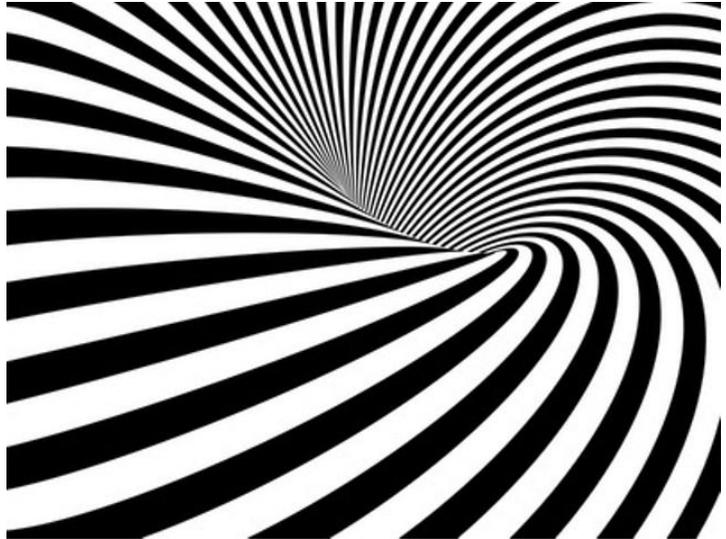


# **RV**



# **Industry**

# **Death Spiral**

**A collection of editorials outlining serious issues  
facing every segment of the recreation vehicle industry**

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## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 1: Less than 20 years of viability remain**

[Original story with comments](#)

Two weeks from today, I will be stunned if I have any subscribers or advertisers left on RV Daily Report. I'm adopting the old adage, "If I haven't offended you already, take a seat. I'll get to you soon."

After covering the industry for 15 years as a journalist, one of the best career moves I ever made was to actually purchase a product produced by the RV industry and hit the road using it. I started observing how the industry works from the eyes of a consumer. It hasn't been pretty.

I have come to realize the RV industry is in a death spiral.

The current business model is simply unsustainable and the professionals working in the industry either:

- Know what's going on, are in denial, and remain hopeful the problems will simply fix themselves.
- Don't want to know what's going on and keep their heads firmly planted in the sand ignoring many very obvious signs.
- Are aware of the problem, know it won't end well, but are simply choosing to ride the wave as long as they can.

Every other day for the next two weeks, I'll publish another opinion column targeting a specific segment of the industry and explain how that segment is contributing to the eventual demise of the entire industry. I'll look at:

- RV manufacturers
- RV dealers
- RV suppliers and wholesalers
- RV parks and campgrounds
- RV associations
- RV owners
- RV media

Consumers are frustrated beyond words over product quality and customer service. Every single day I hear about another issue involving a new or experienced RVer. RV owners are seething over the finger-pointing response they receive when attempting to get problems addressed.

Yet, industry professionals are fired up to see 400,000 RV deliveries to dealers this year – the most we've seen in a very long time. The twinkles in their eyes suggest they believe the industry can break the 500,000 mark. One person recently suggested we could see 600,000 RV deliveries in one year.

Riiiiight! Under the industry's current infrastructure, there is not a snowball's chance in July that will EVER come true. Unless something is done now, the industry has less than 20 years of viability remaining. Every year it delays addressing these issues further accelerates its pending demise.

It is as though everyone is having a great time at the wild and crazy all-industry party while delicately ignoring the dinosaurs in the room. I say dinosaurs because the problems have been around longer than I have – yet few people seem willing to really address them.

### **The industry knows a problem exists**

The most telling point for me occurred during this year's RV Industry Power Breakfast in May where the chairman of Thor Industries and the CEO of Forest River both admitted that the "customer experience" needed to be improved.

During the introduction it was noted the two firms control about 72 percent of the entire RV market. With Thor's acquisition of Jayco last Friday, that number is now up to 83 percent. If the two leaders of 83 percent of the RV market realize a problem exists with RV owners, then maybe a problem really exists. But, will anything of consequence be done to address it?

According to the RV Industry Association's market data and trends, there are 9 million RV-owning households in America today.

Funny thing is that a 1997 report from Dr. Richard Curtain claimed there were nearly 9 million RV owning households. By 2001, that number dropped to 7 million. But, in 2011, Curtain claimed there were again 8.9 million RV-owning households – which he described as "the largest number of U.S. households ever recorded that owned an RV."

So, there were 9 million RV owning households in 1997, and 9 million in 2011 and 9 million today. This despite the fact that, using RVIA's own shipment numbers, there were 5.7 million new RVs built between 1997 and 2015.

Yes, a whole bunch of RVers upgraded their units during that time, and some more than once. But the used RVs didn't evaporate, did they? One would assume that people bought the previously owned RVs and added to the number of RV-owning households.

But, if there are just as many RV-owning households today as there were in 1997 — despite the flood of 5.7 million new RVs into the market during that time — then there were a heck of a lot of RVs junked in 18 years.

### **Turning a blind eye**

"Would you just shut up, Gerber! There's nothing to see here. Move along."

Oh, how I wish I could, but I've been too complacent for too long. Product quality and customer service was an issue when I first arrived on the scene in January 2000, and it's an even bigger problem today despite the advent of technology designed to improve construction and service.

When the industry cheers the defeat of Lemon Law legislation, it conversely conveys the message to consumers that it is willing to tolerate imposing products that don't work and can't be fixed on unsuspecting buyers. Over the next few weeks, I will relay some real life experiences in hopes of educating people who can actually influence a solution.

As a full-time RVer I can see through the industry's smoke and mirrors. The industry talks a good talk and markets the heck out of the lifestyle. But, it drops the ball big time when it comes to QSV — quality, service and value.

My goal in doing this series is to spark a desperately needed debate or at least a serious discussion. I'd be happy if professionals would engage in a 10-minute talk in some boardroom.

It is astounding how poorly connected the industry is to its consumers. Most RV industry professionals know at least one journalist covering the industry side of the business, but how many can name just one blogger?

Pick any three bloggers who have the ears of consumers and their combined audiences are likely larger than that of the Go RVing website — and the bloggers aren't spending \$16.5 million a year in advertising to get the traffic.

With the flurry of activity involving the ENTIRE RV industry including all the segments mentioned above, minus RV owners, it employs 289,852 people, according to the recently released RVs Move America Economic Report.

When compared to 9 million RV-owning households, people employed in the industry equate to just 3.2 percent of people who own RVs. This graphic puts it into perspective.

### **Owners vs. industry**

How 9 million voices can fall on mostly deaf ears defies logic. But, it happens. RV consumer forums and Facebook groups are brimming with horror stories about poor products and poor experiences. And it doesn't just impact average everyday RV owners from Main Street USA.

Highly influential people in the RV industry have abandoned the lifestyle after the very expensive products they purchased failed to deliver on expectations.

I would stake my career on the fact that of the 289,852 people employed in the RV industry, just 3.2 percent — 9,275 — of them actually own an RV. A bunch more may borrow an employer's RV for a long weekend, but my guess is they have never had to experience the pain of getting an RV serviced or in making a campground reservation.

I'm about to put it all in perspective and I'm probably going to offend a bunch of people in the process, especially when I show how RV owners themselves actually contribute to the problem. But, in doing so, maybe, just maybe, some eyes will be opened.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 2: Manufacturers race to the bottom**

[Original story with comments](#)

When it comes to RV manufacturing, it is clearly evident that the race is on – a race to the bottom.

Manufacturers are competing intensely against each other to produce RVs that are built cheaply, with cheaper components so they can be sold at what I call the “mythical price point.”

The mythical price point is that price at which RV manufacturers, and in some regard dealers as well, believe is the absolute highest price consumers are willing to pay for a recreation vehicle. Add one more quality component and RVers will run away.

For example, a 360 Siphon is an effective \$10 part that can eliminate RV odors, which people who actually use RVs know is a consistent problem. But, many manufacturers won’t install the simple device. Why? It will push them out of the mythical price point.

RV makers do spend a lot of money on bling, the flashy things that people readily see when they walk through an RV. But, they don’t seem interested in installing the best quality products to support the RV infrastructure.

