

BY JAMES ANDERSON

Vistas and Vision

TUM-A-LUM LUMBER FOCUSES ON TECH IN PACIFIC NORTHWEST.

When a lumberyard is nestled in the beautiful Cascade Mountain foothills of Hood River, Ore., it's a smart decision to bring as much natural beauty as possible inside the store. That's why this past summer Tum-A-Lum Lumber unveiled its new 10,000-square foot showroom complete with a wall made entirely of glass showcasing the breathtaking view of the Columbia River.

The new Hood River store, CEO David Dittmer said, is built to "give the impression of being outdoors." The store is designed to be well lit and modern.

As beautiful as the company's new location is, the Hood River store also serves a strategic purpose for Tum-A-Lum. The company's owners recognized a few years back that the community of Hood River was going through a change. The town on the outskirts of Portland was beginning to be recognized as an area that provided outdoor amenities with the influence of a larger city. As the Hood River area became known for world-class fly fishing, mountain biking, kite boarding and windsurfing, it grew to more than just an escape from Portland.

Over time, Dittmer said, Hood River became a popular destination area. Along with a strong agricultural community, an influx of recreationalists meant an increase in home improvement, new construction, second homes and seasonal residents. While Tum-A-Lum had long ago carved a niche with builder and contractor customers, it was time to grow the business's consumer retail brand.

"We're not trying to move emphasis away from contractors," Dittmer said. Last year contractors made up 54% of the company's sales. "We're still strong there, but we're also trying to grow the retail sales."

To expand on retail offerings, Dittmer and his team added 50% more display space with the showroom rebuild, expanding to 10,000 square feet and adding an additional 3,500 SKUs. With help from its partnership with Do it Best Corp., Tum-A-Lum added additional products and brought in entirely new lines. The store now carries products like light fixtures that it didn't before. In addition to the new lines, the store's plumbing, electrical, hardware and tool departments have all been expanded. >



Tum-A-Lum's new Hood River location, which includes a 10,000-square-foot showroom, helps it better serve its growing DIY customer base.



CEO David Dittmer, who joined Tum-A-Lum in 2013, is leading the company's embrace of technology to better serve its pro customers.

“Prior to that, we had a small area of doors and windows, a small paint department and small cabinet space,” Dittmer said. “Now, we have a much larger selection in each of these areas.”

Staff member responsibilities were also restructured so that there are dedicated employees in each department. The store now offers extended hours and additional personnel to serve the increase in retail customers.

Until the new showroom was constructed this year, not much had changed at Tum-A-Lum’s Hood River location since it was built in 1980. A couple of years before new CEO David Dittmer arrived—he started in Jan. 2013, after retiring from ProBuild in 2007—plans to construct a new building began to take shape. It wouldn’t be until 2015 when construction on the new facility began. By June of 2016 the building was finished and now stands proudly on a plateau along the highway overlooking the Columbia River.

The Dalles and Pendleton

Tum-A-Lum was founded in 1906 in Walla Walla, Wash. by J.M. Crawford. Local history says that company’s founder, inspired by the cascading waters of the Walla Walla area, named the company Tum-A-Lum, a Native American phrase meaning cascading waters.

Crawford decided early on that his new business’s focus would be on supporting smaller, rural communities. The company grew quickly and at one time prior to the Great Depression, Tum-A-Lum had 55 lumberyards. As the small towns struggled economically throughout the years, so did the lumberyards.

“Today, we have three very strong locations, and what’s interesting about those three is that we’ve been in each since before the Great Depression,” Dittmer said. “In Pendleton, we’re even still in the same building.”

In all, the company employs 54 staff members, with each location supporting an outside sales staff. These employees served a 2015 customer base made up of 54% contractors and 32% consumers, with the remaining 14% split between government and local business customers.

The well-rounded focus, along with the Hood River location remodel, brought the first seven months of 2016 revenues up 10% over the prior year.

“We’re a stable company that is trusted in our communities,” Dittmer said. “We’re full line suppliers, from framing to faucet repair, in strong, county seat markets. Part of that trust is based on our employee base,” Dittmer said. “We have a lot of quality employees. We have a great crew that knows our customers and knows our communities”



ABOVE: The company recently restructured its staff responsibilities, added personnel and extended its operating hours to provide expert service for both pro and DIY customers.

LEFT: “We’re a stable company that is trusted in our communities,” explains Dittmer, pictured here with Dana Cowart, manager at Tum-A-Lum’s Hood River location.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The new Hood River showroom enabled Tum-A-Lum to increase its customer service space, as well as add 3,500 SKUs to its product lineup.

All three Tum-A-Lum locations are along I-84 in Oregon, an advantage that provides high visibility to Portland-based suppliers who daily drive past on their way to other locations. Frequent supplier visits allow Tum-A-Lum to increase its customer response times and keep up with customer needs in an increasingly “always on” workplace.

Driving Technology

Dittmer takes pride in Tum-A-Lum’s desire to focus on the ever-changing technological needs of his customer base.

“The lumber business has never been a leader in technology,” Dittmer said. “In part, that’s due to the fact that lumber owners believe that their business is relational. It’s face-to-face. Keeping up and leading in technology hasn’t been all that important. You have to keep up, but it hasn’t been important to lead.”

Leadership in technology is shifting, Dittmer said. His new customer base is using technology at a greater frequency and it is important for any LBM dealer to be a focused on the tech space. The presence of a large Google server farm and its employees near Tum-A-Lum’s The Dalles location reminds him of this fact, Dittmer said.

The efforts in tech need to happen not just in store operations, but in marketing and branding as well. “We didn’t have a social media strategy until just recently,” Dittmer said. “Now we have a strategy. We’re on six social media sites. We’re revamping our website. We’re working to be much, much more interactive with our customers.”

Dittmer acknowledges that statistically, most customers who come into his store have already done a lot of online research before walking in the door. If Tum-A-Lum hasn’t met that customer’s requirements from a social media and website technology point of view, then that customer is going to go elsewhere.

“It’s brand marketing,” he said. “It’s difficult to measure the impact of social media. We’re still trying to find ways to measure the results, but we’re certainly getting in front of customers, and that’s what we need.”

New products, new techniques and new designs are all aspects of the company’s social media focus said Dittmer.

Next Generation Leadership

Dittmer said that while customers were the initial focus of Tum-A-Lum’s social media strategy, potential employees also make up part of the social media audience.

“When I first started in this business, people were proud to be a part of the home building industry. Now, we’re not a sought-after industry. We have to find ways to encourage younger people to join our organizations,” he said.

To bring in younger, more technologically focused employees, Dittmer has introduced a management training program at Tum-A-Lum. A new hire in this program will “sit in each chair in our company,” he said. A current management trainee just finished two months working with a Tum-A-Lum contractor customer.

“It’s one thing to see the business from across the counter,” Dittmer said. “It’s another to see it from the end of a hammer.”

As Dittmer and the staff at Tum-A-Lum focus on leading-edge technologies, business growth remains the foremost objective. Acquisition isn’t out of the question as Dittmer keeps his eyes set on like-markets in the region. The successful remodel of the Hood River location has inspired talk of a similar project in The Dalles, as well as possibly relocating and upgrading the Pendleton location.

In an area of the country as scenic as the Pacific Northwest, it’s likely that any future Tum-A-Lum store remodels will include an inspired view of the world. ■

