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Volume 02 • Issue 06 • September - October 2010

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# Backwoods Equipment Company

Equipping customers with the gear and the knowledge to embark on new adventures

BY JULIE JIGOUR

Jennifer Mull, President and CEO of Backwoods, is not afraid to get her hands dirty. Growing up with a father who was passionate about adventure travel meant she experienced “outdoors” all over the world. In 1973, when her father founded the company in Wichita, Kansas, Mull met the retail side of the outdoors. 30 years later she took over the family business. Backwoods now provides technical outdoor equipment, travel gear and accessories, casual clothing and footwear to nine locations in Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas.

In 2008, Mull made the difficult decision to uproot the company and move headquarters from Wichita to Austin, Texas. Though the company felt strongly tied to its heritage, the demands of specialty retail required a change of location. “Recruiting was a big reason that we left Wichita,” Mull tells Outdoor USA. “We were growing at a fairly fast pace and adding to our staff, and recruiting was difficult for us there.” Mull looked to the Southwest, where she found both a wide talent pool and a natural enthusiasm for the outdoors. “Austin offered everything we needed, as well as the opportunity to participate regularly in the recreational activities we sell: climbing, biking, camping, and more.”

## ADVENTURE TRAVEL

The Mull family’s passion for travel gives the outdoor specialty retailer a special connection to this category. This connection inspired Jennifer Mull to create Backwoods Adventures in 2004. The program provides group adventure trips fully arranged by Backwoods, including travel, meals, lodging and guides. “We started the program in 2004 because customers

would ask for suggestions of where to travel, or for assistance in the planning process,” says Mull.

The link between outdoor retail and adventure travel that is created by the Backwoods Adventures program also functions as a marketing opportunity as customers shopping in the store can get exposure to the program and join the community. In fact, the customers aren’t the only ones who are taking advantage of the program. “We’ve had several different employees that have gone on trips, either through a bonus program that we have in place or on their own,” Mull notes. “It is a nice vehicle to get the staff outdoors and experiencing what they sell.”

One extension to the travel experience, started in April, is the You Had to Be There! blog, a place online where users compete to submit the best story about an outdoor adventure. The blog creates a space for the adventure travel enthusiasts to engage with the store’s online community. Every month, the best story wins a \$300 gift card, and the top five finalists win a prize and have their stories published on the blog. The stories range from inspiring to hilarious, and it gives customers a place to share their passion for adventure. At the end of the year, the overall best story will win a grand prize package valued at \$1,000.

Backwoods is enthusiastic about the rebound in sales numbers that it has seen in the adventure travel category, after a rough few years due to the recession. Rob Morales, a buyer for Backwoods, notes both positive sales increases and increased consumer interest. “I’m hopeful that it signifies a larger turn in the economy,” he remarks. To those who see the category as limited to luggage and accessories, Morales couldn’t disagree more. “There’s a whole lifestyle connected to it that is at the



Backwoods Austin store at the Hill Country Galleria

core of what specialty retailers are all about. Our primary focus is getting people out into the world exploring and growing, and travel fits right in with that.”



Photo by Brian Fitzsimmons  
Jennifer Mull, president and CEO of Backwoods

## MERCHANDISING: KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

With nine store locations in the United States, Backwoods has found that connecting with customers means keeping aware of their particular needs. Communication from store managers is invaluable because it provides knowledge of what makes each market unique. For this reason, stores are given some freedom to make merchandising decisions. Tim Martin, general manager of Backwoods’ Fort Worth location, explains, “There are a fair number of product lines in the store that I actually write the majority of the orders for.” The needs of a market may be as simple as keeping an eye out for a specific colorway. “University colors play a large role,” he comments. With a location close to Texas Christian University, Martin’s alma mater, keeping a lot of purple in stock always pleases the enthusiastic fans and further strengthens the bond between the store and the community.

Knowing the customer allows Backwoods to make merchandising decisions that make the

shopping experience as easy and efficient as possible. According to Martin, most clothing is merchandised by vendor because “they have a color story, or we will try to buy a color story.” However, some items make more sense to separate by category. “Say a customer is looking for waterproof, breathable rain jackets,” he describes. “I don’t want to walk customers all over the place trying to show them our selection of rain jackets if they have come in looking for that specific item. I want to have them all on a couple of racks adjacent to one another to make it easier for customers to shop.”

## KEEPING CUSTOMERS ENGAGED WITH THE CHAIN

Tim Martin knows very well the importance of connecting to the customer. In fact, he recounted one of his most enjoyable hiking experiences trekking with the Boy Scouts of America at the Philmont Scout Ranch in northern New Mexico. “I had never really spent a lot of time on the trail with kids, and that was really fun,” he tells Outdoor USA. The experience highlighted for Martin the importance of getting young people involved in the outdoors, a challenge for all in the outdoor industry. For this reason, Backwoods has always put a special effort into supporting the Boy Scouts of America in any way they can, including keeping stores stocked with the products that they need.

