

Summer: Outdoor Living's Season to Shine

Tuesday, July 6, 2010, 3:15 p.m. EDT

When offering samples from grills and smokers, keep it simple and help customers feel like they are in their own or a neighbor's back yard. In Alabama we had our third hottest June on record, for high temperatures and surprisingly for summer sales. What's the weather like where you are? Are your sales corresponding with the number on the thermometer?

For more than a week our temperatures neared 100 degrees Fahrenheit with almost equal humidity readings. Those kinds of days can make it hard to concentrate on business, and even harder to continue working outside.

Some retailers regard summer as a very slow time. When speaking of Dog Days there seems to be a connotation of lying around, like an old lazy dog on the front porch in the shade.

Whatever your definition, the Dog Days of summer lend themselves well to the outdoor-living business. Whether you strictly offer ponds and water gardens or a more comprehensive selection of outdoor-living products, this is our season to shine.

This year, to go along with outdoor-living spaces we bolstered our selection of outdoor furniture and added outdoor cooking products, including charcoal grills, wood pellet smokers and prefabricated outdoor fireplaces. We specifically chose good-quality lines not sold in box stores.

June was an especially popular month for outdoor furniture sales. Everyone seemed to be preparing to relax in the back yard and enjoy the results of Spring plantings.

Furniture and cooking equipment proved good fits for our inventory. While the margins are lower on whole goods, the repeat sales for charcoal and wood pellets drive customers back to the store. The frequent traffic has become a routine for some, much like going to the grocery store. The more they come in, the more they see other products and the more likely they are to continue to regularly spend money with us.

For us, the key to selling some of these lines is by offering cooking demonstrations on many summer weekends. The demonstrations need not be fancy or expensive. You want people to feel like they are at home or at a neighbor's house.

At the beginning of summer, we offered free samples on the various grills and smokers. From something as simple as hot dogs or chicken wings to the more unusual breakfast biscuits and cookies, anything we could think of to cook on a grill or smoker, we tried.

Once people tasted the results, they were more likely to buy. While sampling the food, customers might recline in a porch swing or dine at a patio table -- all for sale, of course.