

## Selling Hunting With Bill Carter



### Lots To Learn From 50 Years Of Ol' Bill Sez.

It's August and firearms dealers should have a clear hunting season sales strategy — at least through the end of this year — in place. The importance of hunting to a dealer's profitability is substantial.

Hunting accounted for nearly 43 percent of last November and December's firearm and related purchases, according to Southwick Associates' Hunter Survey. How much of that business will be conducted in your store this year?

To provide dealers with long-learned business tips, Shooting Industry enlisted one of the country's leading hunting experts, and seasoned business veterans, Bill Carter. The founder of Carter's Country Guns & Ammo in the Houston metro area is eager to share 50 years worth of insights.

"Hunting is one of the main outdoor objectives in Texas," Carter said. "The first season starts in September with dove hunting. Then deer bowhunting season comes in October, followed by general rifle hunting in November. What we call our peak hunting time is during school holidays, and Christmas sales are the final jump."

Carter says the upward trend in his hunting business even continues through the third or fourth week in January.

"We spend eight months getting ready for four months. We have to be very well prepared and make sure we have the proper amount of inventory, plus enough staff in place," he added.

Today, with four thriving retail outlets, a gun range and elk and whitetail hunting ranches, Carter's Country is one of the Lone Star State's gems and "Ol' Bill" remains a fixture at the center. Continuing the family tradition, Carter's son Billy now manages the anchor store in Spring, Texas.

Earlier this year, Carter's Country was honored as Ruger's 2012 Retailer of the Year.

"The fact that Carter's Country is celebrating 50 years is validation of their successful business practices, and we are proud to recognize them for their accomplishments," said Mike Fifer, Ruger president and CEO.



*When you step inside one of the four Carter's Country stores, you know hunting is a major focus.*

*"Texas has always been a family hunting state, but it's even more so now," Carter says.*

## Work Your Strategy

“We do several things in getting ready for hunting season. One of the first is to have a preseason, free financing sale in July,” Carter said. “We buy quite a bit of extra advertising. We’ve been doing this so many years, our customers depend on it to buy some of their fall hunting needs and get ahead of the crowd. We follow that up in September with another free finance sale. We step up our advertising — in newspaper, TV and radio — even more.”

Despite reports that print readership is on a downward trend, Carter says his newspaper ads drive more sales than any other form of advertising. “Ol’ Bill Sez” is one of Carter’s trademarks, his shtick and it endears him to his customers. “We’ve been prominent in the sports section of the paper for 40 years. Believe it or not, they want to hear what Ol’ Bill has to say, and I’ll never understand that,” Carter said.

During the July and September pre-hunting season sales, customers who make a minimum \$500 purchase enjoy free financing for 12 months. Carter says the business of his stores’ during these sales probably doubles. He and his team make sure they have extra hunting products inventory on hand, and they hire seasonal, part-time staff to handle the customers who crowd the stores.

Even though smaller dealers may not be able to offer free financing, there are other creative options to lessen the purchasing bite for their customers and still increase sales. One example, is a seasonal or Christmas layaway program. The main objective is to find what works for you, and let your customers know they can count on it every year. Then promote the program through advertising — print, radio, TV and Internet — and in-store signage and flyers.

In addition, are you utilizing your manufacturer’s reps to help boost your hunting sales? Bill Carter does.

“During these sales, we have a lot of help from the various factory representatives who come in to demonstrate their products. We get treated really well by all of our manufacturers,” Carter said.

Companies representing different segments of firearm-related markets want to help dealers increase their sales. Contact your sales representatives to learn how they can help you boost your hunting sales at in-store special events.



*Carter's Country's weekly print ads are packed with deals and anchored by "Ol' Bill Sez."*

*Carter says his print ads attract more sales than any other form of advertising.*

## Promote, Support, Sell

The September free financing sale at Carter's Country coincides with National Hunting and Fishing Day (NHFD); it's an event dealers can tie into to promote the fall hunting season. The NHFD website ([www.nhfd.org](http://www.nhfd.org)) has free, downloadable promotional materials and lots of helpful information.

"We don't take advantage of the day the way we should," Carter said. "It draws a lot of attention, so we need to do a lot better to promote around it."

NHFD is a great way to introduce more families to hunting.

"Texas has always been a family hunting state, but it's even more so now. And we see a lot of lady hunters. That requires us to stock special lady-friendly firearms. We try to do a good job in that area. It's always been our policy to introduce as many people as we can to our sport, and especially hunting," Carter said.

Every region offers opportunities for dealers to give back to their community while supporting the nation's hunting and firearm heritage. These efforts, in addition to "doing the right thing," boost a firearms dealer's standing in the community, and will naturally draw in more customers.

"We do all we can to support and promote local organizations. We donate scholarships to high school graduates who are going to pursue a career in the outdoors. We also hold youth hunts on our ranches and we host wounded warrior hunts," Carter said.

Are you sponsoring local hunting workshops, utilizing one or more of your seasoned hunters — staff or local experts — to share their hunting and safety expertise with your customers? These workshops, when properly promoted, draw crowds and sales. A prominent hunter, Carter formerly taught such seminars. Today, he lets his younger staff do the teaching, with a special focus on hunter safety.

"We promote safety at every opportunity we have," Carter said.



*Bill Carter reaches a wide customer base via Carter's Country's very active Facebook page. Visitors to the page have a lot to chat about, including weekly deals and, of course, "Ol' Bill Sez."*



*Earlier this year, Carter's Country was named the 2012 Ruger Retailer of the Year. At far right, Chris Killoy, Ruger VP of sales and marketing, presents Bisley Ruger Vaqueros to (from left) Billy Carter, Bill Carter and Tommy Zdunkewicz.*

## **Listen To Customers**

When hunting sales have been good in the past, perhaps even great, it can be tempting for dealers to fall into a comfort zone when preparing for hunting season. Even Carter says his company has stayed mostly with what has worked well for them in the past. However, as younger people come into the business, Carter sees that beginning to change.

"We've been a price industry for so long. There is now a whole new generation of gun-buyers and hunters," Carter said. "People are not as price-conscious now as they are quality-conscious. We are giving the consumers what they need, and that's a bunch of calibers and gear based on quality, not price."

Carter says, these new consumers, who have embraced firearm ownership and hunting in ever-increasing numbers, have created a strong business opportunity for dealers.

"The market is there, we just have to make the adjustment. With the Internet, customers can recognize quality and that's part of their buying decision," Carter said.

Hunters also rely on social media for a lot of their information, and Carter's Country maintains a very active Facebook page to stay in contact with more than 7,000 followers. As expected, his "Ol' Bill Sez" feature is popular on Facebook, as it is on the company's website. Carter's Country began promoting hunting on its Facebook page as early as Memorial Day this year.

What are some of the top lessons Carter has learned in his 50 years of business? How can those help boost your hunting sales?

"One of the things I've learned is not to sell merchandise you don't have and don't depend on special orders. We've cultivated good distributor relationships over the years, and now with computers, products are only a day away. We don't depend on that, but we use it to fill the gaps," Carter said.

Bottom Line: Hunting customers will find another retail outlet if you shortchange them in inventory. However, you can be their hero with the occasional rush order.

That leads to Carter's second major lesson: Good customer service is vital.

"If you have one dissatisfied customer, he'll tell 20 guys. If you have a bunch of happy folks, they just take it for granted. We are very service-oriented. We listen to our customers, and we train our associates," Carter said. "We are blessed with some of the most wonderful associates we could have. When customers talk with a Carter's Country associate — and our tenure is probably some of the best in the industry — they feel they are getting good advice."