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2006: The Summer of the Outdoor Room

By Carol Kaplan

2006 was the best year Donald Marze's store has ever had. He isn't quite sure why.

His Hearth & Patio store in Charlotte, North Carolina carries grills, patio furniture, and hearth products, and this year he's seen them move off his show floor and into minivans faster than he can ever remember.

"I can't explain it," Marze says. "It could be the good economy or the stock market." Or, it could simply be the *Summer of the Outdoor Room*.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FIRE STONE HOME PRODUCTS.

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Chairman's MESSAGE

Jerry Scott, Chairman, Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association

As I write this column, many parts of the country are experiencing prolonged heat waves with staggering temperatures. But as the sun goes down and temperatures cool, millions of Americans will retreat to their own personal oasis: the Outdoor Room.

HPBA has witnessed tremendous growth in the outdoor living trend. The number of products geared toward outdoor living and introduced at HPBExpo grows yearly. Retailers are seeing the business opportunity opening before them. That's why HPBA is committed to

servicing the companies that manufacture outdoor living products and finding ways to help retailers sell them. To start, the HPBA EXPO Committee, with the blessing of the Board of Directors, is offering casual furniture manufacturers booth space at member prices for the next five years beginning in Reno at HPB-Expo 2007. This will give furniture manufacturers an opportunity to participate in HPBExpo and see how the show has grown.

The HPBA Board recognizes that the "patio" in HPBA must get the

same level of recognition that the "hearth" and "barbecue" get, and we have reached out to industry leaders to help. If you would like to offer your expertise or need assistance in a certain area, please let our staff know. We solicit your input and count on our members to help us. And, if you're a furniture manufacturer who wants to market furniture through specialty retailers, take advantage of the booth fee discount and sign up to attend HPB-Expo 2007 in Reno, Nevada. I'll see you there!

Need How-to Advice?

“I don’t know why more specialty retailers are not interested in selling the Outdoor Room,” Jerry Isenhour told HPBA. Jerry, president of The Fire Place, Patio & Grill in Concord, NC, has built a very profitable business selling complete outdoor living areas to his customers. From his showroom floors both inside and outside his store, Jerry works with his customers to customize their patios and outdoor kitchens.

If you’re interested in capitalizing on this huge trend and selling the complete Outdoor Room to your customers, or maybe you’re already selling the grills and want to offer more, Jerry can help you. At the 2007 HPBExpo Education in Reno, Jerry will offer a three-hour seminar called “How to Start an Outdoor Room Business” on Wednesday, March 14. This information-packed seminar will not only help retailers work with their customers, but also demonstrate how they can promote their expertise.

HPBExpo Education will offer even more seminars for retailers, including how to increase and improve product lines and general sales performance. Plans are also underway for a seminar on how to host a grilling demonstration in your store. Be sure to check the complete education program at www.hpbexpo.com and make your travel plans to arrive in time for these valuable sessions.

We’ve been hearing about the Outdoor Room trend anecdotally for the past few years, but now the data is finally backing it up. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, American homeowners spent \$3.7 billion on patios

and terraces in 2004 – an increase of an astonishing 366% since 1994. And, in just the two-year period from 2002 to 2004, spending on patios and terraces jumped 238%. The HPBA 2005 Barbecue Attitude and Usage Study showed that 42% of consumers are complementing their patios with furniture and larger grills – an increase of 10% since 2003. The same study said one-third is considering improving their outdoor grill areas. And despite increasing competition with Big Box stores, the results are showing up in specialty retail stores.

“Business has been so good, I’m building a new store twice the size of this one next year,” Marze says, adding that he’s looking forward to even stronger sales next year because of the wide range of new product choices he saw at this year’s pre-market.

New figures from the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) show that new single family homes are increasingly being built with patios and porches. (The number of decks is declining.) And NAHB is forecasting that “outdoor space will have more and better design – a lot more outdoor living, even in colder climates and average homes.” The same study says that outdoor kitchens will be “very common” in upscale housing, as will indoor/outdoor fireplaces.

It all spells good news – and opportunity – for specialty retailers.

Frank Rymdeika, chairman of Grates & Grills in Dublin, Pennsylvania, says grill sales at his store were up 10 percent this summer. He credits rising gas prices. “I think more people are staying home instead of leaving town. They’re spending money on their homes instead of on gas.”

Even in Canada, after a slow winter and the uncertainty of national elections, consumers were back on showroom floors in the spring. Robert Wilson, president of The Fyre Place & Patio Shop in Owen Sound, Ontario, credits better and more creative product design. “We sold a lot of the more colorful furniture this year,” Wilson says. “In previous years, there were a lot of browns and

blacks and it was just boring. I think the bolder, brighter colors inspired people to buy.” He also says he was surprised that well-made, more expensive grills held their own despite increasing competition from cheap imports.

In Pompano Beach, Florida, sales this summer were up a whopping 40 percent at Culinary Concepts. Randy Everatt says outdoor kitchens and grills were hot sellers – especially infrared grills 42 inches and up. “I call them ego grills,” says Everatt. “People here want the best of everything. It’s a status symbol.”

Summer tends to be slow, though, in the Southwest. Audrey Clement, owner of Cave Creek BBQ’s, Fireplace & Patio store in Cave Creek, Arizona, says her customers are largely second-home owners who leave in the summer. But spring was better than last year, she says, due to the spike in new home building. “Firepits were really popular this year,” Clement says, “especially the ones with colored glass chips over them. It gives a really pretty appearance.”

What will the summer of 2007 bring? Retailers can’t control the weather or the economy, but they can anticipate what their customers will want and create dazzling showroom displays to help them visualize the Outdoor Room concept. After all, the Outdoor Room seems to be the future. 🔥

The *HPBA Journal* is intended to provide in-depth information to the hearth and outdoor products industry. Statements of fact and opinion are the responsibility of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the officers, board, staff or members of the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association.

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