

Staying Strong

A New Jersey grill and hearth retailer reaps rewards by facing challenges head-on.

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Retail customer service isn't what it was before the pandemic for many reasons from staffing to inventory shortages. The small things that customers once expected have become luxuries that retailers are attempting to regain. East Coast Energy Products (West Long Branch, New Jersey) has worked strategically to keep its service levels steady through the unpredictability of the past few years—and has even emerged a better business because of it. “If you are going to be a successful retailer, you have to be there for your customers when they need you,” says Chuck Hemwall, owner.

East Coast Energy Products was founded in 1989 as a natural gas distribution business and has evolved over the years to become one of the most respected hearth and grill specialty retailers in Monmouth County. Its strength has always been its ability to pivot when necessary and to evolve with the ups and downs of the market—as it has done over the past few years. “When we started the business, competition from big-box retailers wasn't a concern, but everything changed, so we had to create a niche for ourselves. That's when we first realized we



TOP: East Coast Energy Products has the largest grill selection in New Jersey.



TOP: A vast assortment of grills attracts new and returning customers.

BOTTOM: Randy Ransom (left) and Chuck Hemwall



always have to be on our toes.”

The store is known for its white glove service, which includes everything from in-home consultations to service for both grills and hearth. “What people are looking for when they come into our store is a better piece of equipment,” Hemwall says. “When they are paying that kind of money, they expect everything else that

goes with it—just like buying a luxury car. It’s the whole package.”

Education is at the top of the list when prospective buyers first stop by the store. “We have years of experience in the way we operate and how we serve our customers—people can sense that right away. We also have NFI Master Hearth Professional licensing to back up our expertise,” Hemwall says, adding

that the sales team has adopted a casual approach to sales. “People often come in asking for a specific grill brand because their neighbor has it, but we always try to open up a conversation to compare how different grills perform.”

It’s not uncommon for someone to walk in with a \$500 budget and walk out with an engineered grill for \$1,500 or more. “There’s nothing better than

seeing a customer discover the world of grilling for the first time. Many of them will come back to the store eager to learn new recipes, techniques, and just to chat.”

With over 50 grills on display, East Coast Energy Products has the largest barbecue selection in New Jersey. By far, the hottest pick right now is infrared. “Infrared elevates the grilling game significantly—it’s an exciting technology.” The idea of cooking with super high heat is a completely different school of thought than low-and-slow grilling. It sears food almost immediately and keeps it moist on the inside. “People who entertain frequently love it because they can hustle food for a big party. It’s a favorite of charcoal purists because it brings traditional flavor to food, yet it’s quicker and less mess.”

Convection gas grills are still the mainstay of the store’s sales with infrared and hybrid (half convection, half infrared) coming in closely behind.

Service remains at the core of the complete experience at East Coast Energy Products. “When people are investing a lot of money for a product, they want to know that the store is

OUTDOOR GRILLING

TOP: Hearth is an important part of the store's overall appeal.

going to take care of anything that goes wrong—and we have trained technicians to do the job,” Hemwall says.

When it comes to grills, the store services everything it sells, as well as similar products (even if they weren't purchased at the store). For hearth, it services only what it sells for liability reasons. “We charge the money we need to cover our costs and offer healthy warranties from our own company on installation and service to back up our work.”

The store offers regular service maintenance as well—cleaning fireplaces, gas logs, and grills. Overall, service is extremely profitable, as well as a good way to build trust and long-term relationships with customers. “I think service is one of the most



important things that we offer. We couldn't run the business effectively without it.”

For the three months the world was shut down during the pandemic, Hemwall took the opportunity to reorganize the company both physically and administratively from the warehouse to service, products, and staff. “We've turned down our engines and become a slightly smaller company with better quality employees,” he says. “Our reorganization gave us a team of people who are dedicated to making this machine work as the new East Coast Energy Products.”

As owner of the company, Hemwall has recommitted his time to being back out in the field facing customers directly to build sales. “We also slightly narrowed down our product lines and made our showroom smaller and more focused. It feels good to start fresh with what we do best, know best, and sell best. Ultimately, we are a better business.”

Going into its 33rd year of operation, East Coast Energy Products sees many changes on the horizon—especially when it relates to climate change.

“Electrification is coming. We discuss it and don't know how it's going to affect our business or how quickly it's going to come,” Hemwall says. “I think it's something the entire industry needs to pay attention to and work together to maintain innovative products that operate on renewable fuels. I believe that dealers are going to experience some pain, but wholeheartedly agree and support it. Many manufacturers are already heading in the right direction, if you look at some of the amazing electric fireplaces that are coming out.”

Randy Ransom, vice president and general manager of East Coast Energy Products, feels confident about the path to the future: “We have put the past behind us. We want to grow and evolve through this period of time so we can be a positive force in our neighborhoods and communities. I think all the changes that we have made are a breath of fresh air for myself, the staff, and customers. We are a tighter group than we've ever been, which will make us stronger and more focused as we move forward.” ■