customers do not need to leave the showroom to purchase the pair.

Continuing to the right side of the room, customers will see the water heater area. A working Rinnai tankless water heater is available over a small sink, where people can view how the water heater works when the water turns on. Bradford White tank water heaters are located in the same area, in direct-vent and power-vent models. Space heaters

are nearby, with vented, direct-vent, or vent-free models available.

To the right of the main showroom, customers enter the fireplace room, which includes fireplaces from Regency and Monessan that are vented and functional. Fireplaces and gas log sets from Empire Comfort Systems are some of Blossman's hot sellers. At one end of the room, visitors will notice a portrait of Blossman Gas founder Woodrow Blossman and another of his son, John Blossman, who was president and CEO of the company before his passing in 2009.

But the "wall of flame" is the main feature of that room, with 12 sets of live-burning gas logs. The six on the top row are vented gas log sets; the bottom six are vent-free. At any one time, a Blossman staff member can turn on one, six, or all 12 of the units for customers, although Lipe doesn't recommend turning on all 12 at once since it could increase the room temperature by about 4 degrees every half hour.

All of the live-burn products in the showroom run on propane. Blossman does not stock appliances that run on natural gas but will order one if a customer requests it.

Two walls in the fireplace room are dedicated to options, such as fire screens and fireplace panels. "We're able to take things off the wall and build the fireplace to suit a customer's wants, needs, or desires," Lipe noted. "I call that my 'build-a-bear' workshop." Another wall is dedicated to fireplace mantels.

Also in the fireplace room are two vintage cast iron stoves from Empire Comfort Systems that look like they use wood, but they actually run on propane. "These are heating appliances, but they have the appearance of the old cast iron wood stoves," Lipe noted. "Not the potbellied stoves, but just the heating stoves. These are freestanding cast iron, very heavy, very beautiful, porcelain-finished space heaters."

Rounding out the showroom is an area dedicated to space heaters, including vented, direct-vent, and vent-free heaters from Rinnai that can fulfill any homeowner's needs.

Enthusiastic about all of the propane appliances available at the 5000-sq-ft Asheville showroom, Lipe is also passionate in his belief that propane marketers can benefit from selling products that use propane, even from a smaller, 500-sq-ft site.

He also wants propane marketers to know that getting started is not that difficult. His company already operated a

1200-sq-ft showroom before moving to the new site, so his staff was experienced in this area. But moving to the larger space did require some homework on the part of the team. The staff members met to determine which brands to display on the new showroom floor. Factors in their decisions were availability of the product, warranty, and responsiveness of the vendors to questions or concerns about the products. The Blossman team decided on choosing

“core” brands that they would primarily recommend to customers. Although the showroom carries various brands of each appliance, Whirlpool is its core brand for clothes dryers and cooking products. Other core brands are Bradford White water heaters and Rinnai tankless water heaters. Empire and Monessen are the core brands for gas logs.

“And we’re trying to stay away from the products that the ‘big-box’ stores carry,” Lipe stated. “While there’s nothing wrong with the materials and products they carry, we wanted something that was better. Products that would bring our customers more comfort, whether that be peace of mind, warranty, or price point. There are several different things that go into making that customer comfortable.”

Determining the flow of how the products would be displayed was one of the main challenges in setting up the new showroom. Keeping the grills in one section and kitchen appliances in another section, for example, helps give the area a flow and a purpose.

Lipe notes that the attractive appearance of the new building has helped bring in more customers. But the increased choices of products are the biggest factor in the success of the new showroom. Rather than seeing one or two gas logs on display, as was the case at the previous building, customers now see 12. Instead of one water heater, one cook stove, and one clothes dryer, customers now see several choices of those as well.

He is seeing an increased trend of homeowners wanting propane products such as water heaters, indoor cooking appliances, and outdoor grills. That trend helps toward Blossman’s goal of reaching more of the smaller-volume propane customers. Although the company seeks business from larger commercial businesses that use thousands of gallons of propane annually, Blossman is making a push to target people who might burn 100 gallons or less per year.

“If we can get one or two more products in that home that burn that 50 to 75 gallons a year, that’s one more customer for us.”

Lipe encourages marketers to take advantage of those trends, because companies such as Lowe’s and Home Depot don’t favor propane. “They don’t care; they’re going to sell the electric or gas. It really doesn’t matter to them. I think every propane person that owns a business, whether it be a major company or private mom and pop, needs to be selling appliances to promote their product. We have to have a voice and get our products out there to burn the fuel that we love to sell.”

By Natalie Peal and Daryl Lubinsky



Kiosks Give Customers a Broad Appliance Experience

As the Blossman team worked to determine the core product line at the new Asheville showroom, team members realized that the company needed a state-of-the-art means to showcase all of its products to customers, and not just at the Asheville location. But since the 75 locations varied so much in size that the company could only display a limited number of its core products in every showroom, the group considered placing a computer at the front of the building where customers could simply check Blossman's website to see the product line. In the end, the team decided on kiosks to give the customer a more complete experience of how the products work and all the information needed to make the best buying decision.

In addition to providing pictures of the products and prices, the kiosks include informational videos that the product suppliers provide. For example, one of the videos shows fireplace logs from Monessen. Blossman director of marketing Emily Weidie said videos like that help Blossman sales people in addition to customers. If a customer shows interest in a product that is not on the floor, Blossman sales staff can show videos and expanded information on the specific product through the kiosks.

Weidie noted that the Blossman team relied extensively on its IT team to get the kiosks up and running, and the team is still in a testing phase with the kiosks. The setup is on display now at three of the more high-traffic Blossman branches, but the company plans to eventually roll out the kiosks to all 60 of its branches that feature appliance showrooms.

In addition to product videos, which she said will change continually as product offerings evolve, the kiosks include Blossman commercials and other information to promote propane appliances.

"Branches that have the kiosks have been receiving positive feedback from customers. It's encouraging that it's a helpful tool for them."