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Here's Mud in Your Eye

In the best economy, owning an off-road business requires a leap of faith and a healthy tolerance for risk. For Wendi and Tim Cannon, fear is not an option. With the help of franchisor Off Road Inc., in 2006 the couple opened Off Road Innovations of Tallahassee, dedicating their lives to off-roading.

“As part of a nationwide chain of stores, we get logo recognition and were helped in our initial store set-up and opening,” says Tim Cannon. The husband-and-wife team aim to position their business within the region by creating a unique retail and service experience. “We go the extra mile; Our certified mechanics have over 30 years combined experience in the automotive industry, guaranteeing the highest quality work for your vehicle,” reports Cannon, adding, “We have tailored our store to our customers’ needs.”

The Cannons purchased a 1,530-square-foot space previously used as an automotive shop, capitalizing on potential customer retention, although it was renovated from the ground up for the grand opening. “We allocated 30 percent of the floorplan to a brand new showroom and custom sales counter,” explains Wendi, “5 percent to new office space, and 65 percent to our service area, including three service bays with auto lifts where we perform everything from regular maintenance to almost any type of service and installation you can imagine, from lift kits, tires and rims to standard vehicle maintenance like brakes.” The shop’s interior and exterior were resurfaced and repainted. “We take pride in presenting a clean, organized, customer-friendly showroom,” adds Wendi. After only two fiscal years, the location is earning \$500,000 to 999,000 annual business volume.

Trying to Get Stuck in the Mud

When the Cannons opened their off-road store, they were betting on themselves; the bigger gamble is their territory. There are no mountains or hills in Tallahassee and North Florida, and most of the national forest has been shut down to off-road vehicles. “The majority of our customers are mud boggers,” explains Tim. “We have thick, black, deep mud holes from lake bottoms and swamps. For those who have never been bogging, it may seem abnormal—or just plain weird. For us, it’s a lifestyle.”

The first priority was securing and sustaining a grassroots following. The Cannons began building a solid customer base from the grand opening and are only gaining momentum.

Before the store's opening, the partners invested in a successful print and radio campaign. "We ran ads in a local paper, distributed flyers to the community and had radio commercials announce the grand opening," recalls Tim. Their efforts attracted over 200 people to the opening.

A tried-and-true marketing channel, the company's Yellow Pages ad continues to accrue the most significant volume of local customers--and those from surrounding areas who otherwise would not know them or the store's location.

Garnering the prestige of headlining sponsorship at the annual Extreme Monster Truck Nationals consumed the largest percentage of the Cannons' advertising budget. The billing provided exposure through several print, radio and television ads promoting the event, along with flyers in the vicinity. Tim is satisfied with the results; "Both years of the show, we have seen our client-base increase tremendously."

Bringing the customer through the door is key, however Wendi Cannon's goal is to educate each potential customer about all the business's offerings and capabilities. "Not only can we make their vehicle look good at great price, we also suggest other maintenance work that may be needed while their vehicle is being worked on—saving the customer money in the long run."

While the retailer occasionally runs ads in a small local paper, by sponsoring events like the Extreme Monster Truck Nationals, the company has been able to focus its advertising on its direct target.

Capitalizing on its success, the company sponsors and participates in an annual off-road event in Northern Georgia, where Jeep and off-road clubs meet for a long weekend wheeling the mountain trails. "We are also members of various area Jeep and off-road clubs," says Tim. "We offer special seasonal promotions through our vendors, such as discounts on tires and ropes."

Profitable Community Partnerships

Off Road Innovations of Tallahassee may be the new kid in town, but the company has already made a significant impact; Area residents recently nominated them for two "Tally" awards, "Best Automotive Mechanics" and "Best Overall Business".

The company also let its hair down with an off-road themed float in the annual Springtime Tallahassee Festival parade, taking home "Best Business Float". "We had a four-wheeler and a Jeep surrounded by dirt and rocks," says Wendi proudly.

