

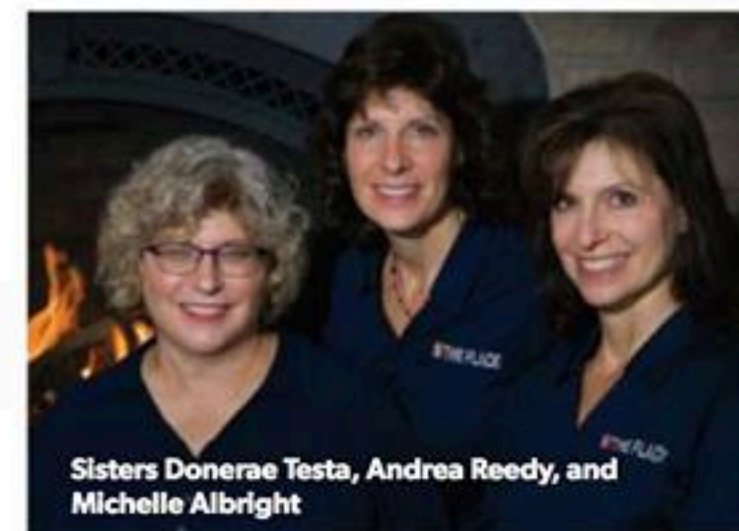
CUSTOMERS COME FIRST

Ohio retailer shines by putting its customers' needs ahead of its own.

BY SHARON SANDERS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DONNA DUCHEK



A local favorite: The Place, Medina, Ohio



Sisters Donerae Testa, Andrea Reedy, and Michelle Albright

The Place (Medina, Ohio) puts the special in specialty retail. For the past 52 years, the family-owned hearth and hot tub retailer has continually recreated itself to better serve its clients.

Ray and Donetta Klubnik started the business in 1967 as Organic Way. They promoted organic gardening and Troy-Bilt tillers, holding the distinction of being the first Troy-Bilt dealer in the world. The business evolved over the years into The Tractor Place and expanded into several other industries: Outdoor power equipment, recreational vehicles, and sunrooms (run by son-in-law Brett Albright). In the 1980s, son Ray suggested bringing in hot tubs. The family was skeptical, so he personally bought the first two, and sold and delivered them



High-style, high-quality hearth



Ross Petersen, Hearth & Home Technologies, presenting at the Renovation Tour

himself. Andrea Reedy, daughter and president of what is now called The Place, says, "He forged a new direction for the business." In 1994, fireplaces were added for income during the winter months. "Up until that point, our business went through a constant cycle of feast or famine because we mainly sold summer products."

The Place now has offerings for

year-round business with hot tubs and fireplaces as its main product lines. Reedy runs the company with her two sisters, Michelle and Donerae. After 20 years working in the family business, Ray opened his own hot tub operation, Hot Tub Liquidators, in Henderson, Nevada, and Brett now owns a remodeling company.

Although the industry and prod-

ucts have changed, what hasn't changed is how The Place treats people. "Clients should feel special because you authentically think of them as individuals and treat them that way," Reedy explains. "There is a general mistrust of salespeople because many folks think they are just trying to make a sale. We believe a deal must be good for both parties—and because people trust us for our expertise—we have a responsibility to design offers that make that happen. We care."

The Place is a respected leader in its market with a 20,000-square-foot showroom in Northeast Ohio. It is the area's foremost source for high-end gas fireplaces from Hearth & Home Technologies, including Heat & Glo, Harman and Quadra-Fire, as well as gas logs from RH Peterson. Its hot tub selection features Coast Spas hot tubs, Hot Tub Liquidators, plus swim spas by Coast Spas and Hydrosol. While The Place carries many of the industry's top products, it is just one way that it sets itself apart. "Specialty dealers, in any industry, need to be just that, special. We give our clients a different experience before, during and after a pur-

chase," Reedy says. "Our job isn't complete until our clients are completely satisfied."