“We found the store being a place where people would hang out and share their experiences in the outdoors,” Mull expresses. “We built a social media presence to extend that Backwoods community experience online.” The Backwoods online presence is extensive, including twitter and facebook pages, a blog and even an interest-specific social community. In this Backwooders community, enthusiasts share their passion for activities including hiking, fishing, trail running, climbing and backpacking. They can post photos and event updates. “It’s about extending our community in that venue,” Mull says. “It is also an opportunity to let the community know about events in the stores.”

Upon the success of its communication

## • • • Store Statistics • • •

**Address of Headquarters:** 127 East Riverside Drive, Suite 101, Austin, TX 78704

**Number of Stores:** 9 (plus 24 hour shopping at backwoods.com)

**Phone Number:** 512.370.3600 **Website:** www.backwoods.com

**Store Hours:** Store hours vary per location, please check www.backwoods.com for specific hours. Most locations are open Monday through Friday from 10 am – 7 pm, Saturday 10 am – 6 pm and Sunday 12 pm – 6 pm

**Owner:** Jennifer Mull **Date of Establishment:** March, 1973

**Average Store Parking Availability:** street/lot parking available at all stores

**Sports Covered:** Hiking, Summer/Winter Camping, Trekking, Climbing, Kayaking, Paddling, Trail Running, Yoga

**Number of Employees:** 57 **Average Store Square Footage:** 7,900

**Leading Apparel Brands:** Ice Breaker, Marmot, Mountain Hardwear, Patagonia, Prana, The North Face

**Leading Footwear Brands:** Keen, Salomon, Teva, Vibram, Vasque

**Leading Gear/Equipment Brands:** Black Diamond, Eagle Creek, Osprey, Petzl

**Rentals:** No

**Online:** Facebook - backwoods.com/facebook

Twitter - @backwooders.com

Backwooders - backwooders.com

Muddy Hands Blog - muddyhandsblog.backwoods.com

You Had To Be There - yhtbt.backwoods.com



Backwoods Adventures organizes travel for passionate outdoor customers: an enthusiastic group celebrates their summit of Uhuru Peak, Tanzania, 5895 meters above sea level

## The Buyer's Perspective



The entrance to the Backwoods Wichita store sets a tone for outdoor exploration

programs, Backwoods decided to reach out directly to customers through a paper magazine called the Pinecone Press. Based on the original Backwoods publication The Outback, it stands as a connection to the store's heritage as well as an effective marketing and communication tool for today. "We included coupons in a recent issue, and that was very successful," notes Vice President of Operations Brad Jerome. In fact, Backwoods has made sure that the reach of the communication goes further than the mailbox. "We print quite a few extras and put them in coffee shops and waiting rooms, places where you can get free publications," he continues. "People pick them up there and read them." It is both an opportunity to connect with customers as well as those who may not have been previously familiar with the store, and it creates another channel of communication from the outdoor specialty retailer to the consumer.

### GETTING THE CUSTOMER ACTIVE

At Backwoods, they believe that getting the customers' hands on the gear is the best way to get them involved. One of their most successful initiatives has been the kayak demo, which was created to allow customers to test the boats on the water before they make a purchase. Twice a month from March to October, Backwoods employees bring demo boats out to the water from 9 a.m. to noon when people can come and go, testing the products as they please. "We do it in a fairly highly visible area in a park down the street from the store, which allows people who may not be familiar with the store to stop, see kayaks and talk to us," Martin explains. "We make some new customers that way."

Hobie kayaks are particularly important for customers to test out, notes Martin, because of their unique mirage driving system. In this capacity, having a strong partner in the Hobie sales reps is what makes the program so successful. "Steve Oxenford really impresses me with the time that he dedicates to us with our kayak demos," expresses Martin. "The Hobie reps are here from 7am until 5pm, moving the boats to and from the trailer. I have not had another rep spend that much time or physical effort to help us connect with customers."

The commitment of Hobie to the Backwoods program allows the store to have a large presentation twice a year with an entire fleet of Hobie boats for customers to test. "When they do that, they will also do a clinic for the employees immediately preceding the demo," Martin says. "It gives all of my shop employees the opportunity to have a greater understanding of the boats and get into the water with them as well."

Another initiative that has been successful for Backwoods is their fly fishing school, also

### How long have you been with Backwoods?

I joined the company in April 2009. Prior to that, I worked at Whole Earth Provision Company, a local outdoor chain that covers Texas.

### Which categories are you responsible for?

I'm purchasing most of the equipment categories, including water sports, packs and luggage, climbing equipment, sleeping bags, tents and parts of the accessory category. I also took over fly fishing when I started with Backwoods because it is a personal passion of mine.

### What are some recent products in the travel category that were particularly interesting?

We have had a very good season with accessories; everything that I brought in went right out the door. Eagle Creek's offering was very well-received this season, because customers were ready for their update. There hasn't been anything that completely redefined the category this season; it's been more of a general return to business as normal.

We had a phenomenal year in the hydration pack category; I've been chasing that business as fast as I can. Osprey's product launch brought a great response at the consumer level. They came with a strong technology story, looking at bladder technology first and foremost, and adding slick components. Anyone who has used a bladder knows what it is like to fill it up and struggle to get it back into the pack. Osprey added a back panel to prevent barreling, with a rigid structure to get it in and out of the pack with ease. Attention to detail and radical thinking came together, and people liked it.