### **Consider these examples:**

Christopher and Kimberly Travaglino are the founders of Fulltime Families – a group that boasts of nearly 1,200 dues-paying members plus 12,000 very active Facebook followers. They own a 2008 Heartland Cyclone, which they bought used.

Earlier this year, they discovered that although their RV label says the vehicle is rated to hold 18,000 pounds, the three axles on the rig were rated for 5,200 pounds each. So, in reality, their 18,000-pound RV could only safely hold 15,600 pounds.

I met Skip and Sara Shute at an RV rally about 18 months ago. They were investigating the RV lifestyle and hoped to hit the road with their four children on a full-time adventure. They were researching RVs and talking to people about the RV lifestyle. Late last year, they eventually settled on a brand new Fleetwood motorhome.

Within months, they had 101 documented problems with the RV and reams of emails back and forth between the dealer and the manufacturer trying to get the issues resolved. What a way to start the adventure!

Matt Smith, my technical partner who keeps our websites running, owns a 2016 DRV Elite Suites Manhattan fifth wheel. A short time after buying it, the family found the basement compartments full of water in its first week of use.

The builders had not secured the pipe coming out of the main level bathroom shower so that it remained attached to another pipe leading to the holding tank. After the rig bounced around a bit, the pipe popped out of place. Whenever their son used the sink or shower, the water would flow directly into the basement compartments.

After they got that problem fixed, one of the stabilizers kept dropping while the rig was being towed. Fortunately, they noticed it in time so that the stabilizer didn't hit the ground, break off, and get kicked back into oncoming traffic. But, to get it fixed is a two-day job because the hydraulic cylinders are trapped behind a bunch of other non-serviceable parts and equipment that need to be removed first.

The last thing an RV owner wants is water damage within the first month of use. Well, except for a broken frame.

A blogger of mine, Dana Ticknor, with the full-timing Ticknor Tribe, purchased a 2015 Crossroads Elevation fifth wheel. But when a wall in the upper bedroom developed a crack, and they could no longer move the slideout, they took it to a dealer who discovered the frame was flexing. The tech also discovered the slideout motor was held in place by a single screw.

To further exacerbate the problem, the designers had configured the upper bedroom door so that it could only open when the slideouts were extended. With the slides in, the door wouldn't open to allow access to the bedroom.

So, when the slideout broke, the family had to hoist their young son through the bedroom window so he could squish through the wardrobe and take the door off the hinges, so others could get in and push out the slide.

These are just people I know personally who have had problems in the past year or so. There are literally thousands of other stories of similar problems with RVs.

### **Don't buy new**

Look on any consumer forum anywhere on the Internet and the advice regarding the purchase of new RVs is consistent – don't buy new.

People who bought a new rig often had their adventure delayed for 24 months because the RV was constantly in the shop correcting dozens of problems. And that's only if the RV dealer could correct the issues in the first place. Most RV technicians don't have a clue as to how to repair significant structural issues with the RVs sold at the dealership and the problem is punted back to the manufacturer.

Manufacturers need to change their marketing message. Buy this new RV and your first vacation will be in beautiful Elkhart, Ind., as you bring the RV back to the factory to get problems fixed. The problems requiring factory repair are so prevalent that RVers forced to go this route must make an appointment months in advance to get into the factory. That takes a bite out of summer fun.

Every RV manufacturer I talk to will boast of having the best, most comprehensive quality control standards in the industry—and some really do. But, then why is the failure rate through the roof? Literally.

Kimberly Travaglino told me about the heartbroken family who was camping in their brand new travel trailer a few months ago. They had picked it up from the dealer earlier in the week and were on their first-ever camping adventure. On the trip from their home to the campground, the roof literally peeled back exposing plywood.

I'm sure the RV will be repaired in time for use next camping season. But, hey, don't worry, it's covered by warranty.

### **Warranty woes**

In the race to the bottom, RV manufacturers have cut production costs to the core to build units as cheaply as they possibly can so they can be sold as inexpensively as possible. The lowest priced RV wins the game.

The problem with this business model is that there isn't enough profitability built in for the manufacturer to cover the enormous costs of repair to correct problems with the products they build. EverGreen RV just went out of business due to an enormous number of buybacks and warranty claims. But, hey, they sold a lot of new RVs!

Without enough money to cover warranty costs, the RV manufacturer has no choice but to either deny claims or short-change its RV dealership partners when it comes to reimbursing the dealer for completing the repairs. RV owners, do you wonder why RV dealers won't provide service unless you buy the RV from them? This is why.

It is a source of contention that is getting worse every year. In fact, one dealer told me this week his company lost \$500,000 in two years in unreimbursed warranty costs.

I told him that it's time to find a new partner, but was told in reply that all RV manufacturers are guilty of playing this game – at least the manufacturers the dealership works with.

It is beyond frustrating for consumers to be told that their warranty claims are being denied within the warranty period. It's worse when they need service on the road and the dealerships insist they pay for the service upfront and submit a claim for reimbursement from the manufacturer.

It's even worse when the consumer buys an RV with a one-year warranty, but only gets to use the RV two or three times that year because it's in the shop the rest of the season. As a result, many problems aren't detected until long after the limited warranty period expires.



Read Lori Magee's story, as she relayed it on Facebook a few months ago:

*"Our warranty ended November 2013. Our Dutchman 2013 Voltage 3200 was in for service due to constant blowouts which caused damage to the RV. When the lower skirt panel was removed, the technician noticed damp wet wood. When removing the corner moulding that wraps all the way to the roof, it was discovered that during the manufacturing process Dutchman cut the rubber roof material short and simply filled in the area with roof sealant.*

*"When we attempted to resolve this with the company, they simply said 'Sorry, it's out of warranty and your fault due to lack of maintenance.' Now, unless we had to have it in for service to repair damage caused by several tire blowouts, we would have never seen this issue until it was too late.*

*"I am a very unhappy consumer right now. This RV had a manufacturer's suggested retail price of over \$100,000. They will not even send a rep out to LOOK at it and are very quick to point the finger to us."*

In other words, when buying an RV, a consumer needs to pay someone to peel back the roof before the warranty expires to ensure that it was constructed properly. Isn't that the message being sent?

### **Dealer relations in the toilet**

There has always been some friction between RV dealers and manufacturers. It is natural that both want to make as much money as possible – that's business and it is how companies survive.

But, in talking with RV dealers, I don't think the relationships they have with their manufacturing partners have ever been as bad as they are today. And that says a lot considering that manufacturers were pretty tight fisted during the great recession for obvious reasons.

This is a prime example of what happens to an industry when it is controlled by monopolies. Yes, the relationship goes both ways and we'll cover dealership issues in another column.

But, dealers are telling me the pricing games, product quality issues, inability to get parts and downright refusal to take responsibility for warranty work is undermining the essence of a cooperative business partnership.

Nobody likes to be the bad guy and tell a customer that something can't be done. But, it is the local dealer who is on the front line serving the manufacturer's customer. It is a symbiotic relationship in that manufacturer, dealer and customer are all essential and equal partners in a sales transaction. Without one, the entire transaction can't happen.

When a manufacturer 1,000 miles away can't deliver a part to an RV dealer for weeks at a time, it's the dealer who looks incompetent in the eyes of a consumer. Consumers know full well that there are overnight delivery services – and they are often willing to pay money to get the part fast so they can use their RVs again.

Imagine how stupid the dealers look when they finally tell a customer, "Yes, the manufacturer called and is shipping the part today. It will be here Tuesday. We'll need two days to put it on, but you'll be ready to go camping on Friday for sure."

Then, when the part arrives on Tuesday it is discovered that it is the wrong one for that brand, or model year or model type because that particular RV was built on a rainy day in April when the line ran out of X component and scrambled to jerry-rig a Y component into its place instead.

Nobody at the RV manufacturing plant understands the rage and invective hurled at RV dealership staff by frustrated consumers who imagine a conspiracy is underway to prevent the RV they bought from being fixed.

