



The Power Shop Adapts To New 'Normal' Business

Dealership stands by customers while building its local brand.

BY DAN SHELL



FORDS PRAIRIE, Wash.

Family owned and operated, The Power Shop is a long-established business that continues to adapt to the new “normal” of operating a business under pandemic conditions as the store brand is promoted as a key member of the community and a business that provides premium lawn and garden equipment solutions.

Located on the north end of the adjacent towns of Chehalis and Centralia along the fast-growing I-5 corridor less than 30 minutes south of the greater Olympia area, The Power Shop has a good mix of residential lot and rural landowner business requiring a wide range of premium equipment.

The business dates back 65 years to its founding. Cedric and Diane Pruitt are the latest owners, since 2005. After years in the construction business and running a gas station in Edmond, Wash., the Pruitts were looking for a change and a new business opportunity.

The couple started off well enough, and daughter Rebekah Oliver and her husband Jarrod moved to town to help out in 2007 and eventually take on key roles in the business.

The economic downturn led to some lean years in 2008 and 2009 and some of 2010 before business picked back up. The down years also led to a streamlining of product lines that only settled down a few years ago.

In 2010, the dealership carried Toro, White Outdoor, Tanaka, Exmark and Ariens. Rebekah remembers she and Jarrod went to GIE+EXPO looking for a new lawn tractor line and settled on Cub Cadet. Soon after, they took on Honda, then later dropped Toro, Tanaka and Ariens.

Today, the dealership offers Cub Cadet, Exmark and Honda wheeled equipment, Echo handheld, Generac and BCS. “We were looking for lines that sold and that we thought we could grow with,” Oliver says. “We feel like we have a good mix now.”

The dealership operates with nine employees that include the four family members, one parts person, a sales rep, a service manager, two technicians and a set-up and pickup/delivery tech.

Rebekah handles HR, payroll, marketing and AR while also overseeing the parts department, managing stock-up orders and helping with equipment orders. Jarrod is Sales Manager who oversees all equipment ordering and the service department.

Cedric handles warranty processing and has been doing full-time tech work



From left, Rebekah and Jarrod Oliver and her parents Diane and Cedric Pruitt have led the dealership since the Pruitts acquired it in 2005.



The Power Shop customers get a \$10/hr. discount off the posted labor rate of \$96/hr.

the past 18 months. Diane handles AP, banking and equipment registrations. Both she and Cedric are looking to step back from full-time roles in the near future.

Operations

Oliver says the customer base is roughly 80% residential. “We’re looking to grow the pro and institutional side as well,” she adds. For The Power Shop, the location is close to the city, “But the economics are more rural,” Oliver says. An additional factor in the market is cost-of-living (mainly hous-

ing) issues in the greater Puget Sound region and along I-5.

The Power Shop has been an Ideal Computer Systems user since 2006, and Oliver says the business has been happy with the system and has worked with Ideal on some of their software testing. She admits that it’s definitely a way to get more attention from a vendor, but also says it’s a win-win for both.

“We’ve been able to help them with their testing, and we’ve also put ourselves out there a bit (in doing it), but I believe it’s helped us with our growth,” Oliver says.

The dealership did some radio and

newspaper advertising early on after the Pruitts acquired the business, but Oliver says she now believes it was too sporadic to make an impact.

“One thing I have learned is the importance of consistency and getting your name out there,” Oliver says, adding that newspaper and radio are still the top advertising choices. “We run ads all the time.”

The dealership is a Bob Clements International client and big fan of the dealer consultant who’s provided valuable insight and advice on general operations, navigating the pandemic—and the importance of promoting the business as its own brand instead of focusing primarily on product lines.

As for the goal of getting The Power Shop’s name out in the community, the business has been a big booster of local soccer and baseball youth leagues, a corporate sponsor of the Centralia Schools Athletics and several independent school programs—as well as being a sponsor at a popular local speedway.

For its online presence, The Power Shop has been working the past several years with Dealers Digital for social media management that includes online marketing and web site administration. In addition, Oliver notes that more suppliers are providing social media resources for their dealers and cites Echo as a big contributor and promoter of so-

cial media activity.

“We’ve been an Echo dealer for a long time, and we’ve been getting calls about seeing this or that on social media,” Oliver says.