### What are some new brands or products that have caught your attention?

We had a phenomenal year with Vibram Fivefingers. I don't think we could have gotten enough of them this year; it's been so in-demand. It has passed everyone's expectations; even after we knew it was on fire this season, it grew faster than we could have imagined.

Our recent launch of Yeti Coolers has been a tremendous success. Yeti has positioned themselves on the marketplace as a high-end cooler maker. The story they tell with their product is that it lasts longer and is stronger. Their cooler is essentially bear-proof if you put locks on it, ice will hold in it forever, and it's a nicely finished high-end product that stands in a unique position in the marketplace.

### Have you been impressed recently by some manufacturer for

### Rob Morales



### the service they provide, and why?

Cascade Designs has been a brilliant business partner for us. The in-house customer service rep Lori Richardson, who is my constant point of contact within the company, is incredibly sharp and responsive. The outside rep, Mike Sullivan, has been a solid and steady business partner over the years. What has been fantastic with them this season is that their delivery capability has been second to none. It was almost a perfect storm in the marketplace this season with dynamics on the manufacturing side making it very difficult to secure product. Nevertheless, I have had a wonderful fulfillment rate from Cascade all season long.

Our women's buyer, Kandice Westerhoff was impressed by Mountain Hardwear, another go-to vendor for us that had asap capability this year. The in-house customer service rep, Charlie Williams, is a great resource, and incredibly accommodating.

Kennedy Peña, our men's buyer was impressed by Simms, the fly-fishing vendor. Their flexibility has made them great to work with, and they made their preseason program somewhat malleable to fit our specific needs. When we've been in situations where we needed help with inventory they've been very responsive.

### Looking towards 2011, do you think the mood is as conservative as last season's?

We're much more upbeat. There have been some strong indications that things are on the rebound, and we are quite hopeful that the growth that we've seen will continue and possibly increase.

### What do you hope to see from vendors in the future?

I always appreciate vendor flexibility, particularly in how I order preseason, and I would like to see that more. We don't operate with a distribution center, so our vendors ship product directly to our stores. Some vendors have revision deadlines where a preseason order has to be revised 30 days before the ship date, whereas others allow me to revise as close as one or two weeks out. Having the ability to change the allocation closer to the ship date gives us much more sales data to analyze to make sure that we get the product in the right store at the right time and ultimately have to move less around internally.

We're also looking closely at the work being done on business-to-business interface. I think we're still a couple years out from seeing a broader use of these technologies, but it will be a great tool when it's come to full fruition. I have a couple of accounts now set up which show real time inventories, so that I know if the product is there before I write the order, and that's extremely helpful.

held twice a month. The only program that Backwoods charges for, the 5-hour, "zero-to-hero" fly fishing class costs \$75. "During the class, we teach them all about the sport, including what makes fly fishing different from spin casting and bait casting," describes Martin. "We will instruct them on all of the tackle as well as all of the knots that they will need to know to be able to assemble it. We show them how to cast in a 2-hour casting session.

We will also teach them how to tie a fly so that they have an understanding of what goes into that, so that they have the ability to go home and catch their first fish on a fly rod using a fly they tied themselves." Due to Texas' mild climate, this is an initiative that Backwoods can run year round—with the exception of December, their busiest month.


### IMPROVING OPERATIONS

Running a successful business in the 21st century means staying high-tech, and Backwoods has shown through its online communication that it is well aware of the value of embracing technology. In fact, the company's vice president of operations, Brad Jerome, comes from an IT background. Jerome's knowledge of technology is balanced by a passion for the outdoors: an avid trail runner, his most recent run was in Austin's Zilker park, on the 7 mile Green Belt trail.

Jerome has facilitated Backwoods' outsourcing of their IT operations. "It wasn't cost-effective for us to have a full-time or even a part-time IT person," he acknowledges. "We outsourced to a company called eFrame, based in Omaha Nebraska. They take care of the point of sale hardware, our network and our server, as well as our email." He has also been keeping his eye on advancements in point of sale (POS) software, in order to balance the operations of the brick-and-mortar stores with Backwoods' online presence. "The biggest challenge that we're seeing right now is two-fold: one is integrating POS programs with online sales, and the other is trying to integrate POS and buying software with vendors,

so that we have an electronic transmission and receipt with each vendor."

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

After a challenging year in specialty retail, everyone is looking with anticipation to the year ahead. "We're definitely seeing a rebound," comments Mull. With many lessons learned, Backwoods has found that communication fosters customer loyalty. "Building relationships with our customers has been critical during this period," she says. "The primary reason people come back through our doors is most often not price or breadth of product but is definitely a trust that the staff has the knowledge to send them off on their adventure with the right gear. That is critical for us." 



Brad Jerome, vice president of operations



Tim Martin, general manager of Backwoods Fort Worth



The needs of a market may be as simple as keeping an eye out for a specific colorway