Dealers are in a tough spot, thanks to consolidation. If they bark too loudly, they risk having the manufacturer find an excuse to pull the brand off their lot and give it to another dealer in the area. Once blacklisted by one Thor brand, can a dealer reasonably expect to be able to take on another Thor company's products? Doubtful.

If a dealer is blacklisted by both Thor and Forest River, they're left hanging out a consignment sign and making a living selling aftermarket products and repair services – but not as an authorized warranty dealer, you can count on that.

### **Model year games**

This is an area that might be getting better with the success of the Elkhart Dealer Open House event in September, and that's the problem with model year introductions. At least now, most new RVs are being introduced in August and September.

Everyone likes new things. Manufacturers like to be seen as being the most innovative company on the block. Dealers like to promote the arrival of new RVs on their lots and consumers don't need much excuse to go checkout new RVs as well.

However, the problems with the timing of new model introductions extend far beyond the marketability of introducing a new product.

The first problem is that dealers get screwed out of thousands of dollars. Imagine buying three 2016 model RVs in April only to have the manufacturer suddenly introduce 2017 models in May. It instantly devalues the cost of the 2016 models.

Even though the 2016s are in fine shape, have never been used and are worth the price, dealers must discount the product because banks won't lend as much on a 2016 when the 2017s have been released, and consumers expect a deal on older units when the new models are parked close by.

Funny thing is, the units are often the same RVs with different model year stickers. Sure the interior design might have changed a bit, but the floorplan is essentially the same.

Consumers are also baffled as to why a 2017 RV is built on a 2016 chassis. I've had several owners contact me wondering if something illegal is taking place because their owner's manual says the RV is a 2016, but the service center tells them the chassis was built in 2015 or even 2014.

### **Carry capacity**

"Lightweight." That magical word conveys the idea that a Prius can tow a 35-foot travel trailer. Almost every manufacturer boasts of having lightweight RVs that can be towed by vehicles the buyer already owns. Many dealers sell that idea to consumers who find out later it's a lie and that they really need to buy a new \$50,000 truck to pull their \$50,000 travel trailer.

But, lightweight is the "in" thing. So how do manufacturers make RVs "lightweight?" By using cheaper, lighter building materials and installing cheaper components, too. Why use plywood when cardboard looks just as good?

Manufacturers also build RVs with lots of drawers and cabinets so that consumers think they can bring a bunch of stuff with them. But the lightweight units don't have a weight rating to allow the RVer to bring much equipment with them in the RV. So the RVer often drives an overweight vehicle that creates an accident risk.

It doesn't just impact towable RVs. A few years ago, another blogger was writing about her Fleetwood motorhome. After the family bought it, they discovered it could carry everything but people.

When the weight of full fuel tanks, fresh water tanks and propane tanks were taken into consideration, the difference between the gross vehicle weight rating and the actual weight of the RV was just 400 pounds – and people, food and dishes were not yet accounted for in the equation.

Sometimes manufacturers go overboard in trying to make the RVs look “homey.” Winnebago last year offered a motorhome that had 13 pillows on the bed. Oh, it looked so cuuuute, but they literally took up half the bed.

Attention RV designers – when you live in 400 square feet of space, there isn’t much room to store things. So, exactly where do you expect people to store 13 pillows when they intend to use the bed? After about three nights of dealing with that problem, your average red blooded American guy is going to hike to the camp store and buy two Hefty garbage bags and throw all the beautiful decorative accent pillows into the nearest dumpster.

People who develop interior and exterior decoration schemes for RVs must all graduate from the same designer school. Can anyone else explain why they all look almost identical regardless of manufacturer or brand? You have a dark brown or light brown woodworking with light tan or white walls. On the exterior, you can have a choice between red and blue swirls on white, or brown and beige swirls on tan.

### **Where does it end?**

Walmart plastic shopping bags perform two vital tasks – getting groceries from the register to the buyer’s car, and then from the car into the house. After that, if they break, who cares?

Many of today’s RV manufacturers approach construction the same way – build the RV strong enough to get to the dealer and last long enough to get off the dealer’s lot. After that, who cares?

Gary Motley, a well-regarded RV service technician based in Oklahoma City, often says in a distinct southern drawl, “RVs ain’t for using, they’re for fixing.” He is right in so many ways.

This year, I am spending \$1,135 per month on repairs to my motorhome. Last year, it was \$286, but in 2016 I am repairing some of the same problems fixed last year. Every RV owner I know maintains a running list of repair items. After visiting a dealership, service center and the Winnebago factory already, I still need to have the furnace fixed and fuel pump replaced.

The fuel pump will be \$1,800 for repair because the entire tank has to be dropped in order to access the fuel pump. Many of today’s RVs aren’t built for future service in mind.

### **RVs today are built to be fixed and stored**

Without drastic change, I don’t see this improving anytime soon. With 83 percent of the RV market controlled by two corporations, there is no incentive to truly innovate or improve customer service. If you want an RV, you have Company A or Company B.

Thank goodness there are a few Company Cs providing pressure on the big boys.

Some companies like Grand Design are enjoying phenomenal growth by building RVs right in the first place, thoroughly inspecting them before they’re shipped to dealers and pricing the RVs to make the affordable to consumers, but still have money left to cover warranty work.

The company started from nothing three years ago and is now the fastest growing manufacturer in the industry. I got an email today from one of their consumers lauding Grand Design's quality and customer service.

So, it is possible for RV builders to make quality RVs! If one company can do it, why can't the rest?

For more fun, listen to this Michigan Lemon Law lawyer explain why people shouldn't buy RVs by visiting <https://soundcloud.com/stevelehto/dont-buy-an-rv-ep-45>.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 3: Suppliers in a tough spot**

[Original story with comments](#)

When it comes to the RV industry's death spiral, suppliers do play a role, but they are also caught in a very difficult position in serving their manufacturing customers looking to keep costs down.

They may build the toughest, most durable products on the market. But, if a manufacturer says, "This is a fine product, now get the cost down 30 percent," the suppliers are left with no option other than to comply with the specifications dictated by manufacturers.

So wood becomes fiberboard and metal parts become plastic parts, and plastic has varying degrees of quality as well. The suppliers can hold their ground, jump up and down and plead their case that the products they design are best suited for multi-climate use while bouncing all over the road.

But, if they don't comply with demands to reduce costs, well, there is always another firm willing to play that game and provide a similar product for less money.

More importantly, a significant way to take cost out of parts production is to ship the process overseas where firms operate in a much more loosely regulated environment. RV suppliers don't pay nearly the same wages – or taxes – in China and other emerging countries as they do in America.

For example, shipping jobs overseas eliminates the need to provide health insurance coverage for entire families based on Obamacare rules, which significantly lowers the cost of labor.

As more pressure is put on suppliers to reduce costs, look for more parts and products to be made overseas. But, if there is a problem with a boatload of products delivered to America, it's pretty much assured the parts will be put in service anyway. Suppliers have no alternative in feeding the demands of cost-conscious RV manufacturers.

Some suppliers have developed very strong standards for products made overseas, and even hire people to oversee production there to ensure compliance with the firm's quality specifications, but not all do.

It is a double edge sword for manufacturers. If they force suppliers to build product overseas, there is significant lag time to build and ship the products, which means suppliers can't quickly add features or correct issues when 10,000 parts have to be shipped and stored for manufacturers. It is much more difficult to deliver products "just in time," when ocean-going vessels are involved.

### **No training or supervision of manufacturers**

I know companies can make a quality refrigerator. I have toured factories and witnessed how they are built and I have observed the great lengths how the products are tested before they are shipped to manufacturers. The firms boast a minuscule failure rate on refrigerators delivered to RV makers.

But, the companies get a bad reputation when the products fail when used by consumers. When that happens, who gets the blame for “making junk?” It’s not the RV manufacturer, that’s for sure. The company name on the refrigerator pays the price for product failures.

What causes RV refrigerators to fail? It generally isn’t a product quality issue. They were improperly installed on the assembly line in the first place. Yes, the quality control tests at the manufacturing plant – and at dealerships — ensure the refrigerator turns on and gets cold. But, how will it work six months later when the family is on a week-long RV trip?

I’ve heard stories from service technicians about how the fans were blocked or no air at all was getting to the coils because the refrigerators had not been installed to the supplier’s specifications.