Positive brand recognition is a result of embracing the community. Demonstrating as much concern for Tallahassee's roads as it does the swamps, the company participates in its County's Adopt-A-Road program.

With so many targeted advertising promotions geared at off-road events, by contrast Wendi and Tim's community involvement has a decidedly feminine angle. Joining the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce provided networking opportunities and business support through various events and forums; Wendi actively participates in the Professional Women's Forum, where she displays a booth alongside several local vendors. "The booths and guest speakers attract approximately 300 local business women, so it's an excellent way to hit a different target for us," she explains. They also support the local Girl Scout council in the northern panhandle of

Florida. "Supporting Girl Scouts is another target market that most people wouldn't think of," shares Wendi. "We have future plans to work with Boys Scouts for local events."

Weathering the Economy

Off Road Innovations' priority has been to establish a reputation as "the most experienced and highest quality work for your vehicle in the Tallahassee area," shares Tim. "We're actively building a very supportive and solid customer base that is continuing to help us make it through some tough economic times."

For the Cannons, building a supportive customer base goes back to their first and most significant goal: creating a unique retail and service experience. "We are lucky to have very seasoned shop mechanics who can work on any vehicle," explains Wendi. "We have been able to depend on regular maintenance and vehicle repair work to help us in the down-time." The shop is now offering specials to help customers get better gas mileage, such as the installation of a programmer. "There are three other shops that are similar to ours within a 30-mile radius," concedes Wendi. "We need to be unique."

Mirroring Success

The immense client-building advantage of sponsoring monster truck shows and off-roading events gave Tim and Wendi an idea. "Our most immediate future plan is to organize a large truck show event in Tallahassee," they share. "This area is hungry for off-road and motorsports events. Off-Road Innovations is becoming deeply rooted in the mud bogging community, and hosting an annual event is certain to secure those roots for years to come."

While the company strives to expand its influence and solidify customer relationships, one area they have not focused on to date is e-commerce. "We would like to have online shopping on our web site," says Wendi, "but that is not in the current radar." The partners' ongoing success reaching the local community face-to-face is the backbone of their upward sales and positive recognition.

"We may have the same colors or logo as our sister stores," remarks Tim, "but we are devoted to all of off-roading in the Tallahassee area."

Watching the fledgling company unfold, it is impressive to witness how much has been accomplished in so little time. It would be tempting to rely only on the marketshare of a well-positioned product line—there is always someone shopping for a popular lift-kit. Yet the Cannons are stabilizing their new retail outlet by offering what only dedicated off-roaders with a passion for their community can: sound advice and mechanical know-how combined with unsurpassed customer service.

Trade Secrets

1. Build a solid customer base. Offer quality work and great service, and customers will come back for more. "Word-of-mouth is the biggest and best form of advertising and you earn it with every satisfied customer," says owner Tim Cannon of Off Road Innovations of Tallahassee. He also recommends becoming members and participants in local Jeep and off-road clubs to build relationships with people who will become customers.
2. Target a desired audience, and avoid exclusivity. Sponsoring off-roading events focuses your advertising message to your direct target. However, remember that in many households, the female partner plays an active role in how the

family's money is spent. Consider supporting local women in business, or non-profit organizations. Off-roading is fast becoming a family-oriented outing; Marketing to the entire family may increase a retailer's annual sales.

3. Host it and they will come. Determine an unfilled niche in your community, and fill it. The Cannons plan to organize a truck show in Tallahassee to secure deep roots in the local mud bogging community.

Source

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TallahasseeORI.com [<http://www.tallahasseeori.com/>]

Fast Facts

Company location: Tallahassee, Florida

Year founded: 2006

Number of employees: 3

Key personnel: Tim Cannon, Owner, Sales Manager, back-up shop mechanic;

Wendi Cannon, Owner, Marketing and Advertising Director, back-up sales;

Joe Silvey, Shop Foreman.

Top-selling products: Lift-kits, Leveling Kits, Tires, Rims, Diesel Programmers, Bull bars/Steps.

Milestone: Right now...because we're continuing to increase profits during a turbulent economy.



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