The store's motto—We make it easy, are the experts and carry the best brands—says it all. At The Place, making it easy for clients means taking the stress out of the sale and caring for customers long after they have made their purchases. "It's been said that buying a hot tub is harder than buying a car because there are so many options and so much confusing information," Reedy explains.

Team training is the key to making the sales process easy. "We must be product experts. Clients trust us to give them the information they need to make the right choices." Becoming a product expert at The Place requires much more than simply reading a brochure or a manual; it's a deliberate process. All team members are required to participate in training classes and take written tests to gauge their knowledge. "A minimum passing test score is 95 percent or they have to study and retest until they master the material," Reedy says. "Our team takes it seriously because it enables them earn the trust of our clients. We had a person come in the other day who had visited three other dealers, yet said he learned more from us in five minutes than from all the other dealers combined."

At The Place, after-sale care is just as important as the shopping experience. "We don't abandon clients after they give us their money. It's often just the beginning of a long relationship." For example, after making a hot tub purchase, new owners are invited to attend a water care class where they are taught the science behind what's happening in hot tub water so they understand how to keep it clean and clear. The store has even created special chemical recipes to make water care easy while also protecting the customer's family and hot tub. During business hours, a recreational water expert is available to answer any questions. When it comes to hearth, The Place has the most NFI-certified professionals in Ohio. "We install it correctly and guarantee our work, forever. We are building fires in people's homes; that's not a responsibility that should be taken lightly."



Gary Luta, Dave Stiffler, Hayden Shrock, and Tim Polasko

SHOWROOM SHOWCASE



Every team member is empowered to take whatever steps are necessary to satisfy a client. “We say, ‘own it’, which means whoever answers an incoming call from a customer is responsible for making sure the issue is handled swiftly—and if they can take care of it themselves, they do,” Reedy explains. It might entail leaving work early to check a fireplace concern or stopping by a client’s home a few times to help them with a water care problem. “When an issue is passed on, the second person doesn’t hear the client’s passion, so the concern is diluted and urgency lost. We

see this as our opportunity to shine.”

The Place goes above and beyond to fulfill its clients’ expectations, even if it means swapping out a product. “If they’ve had several problems with a product—and may feel like they’ve purchased a lemon—we don’t hesitate to take it back, give them a new one and start totally fresh. It takes a huge burden off their heart and their wallet. We don’t want anyone feeling like they made a mistake on a purchase,” Reedy says, adding that in most cases, the product is fixed, and the new owner gets a great deal on a reconditioned one. “Ultimately, we end up with two

happy customers instead of one unhappy one.”

Happy clients lead to new clients, and referrals have always been store’s main source for new business. Over the past 10 years, its website (www.yourplace4.com) and online reviews have taken a front seat as well. “As consumers, we read reviews because we don’t want to make a bad purchase. I think we see it as a way to get the truth from people like ourselves.” As of today, The Place has a 4.5-star Google rating with 110 reviews. “We answer all reviews—the good and the embarrassing. We aren’t perfect, so if we rub someone wrong or

make a mistake, we want to apologize and ask for the opportunity to make it right. Potential clients appreciate our authenticity.” For 2019, The Place is increasing its focus on virtual marketing, which includes adding a secondary marketing website and actively requesting reviews from its clients.

The Place was honored by Coast Spas with its 2018 Best Service award, given to the dealer with the best client service in the United States. For the past seven years, it has won a Reader’s Choice Best of the Best award (in the leisure products category) given by the local Medina County Gazette. Acknowledgements like these, along with an A+ BBB rating, help to brand the store as the expert in its market.

As The Place heads into its 53rd year of business, Reedy says the company is and will always be its people. “My managers, Tim Polasko, Joe Quinn, Mike Cairns, and my entire team are committed to fulfilling their promises every day. I’m thankful to lead an amazing group of people. The products and services we offer are secondary to who we are.”

“We will continue to grow our company by growing ourselves and taking care of our clients,” she adds. “When people can count on us to live our core values, everything else falls in place. Our vision for the future is the same as it is today: To be the place clients love to refer and team members love to work.” ■