A company can make a great septic tank valve, but mine had to be replaced every year? I later found out why. The manufacturer had installed the valves so they pointed downward and the handles had to be pulled down. When that happened, gravity would cause water and black tank gunk to seep into the valve housing.

Eventually, it filled up with water and gunk to the point it was hard to push the valves closed. Because gunk would get trapped in the valve track, it eventually prevented the valve from closing completely. So, when I took the cap off the septic connection, I was treated to nasty water pouring over my hands.

It’s not the supplier’s problem. Their product is designed to work perfectly, as long as the handles are pulled up or directly out – not down. Problems in the installation process caused issues for the previous owner and me for years.

Of course, supplier companies can’t afford to pay someone to stand at an RV manufacturing line to oversee the installation of a few dozen RVs a day, especially if there are dozens of active assembly lines. Nor can manufacturers accommodate to have a dozen “inspectors” standing at stations along the line. There just isn’t room.

But, with the high turnover in manufacturing plants, it is unlikely that line workers are sufficiently trained to install the components right the first time. Suppliers must pay more attention to training. After all, their reputation is on the line.

### **Dealers not compensated for diagnostic work**

Manufacturers and suppliers alike are guilty of this problem. When an RVer brings a unit in for repair, a good technician will investigate what’s broken and why before initiating the repair. However, suppliers often make a part available for free and cover the cost of installing the replacement. They don’t cover the costs to investigate the cause.

As a result, the technician simply addresses the symptom (the broken part) rather than the cause (faulty wiring). The part is replaced under warranty, but the root cause isn’t addressed. So, it is no surprise that the same part may break again – this time after the warranty period expires.

In the suppliers' defense, dealers aren't doing their jobs in effectively diagnosing problem parts either. They just accept the consumer's complaint that a part is broken and go about replacing it to make the customer happy.

I have visited with suppliers who insist that all "broken" parts be returned to them so they can investigate the cause and ensure that any problems are corrected on their end. However, when their technicians hook up the diagnostic equipment to the broken part, many times they discover it works perfectly fine.

In the rush to fix the problem without addressing the cause, a new part is simply installed as a band aid. All it would have taken to ensure the problem was avoided was paying for the diagnostic time.

These cost-saving measures needlessly raise costs for consumers who may have to pay to have parts replaced multiple times until they stumble upon a trained technician who can properly figure out what the real problem is.

### **Planned obsolescence**

That's not to say that suppliers are squeaky clean. There appears to be a planned obsolescence built in to some products today in that they are designed to last just a few years, after which they must be replaced.

That's great for improving cash flow and the bottom line of a company, but consumers aren't reacting too kindly to having to replace parts and accessories after just a couple of year's use – especially when the products are only used an average of five weeks a year.

You see this in electronics and appliances, and the problem will be exacerbated in the future as more residential appliances find their way into the RV industry. Those products are typically designed to be built, shipped to a store and then to a home where they sit in the same spot on the floor or the counter for 20 years.

These products are not designed for over-the-road use and they aren't truly tested to withstand the rolling earthquake to which they are subjected by RVs bumping down the roads or when boondocking.

### **Penalizing innovation**

One of the biggest complaints with RV suppliers is that quality products are ripped apart, analyzed by competitors, who then change the design slightly so as not to interfere with the patent, reassemble them with lesser quality internal parts and sell a similar product for less money in stores and online.

Campfire In A Can is a perfect example. The Canadian company innovated a way to create a gas fire pit for RV use. Thanks to burn restrictions in many areas, especially national parks and national forests, use of wood-burning fires is severely restricted during much of the camping season.

So, Campfire In A Can developed a propane system that offers the look and feel of a campfire, and the ability to cook food and marshmallows over open flame, without risking sparks and hot embers escaping

the pit to start a bigger fire. When the fun is done, users turn off the propane, put the cap on and store it away. There is no issue with hot ashes or unattended fire pits reigniting. It is a brilliant product.

It was so brilliant that a plethora of knock off products soon arrived on the market selling for \$100 or more less than the original.

While some would say that only helps consumers by keeping costs competitive, it stifles innovation and discourages inventors when the product they brought to market can be manufactured overseas and sold for significantly less money. Today, Campfire In A Can no longer sells its innovative product.

I would like to see more competition in the RV parts and accessories business, but can't the competitors dream up ways to make a better product than simply knocking off someone else's invention and selling it for less money?

### **Lack of competition**

Now let me get in trouble by immediately contradicting myself and say there isn't much competition in the RV aftermarket.

There are generally two refrigerator makers, two toilet makers, two water heater suppliers, two furnace providers, three air conditioner makers, etc. So there is some competition!

But, we are getting to the point where RV manufacturers are demanding exclusive use of products. So, if Thor demands one product and Forest River demands the other, where will independent manufacturers go to get products to put in the RVs they build?

That's probably the fastest way to convince an independent company to sell out to one of the big manufacturers.

Let's complicate it further in the aftermarket. One company, LKQ-Keystone-NTP-Stag-Coast, controls 80 percent of the RV aftermarket – products made available to consumers after the RV has been built. That company is demanding exclusivity from some supplier firms to keep the product out of the hands of smaller wholesalers. Even dealers are being pressured into exclusive arrangements.

Company officials sternly warn a supplier that it can sell to "us" (80 percent of the RV aftermarket) or compete with the other companies to gobble up a share of the scraps.

This is price fixing in its infancy. Once the distribution firm locks in exclusive contracts with suppliers, it can charge whatever it wants for the products and consumers will have no choice but to pay that inflated price.

Here's how it would work. Thor Industries would insist on an exclusive arrangement with Brand A to install its product on every RV built by their subsidiary manufacturers. The product would be built with cheaper parts to help meet mythical price points. The product would function when sold, but break a short time later.

Then, Brand A would sign an exclusive deal with LKQ-Keystone-NTP-Stag-Coast to be the sole provider of the product in the aftermarket. So, when Brand A refrigerator needs to be replaced, and there is just one venue from which a consumer can buy the product, the price will naturally rise. It's supply and demand.

Right now the industry has tip-toed along this problem. But, when the next economic correction comes along and survival becomes an issue, the ability to lock in exclusive deals to stay afloat would be very appealing for supplier companies.

### **Companies underselling RV dealers**

This isn't going to be received too well. Dealers are starting to discover their wholesale distribution partners and even some suppliers are selling products online via Amazon.com at prices less than the dealers can sell them at their stores.

This opens a whole can of worms for RV owners who may need a part before their next camping trip. If dealers can't make an acceptable profit margin to cover the costs for ordering, stocking, selling and replacing parts, then they'll simply stop stocking them.

Next time a consumer comes in for a repair, almost every part will need to be ordered and shipped to the dealer in one or two days. That lengthens the time and cost of repair.

Plus, dealers who are already fed up with internet RV sellers undercutting them, now have to compete with their supplier and distribution partners on price as well. This is a ticking bomb.

### **Diminishing comfort**

It doesn't take long for new RV owners to realize what looks good on the outside is not all that it's cracked up to be when actually put in use.

Take RV bedding as an example. The quality of RV beds is atrocious. Most people pull out the mattresses after a night or two, give it to Fido and replace them with household mattresses.

To save weight and costs, manufacturers are installing mattresses that are often nothing more than 8 inches of recycled fiber stuffed inside a holding bag. Mattresses used in bunk beds and Class C over-the-cab beds are usually just a few inches of foam. It doesn't take much to compress the material and render the mattress very uncomfortable.

This is surprising for an industry that prides itself on being able to market RVs that can sleep 10. You'd think that if the RVs are designed to sleep so many people that bedding would be far more comfortable than it is.

Another common complaint among RV owners is the use of non-standard sizes in RV bedding. The RVs are often marketed as having queen- or king-size bed. Owners find out the truth when they go to a department store to buy sheets and learn that the beds are really a few inches shorter than standard sizes.

Plus, where do consumers go to find sheets and blankets for mattresses that are not built to any normal size – single, full, queen or king? They must special order them at considerably higher prices. This is especially prevalent in RVs with corner beds.

