

Southern Hospitality

Rock Creek Outfitters blends expert service with support of local causes. **By Lou Dzierzak**



Dawson Wheeler, co-owner and president of Chattanooga, TN-based Rock Creek Outfitters, is no stranger to competition. Big boxes, chain stores and online sellers that focus on outdoor recreation are just the tip of iceberg.

“We define our competition as anything that might take disposable income away from outdoor recreation, whether that’s a spectator sport, private school tuition, or a family vacation,” says Wheeler.

Make no mistake—Wheeler isn’t ready to surrender to this or any other list of financial distractions, and he has well-considered plans in place to defend Rock Creek’s turf. “We do not react to any competition,” states Wheeler. “We find that reacting means we are in a defensive posture. We have plans in place with triggers that if ‘X happens then we do Y.’”

Since purchasing the business in 1988 with life-long friend Marvin Webb, Rock Creek Outfitters has grown to include four brick-and-mortar locations and an Internet operation that generate between \$6 million and \$10 million in annual sales. Wheeler explains, “Three of our stores are in Chattanooga, Tennessee. In 2000, we purchased 25 acres on the Ocoee River just outside Cherokee National Forest and opened a paddling store focused on whitewater paddling.”

Wheeler and his team also manage two web sites: climbinggear.com and rockcreek.com. “We’ve been in it [Internet sales] since the boom and bust period; 10 years now,” notes Wheeler. “There’s a lot of misinformation for outdoor retailers in terms of start-up expenses, scope of work and commitment levels, both financial and manpower.”

According to Wheeler, Rock Creek’s online operations are very successful. “It’s our number one storefront to date,” he reports. “It’s gone from number three to number one. Being online has helped our brick-and-mortar [stores] in the sense that there is a certain level of online business in Chattanooga. We want to encourage people to come into the store to build relationships, but with that said, it’s always very convenient for Chattanooga folks—or people across the country—to make an order in the evening and have it delivered to their door. That enhances our brick-and-mortar service.”

Roanne Miller, VP of sales at Santa Rosa, CA-based Marmot Mountain, lauds Rock Creek for its online initiatives. “When you introduce the Internet, you increase the circumference area of your business. Instead of [Rock Creek] relying solely on what is happening in Chattanooga, it has proactively gone after business on the Internet [which] has positioned it to be a competitor on a broader scale. It’s paying off for them.”

Brick-and-mortar or online, Wheeler is ready for any competitor. “We pride ourselves on being fast, able to turn on a dime, and very tactical in the event that we need to be,” he says. “Chattanooga is our home and it has been for the better part of my and Marvin’s life. So if someone comes to our backyard uninvited, well, we have direct action plans in place that are reviewed and current to the market climate.” He adds, “I don’t think we would be fun to compete with.”

From a demographic standpoint, Rock Creek’s customer base doesn’t differ drastically from that of other outdoor specialty retailers across the country. “Our customers are 55 percent male, 45 percent female,” notes Wheeler. “No question, the majority are ages 25 to 45, but we keep a very sharp eye on the edges, as well.”

Like its owner, Rock Creek’s customers tend to be outspoken in their support of environmental causes. Wheeler explains, “Chattanooga, Tennessee, is not Berkeley, California, or Boulder, Colorado. It’s definitely not on the cutting edge of that [environmental] movement. But with that said, we have a core customer base that is definitely focused on recycling, on living right, on access issues on a regional basis,



and volunteering to maintain our forests, trail systems and waterways.”

The product mix is geared to meet the equipment needs of climbing, camping, trail running, hiking, backpacking and paddling enthusiasts. Moreover, supporting the intangibles of these activities is a key element of Rock Creek’s outreach strategy.

“If you take a look at the fact that their business is located in the Southeastern geographic region of the country, [Rock Creek does] a tremendous job of selling all categories of clothing and equipment that I would say doesn’t normally

occur in a retailer in that geography,” observes Marmot’s Miller. “They can sell ski gear, climbing gear and cold weather stuff that, for a lot of retailers in that area, just doesn’t happen.”

Miller adds, “[Rock Creek is] probably one of the most proactive retailers out there in terms of aggressively going out and developing their business. They don’t wait for it to happen. Of the 650 retailers that we have, there are very few that take that initiative. Most of them respond reactively. [Rock Creek is] unique in that aspect.”

In addition to taking the initiative on the product side, Rock Creek makes a point of actively supporting local outdoor causes and initiatives.

“Much of our marketing approach is activism-based,” says Wheeler. “We live for a cause whether it is access issues, improving a waterway or improving trail systems. We donate our time and a percentage of each sale in hopes that others will follow. We hope our passion for our natural world is contagious.”

Not surprisingly, the company’s event marketing efforts are designed both to enhance relationships with new and experienced outdoor enthusiasts, and to help support outdoor-related causes.

“It is important for us to be a leader in outdoor education and basic programming to help ensure that a beginner’s first experience in the outdoors is a positive one,” says Wheeler. “We do this in myriad ways. [We] work with the city, vendors and all the [area outdoor] clubs to bring in outdoor professionals to hold classes, provide programming and offer slide shows,” says Wheeler.

In addition, Rock Creek hosts the Stump Jump 50K and sponsors The Triple Crown Bouldering Competition Series. The latter event, a 5-year-old climbing competition, attracts hundreds of competitors from across the region.

After having spent years honing Rock Creek’s solid outdoor specialty reputation, Wheeler’s attention is now turning to managing the company’s growth—a new set of challenges.

“Most small businesses all suffer the same concerns, many of which revolve around the conundrum that they are too big to be little, and too little to be big. For example, it’s always a struggle to find affordable group rates for insurance, maintain IT departments, and get good legal advice. All of these are all tightly controlled budgets,” Wheeler remarks.

As a member of the Grassroots Outdoor Alliance, Wheeler has access to the experiences of more than 70 other outdoor specialty retailers. He notes, “Collectively, that gives us access to hundreds of years of experience to draw from, and it has proven to be invaluable.”

Determining Rock Creek’s future size is something Wheeler often ponders. “The biggest issue is breaking the mold of bigger is better, which has taken over the big box stores and affects some specialty retailers as they grow larger,” he says. “Our customers are concerned with what they eat, how they live, and even where they live.”

He concludes, “With this clientele, you have to be known as experts in the sports you represent and sell, and you have to ‘walk the walk’ environmentally and socially. Otherwise, you are clerking and are no different from all the rest.” ■