



Expanding Customer Care in Utah

Customer care is extremely important to Sierra RV, but a few years ago the dealership outgrew its ability to adequately care for customers. Working diligently to create just the right design, its new and much larger location—with the same number of units on the lot—enjoyed increased sales of nearly \$10 million its first year.

By Karen Garvey

Photos by Gibby Photography

Visitors to Sierra RV's new dealership might be forgiven if they whip out a chocolate bar and some marshmallows and try to make s'mores in the showroom. After all, a section of the showroom resembles a cozy campsite, complete with a simulated campfire on a green carpet "grass." That is a far cry from Sierra RV's previous location, where the cramped showroom could

hold only a small tent trailer or teardrop trailer—and no more than one at a time.

In fact, the showroom was so small that eventually Sierra RV owners, father and son Carl and Jared Jensen, quit trying to showcase units there at all, and instead used the space for employee cubicles.

Sierra RV Owner Jared Jensen joined his father in the business in 2000.



“So basically from 1999 until we moved,” Jared Jensen says, “we had virtually no showroom for units.”

Technically, the old dealership, situated on 12.5 acres, had 16 service doors for eight service bays. But Jensen says the narrow building allowed work on only about eight units at once. And if the service department was working on an especially large RV, squeezing in a second unit at the same time was likely not possible.

“We had a dealership we had outgrown... We couldn’t get product in, couldn’t take care of it, and didn’t have enough employees to service it,” Jensen says.

And so, the Jensens began the process of creating from scratch the new, spacious second iteration of Sierra RV.

Extensive Design Research

Carl Jensen has been in the business of selling or leasing motor vehicles of one kind or another since he and his wife, Geri, started a car dealership in the 1960s. He became a partner in Sierra RV in the 1970s, and bought out his former partners in the late 1990s. A decade or so later, Jensen’s son, Jared, bought into the business.

Carl Jensen remains a daily fixture at the business he built into Utah’s largest family-owned RV dealership, and it was his idea to talk to vendors and to investigate the design and layout of RV dealerships around the country. The goal was to discover the best building plans, see what designs had worked for others, and learn what might work for their own dealership.

“When we started this process,” Jared Jensen says, “we asked all the reps, ‘What are the dealerships that function well, that have good function

and flow, and what is the floor plan like in those dealerships?’”

During the research process, a vendor’s rep put the Jensens in touch with Richardson’s RV Centers in the Riverside, California, area. Richardson shared photos of his dealership, as well as PDF files of the actual floor plan. The Jensens, in turn, shared those files with their architect as a starting point for their new dealership. The designer customized the floor plan to add more space where the Jensens specified.

The design process began in February 2015. By July of that year, the Jensens broke ground on the new site, located on 45 acres the company purchased north of Ogden in Marriott-Slaterville, Utah. The acreage was situated to offer high visibility from nearby Interstate 15.

The site, about six miles from the previous location, sits not only adjacent to a busy freeway, with convenient freeway access, but is also in the midst of an area quickly sprouting new subdivisions full of families—and potential customers.



The former location of Sierra RV was a fifth the size of the new dealership.



(L to R) Geri and Carl Jensen inspect what was then the future home of Sierra RV. The new dealership is six miles from the former location and has interstate frontage.



Craig Smith conducts a winterization seminar for Sierra RV customers. He has been a technician with the dealership since 2001.

“We couldn’t have picked any better location,” Jensen says.

Bigger Is Better

The dealership that customers visit today is nothing like the cramped quarters Sierra RV left behind. The new facility, which opened in spring 2016, provides 100,000 square feet, nearly four times that of the old 27,000-square-foot dealership.

In fact, the new dealership has more square feet devoted to its service area—75,000—than the previous dealership had in total. The expansive, climate-controlled service area includes 30 large—and simultaneously useable—service bays, along with two wash bays.

With increased service capacity, Sierra RV has built its roster of highly qualified service technicians. Now, the dealership boasts 84 employees, including 14 salespeople, 19 certified and apprentice technicians, and half a dozen master technicians.

Jared Jensen sees service, and the increased service capacity of the new location, as vital to the dealership.

“RVs are built by hand in a factory that may have included a Friday afternoon or a Monday morning shift,” he says. “The expectation of customers to have something work right and function like an automobile is so high that if you didn’t have service, you simply wouldn’t exist.”

The retail area includes an 8,000 square-foot parts department, as well as a 10,000-square-foot back stock room.

And of course, the new facility has one major feature that the old one did not: a showroom. At 15,000 square feet, the new showroom



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easily accommodates 12 to 15 units, including as many as two 42-foot fifth wheels. That is quite a bit more than the previous showroom's limit of one tiny unit.

Jensen has taken full advantage of that space.

"We plug 'em in, line 'em up and decorate 'em," he says. "We have a fun little green carpeted area with a campfire; it gives you the feel of a campsite."

He calls the addition of a showroom "exponentially important," and notes the units standing on the showroom floor typically sell in 18 days, significantly faster than units housed outside.

Training Days

The sprawling new dealership includes plenty of space the Jensens have dedicated to employee comfort and education.

The large breakroom hosts employees and their spouses for meals several times a year. The site also allows for free customer seminars on topics like how to winterize/de-winterize a unit or install after-market extras. All seminars are led by certified technicians.

"It's just getting people back in the door so they know we're here for more than just selling a trailer or selling a part. The value they see in us and in our name is worth doing these seminars, in my opinion," Jared Jensen says.