### **Emerging monopoly**

Lippert Components has acquired a host of RV suppliers in recent years and is well on its way to being the exclusive provider to RV manufacturers. Currently, the company offers more than 100 products to RV manufacturers. [Click here to see the list.](#)

Unfortunately, the company's products don't have the best reputation for standing up to the rigors of RV use. Consumer forums and social media are frequent avenues for venting about problems with Lippert products. In fact, I was surprised in talking to manufacturers in the last year or so that did not want me to report in a story that a frame or other component was supplied to them by Lippert.

Lippert is able to bundle the products to a manufacturer in a way akin to what cable TV companies do to consumers. When I signed up for an account with Cox Communications in Phoenix, the company bundled the television, internet and phone for "one low price." Later, when I tried to cancel the phone service, I was told the price of the unbundled services was higher than the bundled package.

How does that work in the RV industry? Lippert can bundle 10 essential items for a particular RV and sell them all to a manufacturer for, say, \$10,000. If a manufacturer indicates a desire to use Brand B for a particular component, then Lippert responds by upping the price of the remaining nine items to \$11,000.

Suppliers tell me this is becoming more frequent and it works to shut out competitors from getting their products installed on RVs.

As a result of these exclusive games, there is little chance for new companies to enter the RV market with more innovative solutions, better quality products and better service. This is especially true when the sweetheart exclusive deals are being locked in for multiple years.

Welcome to American free enterprise — version 2016.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 4: Dealers drop the ball on service**

[Original story with comments](#)

RV dealers are on the front lines of the RV industry – the foot soldiers engaging in battle every day. They are the face of the industry as well, and the group most likely to take shrapnel from friendly fire and hostile customers.

These small-businessmen and women are becoming more professional every year, but there are still some glaring deficiencies as a group.

Perhaps the most significant problem, for which RV dealers have direct ability to solve, but choose not to, is service capacity. They are laser-focused on selling new and used RVs, but it's a rare dealer that invests in expanding the business' infrastructure to service the RVs being sold.

For example, an RV dealer opened his new shop 10 years ago with 10 service bays. In the ensuing 10 years, the dealership sold around 150 RVs each year. That means he has 1,500 new customers, in addition to the old, competing for time in 10 service bays.

The industry built more than 1.1 million new RVs in the past three years. During that time, how many dealers have added even one bay to their service center? My guess is that it is less than 100.

It's no wonder that RV owners have to wait weeks to get a service appointment – a fact that leaves owners steaming mad.

Now take into consideration that people buy RVs to travel and, when they do hit the road, the RVs have a tendency to break something almost every week. In the past 30 days, my levelers stopped working, the fresh water inlet valve broke and the air conditioner conked out.

The earliest an RV dealer could fit me in to the schedule – if the staff were to reply to the inquiry at all – was Aug. 13. That's simply unacceptable due to my heavy travel schedule. It is getting to the point now that I must estimate where I'll be on a specific day months at a time and make an appointment. If I arrive in the area and don't need the slot, cancelling it is easy enough.

Fortunately, another camper fixed my levelers and a mobile tech fixed the other issues. Kudos to Stuart's Service in Elkhart, whose owner Chuck Stuart drove to the campground I planned to visit and hand delivered the needed wire to fix the levelers because his shop was shut down for vacation the week I was planning to be in town.

I can't count the number of times I have been told by RV dealers that they only service units bought from the dealership. I'd like to say I hope their customers encounter similar treatment when on the road, but I suspect they already do.

When it takes six weeks in the middle of the camping season to score an appointment at a service center, you know the dealership is blinded by sales and oblivious to the disaster unfolding the back of the house.

If the season starts Memorial Day and ends Labor Day, that leaves 10 weeks for RVing fun. It is understandable why consumers are incensed when told they have to wait six of those weeks for an appointment, and then often leave the RV at the dealership for a week or two to complete the repairs.

### **Fix it right the first time**

There seems to be a consistent issue in that technicians can't diagnose a problem and fix it right the first time, which requires multiple appointments to correct. It is a never-ending vicious circle. I have experienced this problem first hand.

- I had a stereo system installed in my RV, but the technician forgot to attach the roof antenna to it, so I could not get AM or FM stations.
- The hydraulic motor that services the slideouts stop working. After paying \$99 to overnight a \$500 part, the technician replaced just a section of the motor assembly, but not the entire motor. So, after having it repaired in August, it was replaced again in February.
- The driver's door would come ajar while driving and I couldn't open the door from the outside. After a technician "fixed" the problem, I could open the door from the outside, but could not lock it from the inside.
- I had rotors repaired in February 2015 and replaced again this April – with the second technician saying there was no way the rotors could have been turned the first time because they were so worn it would have damaged the machine.
- Another dealer "fixed" a broken water filter by installing a new filter housing and jerry-rigging the connections so that all water to the kitchen sink went through the filter, instead of just the filtered water faucet and ice maker. Now it takes four minutes to fill the sink.

Kudos to Little Dealer Little Prices in Phoenix for assigning a trained technician to fix a long laundry list of problems in February – all of which have held up without a problem.

For far too long, the RV industry has relied on handyman tinkerers to fix most issues with their own RVs. However, that luxury is quickly coming to an end. People once grew up fixing their own cars and were actually taught auto repair in high school. Today, many people, myself included, have no interest in fixing things and lack the skills to do it well.

Why is it that most RV owners need to adopt a service technician after buying an RV? The industry would do well to develop and include an R2-D2 robot with each RV built just to diagnose and repair the vehicles.

## **Lack of tech training**

One obvious reason for dismal repair quality is that RV technicians lack the training needed to properly diagnose and repair the RVs. This is an absolute industry black eye that I will explore in an upcoming column.

RV dealers have been complaining about the inability to find qualified technicians since 2000 when I first entered the industry. Here we are 16 years later and dealers still can't find them.

Why this industry doesn't have a permanent comprehensive online multi-faceted training program to allow technicians to educate themselves on every RV component is baffling. Stranger still is that there is no concerted effort to recruit technicians to the industry.

Yes, some state associations, like Pennsylvania and Florida, have taken the lead in providing training services for technicians, and the Florida RV Trade Association has created billboard campaigns to attract returning veterans to the field.

But, the Pennsylvania courses can accommodate just a few dozen technicians, and Florida has less than 1,500 people enrolled in all of its programs.

But, dealers are capable of so much more potential. They don't seem to hesitate to bring sales professionals in to train the staff; but they aren't as likely to make an equivalent investment in technician training.

I know it's more fun for dealers to spend \$1,000 to treat their staff to a nice meal. But it would be a much better investment with a significantly higher rate of return to pay the annual fee for all techs to access the FRVTA's online training.

Some supplier companies do make an effort to set up training sessions in key locations hoping that dealers will send technicians to the meetings. But, many times they'll see less than 10 people at the sessions, even though there are dozens of dealers within a two-hour drive, each employing six or more technicians.

To its credit, the RV Industry Association introduced technician training to the schedule at last year's National RV Trade Show in Louisville, Ky. RVDA also offers Vendor Training +Plus sessions at its convention in Las Vegas, but most lack the technical component to teach technicians to diagnose and repair equipment.

Service at RV dealerships has become such a problem for consumers that they turn to RV manufacturers not just for major structural repairs, but nit-noid fixes as well. Ticked off that their RV dealer can't do repairs for six weeks, owners make appointments at manufacturer facilities hoping to get the work done faster.

But, so many RV owners are taking that route now that RV manufacturer repair facilities have a backlog of appointments that often stretches out for months as well.

Why are there as many people abandoning the RV lifestyle as get in it each year? It's certainly not because they have seen all they can of America. It's because they get fed up with the amount of repairs necessary to maintain an RV, and the length of time required to complete the repairs.

I challenge anyone to google "RV tech training" and look for online training. RVTechnician.com, an RV Dealers Association website, comes up near the top. But click on that link and what do you find? Information about becoming certified – not becoming educated. For a comparison, google "electrician training." Notice a difference?

Thank goodness there are a few public tech schools and specialty private schools around the country offering training for RV technicians. The bad news is that bigger dealers immediately hire all the graduates.