Speaking of web sites, The Power Shop at one point sold parts over the internet for several years but ultimately ended the practice. “Once we took a real close look we found we were really just breaking even and it was taking a lot of my time,” Oliver says. She also decided she had better things to do than try to build relationships around the country.

“We decided we wanted to focus our efforts here, keep the money and effort local,” she says, noting that they couldn’t really compete with the dedicated parts houses anyway.

As for selling whole goods on the internet, Oliver doesn’t want to get into it for the same reasons but says dealers have to realize there’s a customer segment out there—even local buyers—who are just not going to come in and browse like traditional shoppers. She’s encouraged by manufacturers who are doing more to point online customers to local dealerships that can handle the sale and pickup or delivery.

Cub Cadet does a good job connecting dealers with online buyers, Oliver says, adding that’s the kind of thing OEMs should be doing for their dealers anyway: “It comes down to pointing the customer in the right direction to purchase the product and having it go through the dealer so the customer has that local support and contact,” she says.

Service

The Power Shop’s posted labor rate is \$96/hr., just raised from \$90/hr. starting in 2021. However, for customers who bought their equipment there, the rate is only \$86/hr. (a Bob Clements concept). Oliver says the rate is competitive for the area, and the regular customers took the recent rate increase in stride while first time full rate customers sometimes raise an eyebrow.

As for service operations, “We’re moving toward the point that if it’s not a line we carry or a product we actually sold, we’re not going to work on it,” Oliver says.

The service policy becomes a little more lax in the winter as it does for many dealerships, but Oliver



Counter buffers still in place, The Power Shop has seen a big increase demand in the past year.



The dealership’s owners are seeking to promote and build The Power Shop’s local brand and reputation as a key lawn and garden premium equipment supplier.

says they soon noticed that during the winter of 2020-21, the service department stayed slammed and a couple weeks out—to the point where they didn't have time to pursue a "winter project" for dealership improvement as they usually have.

"We never really slowed down. And at some point we have to draw a line because we can only work on so much equipment," Oliver says.

Another reason for the tight service policy is the dealership likes staying true to its certifications and always looks to use OEM parts. "When we go to work on equipment we want full access and parts lookup," Oliver says, adding that the dealership's technicians are all up to spec on their certifications for the product lines and engines they carry, and they'd rather not spend time working on machines they aren't certified on.

Pandemic Issues

Like many dealerships, The Power Shop took an initial hit—only to see business and customer demand skyrocket as customers spent more time at home and had extra stimulus money on hand to spend.

The dealership initially shortened hours and closed the showroom for six weeks while making appointments with only two customers at a time.

Meanwhile, "The phone just rang all day long," Oliver remembers, noting that one day the dealership received 120+ messages.

They rearranged the parking lot to create an in-out loop for curbside pickup, added counter buffers and employees wore gloves as the dealership saw a big increase in business from the year prior. One of the challenges of working in such conditions was finding a way to sell equipment—when it's not yet on the shelf.

Oliver says she had ordered heavy going into 2021 and did really well through April before product shortages and order delays became more of an issue. The Power Shop is still using a waiting list for customers who want certain products currently unavailable. Orders come in person, over the phone and sometimes online: Once Oliver can confirm the order and its arrival, the dealership contacts the customer to confirm the order and takes a small deposit. The customer then pays the balance when the product arrives.

Oliver says the dealership and its staff were so busy that it wasn't until fall 2020 that they were able to realize the huge silver lining in a crazy pandemic year—a roughly 30% increase across all major lines. "And that's with working through the product shortages," she notes, adding that once customer demands had leveled off and they weren't at the counter or on the phone constantly, most of her time has been spent managing the ordering process, finding out what's available and when and confirming orders.

The Power Shop is in the same boat as many other dealerships and businesses in general looking for employees, specifically an extra technician they've been needing for about 18 months, Oliver says.

Looking ahead, Oliver says overall activity is slowing as usual with drier fall weather. However, product shortages and shipping issues are still factors and will remain so well into 2022, she's hearing from several vendors. To adapt, she's ordering heavier and earlier than usual for next spring.

"We're still anticipating a good finish to this year and a great 2022," Oliver says.

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