And two or three times a week, the technical staff conducts in-house training in a dedicated training room. Jensen says they try to provide as much training as possible. He says they are all the better for it.



The service staff gathers for a team photo in the service center. The space now provides year-round climate-controlled comfort for customers and staff.

Jared Jensen sees the building itself, its location, and the training facilities as great customer draws.

“I think people drive by and they see a beautiful new facility full of new and used RVs along the fence line. They can see us from the freeway and, for people who haven’t been here before, it’s a big draw.”

And previous Sierra RV customers come back because, as Jensen put it, “they know who we are and what we offer.”

Customer Service and Care

Of course, a pretty building, even an extremely functional one, would not keep customers returning if the service was poor or they were not treated right.

Jensen says his father began a tradition of caring about employees as well as customers and the community. And he and his father carry on that tradition.

“We’re not some corporate giant that only cares about the bottom line. We care about people,” he says.

As far as customers are concerned, the caring begins the moment they walk through the door.

“We want to make sure we get them with the right salesperson,” Jensen says, “who can make sure they are looking at the right product, get them the right unit for their needs.”

That level of service does not stop with the purchase. Sierra RV provides an employee walk-through with the customer, demonstrating all the unit’s features and ensuring the new owner understands how each works.

“Then we do something I think is totally different from any other dealership: we set a 60-day service appointment,” Jensen says.

The 60-day free warranty service appointment was the brainchild of Carl Jensen and Sierra RV managers, who were looking for a way to improve service, and who noted many manufacturers offer only a 90-day warranty. So, the goal of the 60-day appointment is to address any issues before the warranty expires.

“We want to make sure we’ve done the best we can to be ahead of issues and fix all those little things and... have them enjoy the unit,” Jensen says, “rather than have it sit in here with us.”

When units do need service, Sierra RV is better able to do repairs quickly, thanks to its expanded service area and service team at the new location. And while the dealership services any unit purchased anywhere, it gives service scheduling priority and preferred service rates to its customers.

Marketing Matters

To complement the grand, new facility, Sierra RV conducts an extensive and multifaceted marketing effort, one including both up-to-the-minute—Facebook, Twitter and other social media—and the tried-and-true approaches, like hosting customer appreciation barbecues and sponsoring activities at the local high school.

The dealership even holds an annual car show. The most recent such show

featured everything from antique cars to military trucks, Jensen says. He estimates the dealership fed some 300 people that day. The crowd favorite menu item was none other than good old-fashioned grilled hot dogs.

The Jensens see events and community involvement as an important way to create an image in their area, as well as to attract people to the dealership. And the area Sierra RV draws from is geographically extensive, stretching south to Salt Lake City, north into Wyoming and northwest into Idaho. Once someone becomes a customer, the marketing department works to keep that person in the fold, by sending monthly emails about upcoming sales, and by asking the consumer to comment on his or her experience with Sierra RV.



The service center features 75,000 square feet of space and includes 30 large service bays plus two wash bays. If they could do it again, they would have added 10 additional bays.

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Sierra RV staff gathered at the ribbon cutting ceremony. The new dealership sits on 45 acres with outdoor RV storage and a planned future adjacent RV park.

Significant Impact

No doubt, these efforts pay off.

Three years on, Jared Jensen sees one or two things he would have done differently, such as doubling or tripling the size of the showroom, adding 10 more service bays, and possibly a roll-up door into the service area for easier, faster parts retrieval.

But Jensen also sees tremendous benefit, both quantifiable and intangible, in moving to the larger location. He gives a great deal of credit for the dealership's \$40 to \$45 million in annual retail gross revenue year after year to the additional space afforded by the new location.

Despite carrying the same number of units on the lot as the previous location, the dealership saw an increase of nearly \$10 million in gross sales the first year in the new location. What's more, the dealership is on track to meet its target of selling more than 1,200 new and used units per year.



(L to R) Sierra RV management team in the showroom: Owners Carl Jensen; Geri Jensen, Jared Jensen, Sales Manager Brock Peterson, Service Manager Ray Tanner, Sales Manager Austin Slaughter, Sales Manager Ken Brech, Sales Manager Chris McDowell, Assistant Service Manager Shawn Petty and Parts Manager Justin Lee.

Forecasting the Future

Because the existing buildings occupy only a small portion of the acreage the Jensens purchased, the dealership has plenty of future expansion opportunity.

Currently, the Jensens have dedicated five or six acres to secured outdoor RV storage and will likely add more in the future.

Eventually, they envision an RV park on the property, one with as many as 180 camping spots, augmented with grass, trees, a gazebo, even a swimming pool.

“My vision is to have customers spend their first night in an RV in our park next door, and have a tech pop in the next morning to see if everything is okay,” Jensen says. “It’s a long-term vision, but it’s part of our focus on customer service.”

Jensen says he can’t quantify the monetary advantages the new location has brought. But dollars and cents are not his only measure of the new facility’s value.

“If you can satisfy a customer and get them in and out of the facility and let them get back to camping,” he says, “you’ve become a destination dealer.”

And that attention to service has intangible value that may be impossible to measure, but it pays off again and again.

“The facility itself shines above my competition. And that is by design. We wanted to make sure customers could see and feel the difference between us and any other dealer,” he says. “They don’t have to pay more, but they will get better service than with any other dealer.” **RVN**

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