The situation isn't getting better. In fact, it's moving in the opposite direction with the abandonment of RV specialty certification. You'd think technicians with advanced training in propane systems, electrical, hydraulics, or chassis repair would be far more efficient at their jobs. But, when training is offered, the industry wants to create jacks of all trades – and masters of none.

### **Poor technician pay**

One big reason RV dealers can't attract technicians is that they aren't often willing to pay them enough to jump into the industry. I know a master certified Volkswagen technician who makes upward of \$80,000 working Monday through Friday from 9 to 5. That's about \$38 per hour.

In the RV industry, it is estimated that new techs are paid as little as \$12 to \$14 per hour. In-N-Out Burger starts their employees at \$11. Senior technicians, especially those who are master certified, can make as much as \$30 to \$32 per hour.

I saw a dealership's Facebook post that offered a starting salary of \$13 per hour. If the tech became certified the rate jumped to \$15 per hour, and a master certified technician could earn \$17 per hour. Yeah, baby!

Where do I sign up to invest a lot of money in training and tools to become master certified so I can bank a whopping \$650 more per year than the kid who just graduated from high school. Trained and certified technicians are often the most efficient in the shop. They should be amply rewarded for their work in developing that profit center.

I don't know if there is a magic formula for pay, but something needs to change. Techs paid by the hour don't really have an incentive to complete repairs in a timely manner. Techs paid on a flat-rate are incentivized to work faster and smarter, but generally don't get paid to properly diagnose the problem – especially on warranty repairs. So they address symptoms, not the true cause.

## **Costly repairs**

Most RV dealerships post shop rates between \$125 and \$160 per hour. Yes, they have to recoup their investment in building and supplying the shop, as well as pay for plumbing, electricity, storage of hazardous materials and liability insurance, among a dozen other things.

They also need to hire a warranty clerk, a parts manager, service writer, porters to move units in and out of the bay, a cashier and service manager – all of whom are paid salary and benefits from that hourly rate.

But, if there are six working technicians billing \$125 per hour, the dealership is making \$750 per hour – which is more than ample income to cover the above expenses.

“But, but, but... we have to pay techs to do check units in upon delivery and another inspection before the owner takes possession!” Agreed. But, the sales department should be a customer of the shop and those expenses recovered through the sale of the RV.

Customers are known to physically gasp when presented with the repair bill when they see the amount due, especially for labor. Therefore, it is in the best interest of customers that dealers employ trained technicians who can quickly diagnose and make repairs.

Last year, I got two oil changes for my motorhome. One was done at a truck stop for \$69.95 and took all of 25 minutes. The other one was done by an RV dealer that billed me for 1.5 hours of labor and the total cost came to \$150. This kind of overbilling breeds distrust among consumers who have a good idea what it takes to do some basic repairs.

## **Training buyers**

RV dealers have not just dropped the ball on consumer education, they have punctured it and thrown it away.

The “industry” routinely fights off legislative proposals to require special licensing to drive 26,000-pound motorhomes and fifth wheels as long as semi-trailers, but fails to provide any formal training on how to drive, tow or use an RV.

Yes, new buyers can pay \$150 for a one-hour walk-through demonstration of their new RV. Even then, they aren’t taught HOW to dump the tanks, the proper way to hook up to electrical outlets, how to hook up a tow car, or how to position an RV in a campsite to avoid obstructions when slides are extended. Those are all lessons learned by experience.

There is a hell of a lot of difference between driving an SUV and driving a motorhome; and backing a fifth wheel can be tricky and dangerous. In fact, using an RV on a highway is a white-knuckle experience for most RV owners, especially newbies.

Kudos to Lazydays for offering consistent driver training courses, but the classes are limited to motorhome users only.

To tell a driver that operating a motorhome is just like driving a car is irresponsible at best. Failure to properly handle a tire blowout in a big rig can be a fatal mistake for the RV owner and other drivers around him. Turning corners when dragging a 20,000-pound towable exerts significantly different gravitational forces than experienced when driving cars and trucks.

RV driver education is essential, and RV dealers are in the best position to provide it.

### **Dishonest and unethical**

All it takes is for one consumer to encounter a dishonest or unethical RV dealer to give them all a bad name. Manufacturers generally know who is screwing up in that regard because the bad dealers are reported by consumers and competitors.

But, the attitude is as long as they keep rolling inventory off the lot, the OEMs will just look the other way. That's why it's good that groups like Route 66 and Priority RV Network have standards they expect their dealer members to follow.

One of my bloggers, Dana Ticknor, penned an article for RV Daily Report last year that has been viewed more than 16,000 times. Titled "Dear Dealer, Here's Why You Lost a Sale," the article outlines her family's experience to buy a new RV. You can read the story by clicking [here](#).

Honesty among RV dealership staff is a problem, and many times the dealer isn't fully aware of what's happening in his store.

Here's the ugly truth. RV owners are better educated today than they've ever been. They often quiz dealership staff to determine if they are being told the truth when it comes to buying and servicing RVs. One lie and the opportunity for a sale or to develop a lifetime customer walks out the door.

Consumers are routinely told the RV, regardless of RV size, can be towed by vehicles they already own when nothing could be further from the truth. They discover the lie only after the deal is inked and the RV is dragged off the lot. Congratulations, you made a sale! But, when they find out they need a \$35,000 to \$50,000 truck – or larger – to tow the RV the dealership's staff just sold them, that's when the next call is to a lawyer or a legislator.

Suppliers tell me dealers have defrauded their companies for years. Tricks like sending in a picture of a solid surface counter with a hair or thread on it claiming it is a crack is, in reality, illegal. So is spraying water on a decal to trick manufacturers into thinking there are bubbles underneath.

More importantly, so is "fixing" RVs and charging suppliers for parts that are never really replaced. Taking parts off someone else's RV and storing them so they can be billed to a supplier for a unit under warranty is going to get the dealer in big trouble someday.

**WARNING:** Suppliers are sick and tired of the fraud and so are insurance companies. They are turning to third party "inspectors" to verify problems before they are repaired – and to ensure the repairs were actually completed. It would not surprise me if consistent violators will soon face civil charges, if not

criminal charges when issues are reported to the police. Suppliers and insurance companies are quite eager to send a message to the industry.

Dealers who willingly sell an RV to consumers in a way they can't possibly pay it off for years are actually shooting themselves in the foot. Yes, they make a sale, but they'll never be able to accept it back in trade when the owners are financially upside down in their units.

Most RV owners have no clue as to the level of depreciation that impacts RV values in the first year or two. Selling an RV with little or nothing down and extending payments 20 years or longer means the customer won't have any equity in the vehicle for a decade.

Dealerships that sell RVs over the internet and willingly reduce the price based on the distance between the dealer and the customer's home are not doing the industry any favors. Manufacturers absolutely know this game is being paid, but willingly go along with it.

The dealers know darned well the customer will never drive 1,000 miles or more to bring the RV back for repair. So, all the dealership has to do is make the RV look pretty and get it off the lot. I don't know how they sleep at night knowing their buyers will face big obstacles in getting the RV serviced later.

While not directly related to honesty, how some RV dealers treat delivery drivers is abhorrent. Making a driver wait for hours for check-in does not demonstrate good partnership. When a driver arrives at 3 p.m. and isn't checked in until 8 a.m. the next day, the driver incurs needless expenses for which he is not reimbursed.

You wonder why the industry has a delivery problem? Look no further than how dealers treat the self-employed drivers.

### **Short memories**

Sometimes, I think RV dealers are like goldfish in that they have very short memories. They swim to the end of the tank, flip around and think they're on a whole new adventure.

You never see a Ford dealer become a Chevy dealer two years later and then jump back to selling Ford vehicles a few years after that. But, in the RV industry, this happens all the time. There is no loyalty to manufacturers.

Dealers get ticked off over poor warranty reimbursement or quality problems and drop the manufacturer – as they should. But, a few years later when the OEM has the hottest new model, they jump back in without remembering what led to the divorce last time.

That's no way to build a brand for a manufacturer or dealer. They should carefully chose their partners and stick with them through thick and thin.

Before dealers jump on me for questioning their loyalty, I'll admit that manufacturers have little loyalty to their dealers as well.

They impose excessive quantities of inventory upon the dealership, then withhold warranty payments. Even if the dealers remain loyal to the manufacturer, they can get dumped overnight if the OEM thinks someone else a few miles away may be able to sell a few more units a year.

RV dealers who were caught with enormous amounts of inventory on their lots in 2007 are playing with fire today. How many dealers went out of business in the Great Recession? Yet, many dealers are once again financed to the hilt today. Why must history repeat itself? Because OEMs tell the dealer to increase inventory or they risk losing the product line.

RV dealers are some of the most brilliant entrepreneurs I have ever met, but as a group, they also provide some of the biggest disappointments for consumers. What's truly unfortunate is that bad dealers taint the good ones to the point buyers expect bad service when visiting any RV dealership.

The industry cannot survive on that foundation of distrust.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 5: Campgrounds losing capacity**

[Original story with comments](#)

Campgrounds truly are the last bastion of genuine community that remains in America. Where else can a family drive up and allow their kids to blast out of an RV, hop on their bikes and explore the area while mom and dad settle in for some real rest and relaxation?

Just the thought of going camping is enough to brighten the day for many people. As the boss drones on in yet another useless meeting at work, who doesn't dream of sitting around a campfire or a lake or just listening to the wind blowing through pines.

Campgrounds are the most essential part of the RV industry, yet the most overlooked. Without a place to use an RV, there is no sense to buying one. However, campgrounds are contributing to the demise of the RV industry in a powerful way and, some could say, at a pace faster than the others.

I say this because the number of RV sites is declining rapidly. Campground owners are taking out RV sites to install cabins, deluxe cabins and park models. Sure they bring in more money – lots more – but it leaves too many people scrambling to find remaining space.

As a result, experienced campers know to lock in campground space in January or February for the summer months. By May 1, if you don't have a campsite reserved for Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day weekends, good luck finding a spot.

The RV industry preaches about freedom and the ability to hop in an RV and just take off down the road. The idea of coming home exhausted on a Friday night and announcing to the family that the crew is going camping is a big selling point for the RV lifestyle. In reality; however, finding a last-minute campsite often requires sheer luck and a lot of phone calls.

### **Selling out to seasonals**

Those sites not gobbled up by cabins and park models are being rented long-term to seasonal campers. The campground I'm at right now in Streetsboro, Ohio, is almost entirely full. Yet, nobody is here because the RVs are permanently set up waiting for their weekend owners to arrive.

It's a beautiful location with a lake and plenty of activities for families. But, because the sites are sold to seasonal campers, travelers and weekend warriors have difficulty snagging a spot. It appears there are just 10 sites set aside for short-term use.

As a business owner myself, I truly understand why campground owners would prefer to lock in campers for the entire season rather than check people in and out every other day. There is less work involved. They can get to know their campers very well, which builds long-term loyalty. Plus, it's nice to lock in a big chunk of income before the gate opens for the season.

But, campgrounds that sell out to seasonals or leave just a few spots open for drive-in customers aren't doing the industry any favors.

At those campgrounds that do accept overnight guests, but set aside most sites for seasonal use, RVers complain they are treated as lower class creatures. The cliques that develop in seasonal campgrounds often look at short-term guests as unwanted intruders and loudly make their opinions known – especially if the newcomers bring children with them.

Perhaps Charlie Curry has the solution at his Toutle River RV Park in Castle Rock, Wash. Rather than creating permanent neighborhoods of seasonal guests, the long-term sites are scattered throughout the campground. He says his seasonal campers don't mind having different neighbors every few days.

### **Selling out to REITs**

It's obvious that campground owners sit on some pretty prime real estate. They often pour all their profits back into their business in hopes of selling it for a big payoff someday in the future. In the past, they sold the campgrounds to another couple or family who built upon that foundation to make it even better.

Today, campground owners are selling out to real estate investment trusts (REIT). These big corporations often dangle mind-boggling checks in front of the land owners who would be stupid to ignore such a generous buyout. The selling price is often based on several multiples of annual income.

But, once the deal is signed, the corporation needs to recoup its investment somehow. The first thing they do is raise camping rates. A \$30 per night site quickly becomes a \$50 site and the affordability of camping is seriously diminished.

Many times the corporations pour additional money into the property to improve the amenities and appearance of the park. But, the improvements come with substantial price increases.

REITs are often the biggest offenders when it comes to ripping out campsites and installing park models and cabins. I have attempted to book reservations at several "campgrounds" only to be told they only cater to year-round permanent renters.

I don't blame the corporations for seeking to buy existing RV parks because the alternative is darn near impossible because...

### **Regulation stymies new campground development**

The joke is that there aren't any new campgrounds being built because all the land near railroad tracks has been acquired. In reality, building a campground is a frustrating three-year exercise in developing patience.

But, as soon as someone decides to invest money in building a new RV park, he or she better have lots of time and plenty of money. Just petitioning local government for permits to build a campground unleashes the hounds of opposition who don't want any "trailer trash" in their communities.

Then, the developers have to deal with competing federal and state environmental protection agencies which both believe that if rain falls on the ground, it must be a wetland in need of protection.

Expensive long-term studies have to be completed by multiple groups to determine the impact on the environment and to ensure that there are no endangered Hungerford's crawling water beetles or rattlesnake-master borer moths on the property.

If there are, developers must whip out their wallets to develop a mitigation plan to move the creatures off the property or set aside a significant chunk of prime land as a protected environmental zone.

Once construction plans are in place and the necessary permitting begins, then developers go to war with utility companies that demand vast sums of money to bring services to the property and dictate how they will be installed and used.

Even after playing all the games and ensuring the forms are properly filled out, stamped and filed, the campground can't open until the local building inspector dons his holy robes and gives his blessing on the property. But, that generally takes place after he dictates that several nonsensical changes be made to the property.

When he's done, call the fire inspector who believes he, too, can dictate how the business is set up, laid out and even managed.

Charlie Curry, who I mentioned above, wanted to install an outdoor snack shop by the pool where people could get burgers and hot dogs. The government approved the plans and he went about constructing the center. Then, he was told he had to move the sinks indoors 75 feet away and position them in a specific manner. Then he had to recreate the grill area because the inspector didn't like the setup.

In the end, the health inspector wouldn't grant a permit because the cooking would be done outdoors. So, the project was scrapped after a significant investment was made. Good thing the inspector didn't notice hundreds of people grilling outdoors in nearby campsites.

### **Rising rates**

The law of supply and demand is definitely impacting campground rates. When I started my journey two and a half years ago, I budgeted \$30 per night for camping. I immediately had to change that to \$35 and most places now charge \$40 or more. While in Maine next month, I'll pay \$85 per night for a place to park with electricity and water.

It's different for me in that I am a full-time RVer. Sometimes I can score a reduced weekly rate or even a monthly rate depending upon my schedule. And because I am a full-timer, I must pay for a campground every single night – not just for a long weekend.

So, occasional RVers won't likely balk at the cost as much. Even at \$80 per night, a three-night campground stay is more affordable than a two-night hotel stay.

Campground owners are turning to add-on fees to bolster income to cover rising expenses. They'll charge for things like mini-golf, jumping pillows and water slides, which is understandable because not everyone will use the amenities.

But, more and more are starting to charge for showers and metered electrical service. Granted, some states require them to charge for electricity, but it's an added cost born by families on top of the higher fees.

Let's not forget the dreaded "kid tax," that many "family-friendly" campgrounds seem to charge. This added fee based on the number of children per vehicle can range from \$2 to \$10 per kid, per night. That seems silly to me knowing that, as a parent, my wallet will be permanently open to pay for bike rentals, train rides, ice cream, mini-golf, ropes courses, paddle boats, video games, toys and other supplies in the store.

Campground owners justify the kid tax by noting their pricing is based on two people per RV. Then why promote the park as "family friendly" because most families often include more than two people?

Speaking of family friendly, those campgrounds that don't want children on their property at all can do everyone a favor by clearly noting that on their websites. But, if they promote kid-friendly activities like playgrounds and mini-golf, then they shouldn't be following children all over the campground and sniping at parents for the noise the kids create.

### **What is a resort?**

So many RV parks and campgrounds today brand themselves as "resorts," but the industry lacks a definition and it is confusing to RVers who hear the word and expect a certain level of service to be offered. In fact, I consider it deceptive advertising to brand a campground a resort if it doesn't offer:

- An on-site food option
- Escorts to the campsite
- At least one open pool
- Working internet connections
- 50-amp service
- Paved roads
- Paved and LEVEL sites
- At least 25 feet between campsites
- A well-stocked camp store
- More than one working washer and dryer
- Organized activities
- Amenities beyond horseshoes
- Attractive landscaping

There are some "resorts," like Hersheypark campground, that deserve their self-proclaimed "resort" label for nothing more than the exorbitant fees it charges campers for incredibly few services.

Fortunately, the industry doesn't have to reinvent the wheel here. Kampgrounds of America understands that the label applied to a campground sets customer expectations. So, the firm is rebranding all of its campgrounds into three levels – Journey (overnight), Holiday (short-term) and Resorts (destination) campgrounds.

People who reserve a spot at one of those branded campgrounds have a very good idea of what to expect when they arrive and there are fewer disappointments. If the industry were to adopt KOA's resort requirements before the word could be used to describe a campground, it would prevent a lot of frustration and confusion.

### **Technologically ignorant**

Campgrounds are missing the ball so much when it comes to technology that it's definitely having an impact on their income and profitability.

First up is a working website. It's surprising how many campgrounds still have websites that look like 8th grade computer science projects. The sites are old-fashioned, render silly graphics – or worse, music and Flash introductions and visitor counters. The sites often feature broken links, even to their own pages.

Dudes, it's 2016! Update the website! It is your 24-hour billboard and absolute first point of contact with your guests.

When I look for a campground, I use Google Maps to find places to stay in an area I'm visiting. Ignoring the mind-blowing fact that Google thinks ALL mobile home communities are RV parks, it does show every type of campground it can find in the area.

But, if the campground or RV park does not have a website where I can get more information, but only lists a phone number, I'm not staying there — and others won't either. At a minimum, people want to see what services are available, this year's current rates and pictures of the park.

Next, I'm still stunned at the number of campgrounds that lack the ability to make reservations online. They tell their potential guests to fill out web forms demanding not just date of arrival and number of nights, but the make, model, type and size of the RV along with number of people, pets and children coming along.

After submitting the form, cue crickets as the customer waits, and waits and waits and waits to get an email phone call announcing yes or no as to availability. If yes, the customer is told to call the office during business hours, which, not surprising to anyone, are the same as the customer's on-the-job work hours. Most employers frown on planning vacations on company time.

Then, when the customer calls in, for some reason he has to repeat all the information that was required on the silly web form. Web forms are a waste of everyone's time.

Most people plan their trips at night. Campgrounds that don't make it easy for guests to lock in reservations are losing customers to those RV parks that understand the convenience of doing business over the internet.

The ability to add online reservations has never been easier. There are several companies that will do the website modification work for little or no cost in exchange for a small fee per transaction. But, many campground owners are leery of those firms thanks to the experience they had with Friend Communications, which has a reputation to holding on to credit card payments much longer than necessary before forwarding them to campgrounds.

### **Very poor internet connections**

The reality of life in 2016 is that people are connected to their devices. Most check email regularly throughout the day and many are regularly using Facebook and other social media sites, too.

Just about every campground advertises free wireless and some willfully deceive their customers by advertising free "high-speed" wireless. Can we settle on a definition for "high speed?"

The first thing I do after setting up my RV site is to conduct a speed test on the campground's internet connection and the Verizon data connections. Campground internet service is so poor that I don't even expect to connect to it any more.

That forces more people to use their cell phones, which clogs the nearby tower and reduces access for everyone leaving the entire campground frustrated over the inability to connect.

The number of campgrounds where the internet speed is less than 1995 dial-up connections is way too high for this point in the 21st century. The number of campgrounds where the 30-second speed test can't be completed because the signal is too weak or times out during the test is embarrassing.

Campground owners, go out into your park, connect to your service with a laptop, then go to [www.speedtest.net](http://www.speedtest.net) and click Begin. If your download speed is less than 0.05 mbs, you're at dial up speed. Take down all signs and scrub marketing materials and camp guides from any reference to offering Internet service.

Yes, some campgrounds desperately want to improve internet speeds, but can't because they are located in very remote areas at the end of a single digital subscriber line (DSL) which, at best, delivers a 1.5 megabyte per second connection. I feel their pain.

But, if the campground is located anywhere it can bring in cable television, the company should be able to pull in reliable internet speeds as well.

Yes, some consumers are hogs and feel it is their right to download streaming video signals to dad's laptop, mom's tablet and each child's smartphone. Yet, technology exists to identify those hogs and throttle or drop their connections. Just investigate Checkbox Systems.

Some campground owners, like Vern Mangels at Anaheim RV Park, understand the role the internet plays in the lives of his customers. He invests \$50,000 per year for fiber-optic connections capable of delivering 100 mbs upload and download speeds. He is right when he says 100 percent of information and entertainment options will come from the internet in just a few years.

Dump cable, increase internet speed and everyone will be happy.

While campground owners can balk at that cost, customers are willing to pay for quality signals. Jellystone Parks often offers two levels of paid service. The basic connection allows hassle free web surfing for a few dollars a day. Those who want to pay for video streaming speeds can do so as well for less than \$10 per day.

But, campground owners who really want to tick off customers can offer PAID “high-speed” service that, once connected, is slower than dial up speed. Trust me, those campgrounds won’t see many people under 50 coming to their campgrounds. They are also inviting deceptive advertising complaints to regulators.

### **Poor public parks**

While private campground owners are at least tuned in to customer desires, the same can’t be said for most public campgrounds on state and national lands. The sites are cheap – much cheaper – thanks to the fact they are subsidized by tax dollars. While a public campground can snag \$1.5 million to build a bathhouse, a private owner must raise rates to cover the cost.

I stayed at a county RV park in Illinois recently that enforced a strict 14-day stay limit, despite the fact the park had 40 percent occupancy at best. A private owner would say, heck if I have that much space, sure, the guest can stay an extra week. A public campground supported by tax dollars doesn’t think that way.

Plus, despite having the 14-day limit, campers could only pay for seven nights at a time. I had a work camper knocking on my door at 10:15 one night demanding payment for another week because the office wasn’t open when I happened to be in the campground earlier in the day. Goofy, just goofy.

National parks are notorious for being unfriendly to RV owners. The sites are too small, the roads are too narrow and the campgrounds lack basics like electricity and water.

If the public parks in America would wake up to the fact that they could earn more money serving RV owners, the shortages of campground space mentioned at the start of this column would be relieved considerably.

## Clean up the parks

Why do people get the perception that RV owners are “trailer trash?” Because they go into campgrounds and find trailers looking like the one to the right. Some campgrounds put dumpsters by the office and then never bother to pick up the trash that blows out of it.



It gives a wrong impression when people pull into a campground only to discover cigarette butts all over the ground and someone else’s trash still in the campfire ring.

I know it is costly to pick up after people who refuse to pick up after themselves. But, this is the outdoor “hospitality” industry. You’d tidy up the house before inviting guests over — especially those you’ve never met before. Your camping guests deserve the same consideration.

While you’re at it, fix the broken windows and leaking pipes, clean up the filthy floors and eradicate all spiders and webs from the restrooms. It freaks people out and certainly presents a bad impression.

Finally, this shouldn’t have to be said, but check your state’s sex offender registry. If the campground’s address is listed, it’s time to clean house. You can be sure some of your customers are checking that list. There was one campground I truly felt uncomfortable staying, and a quick check showed there were three registered sex offenders living there.

## Fighting Walmart

Many campground owners can feel their skin crawl as they drive past a local Walmart and see one or two RVs parked overnight in the lot when there is space available at their nearby RV park. So, they lobby local officials to pass ordinances prohibiting overnight parking in those lots.

However, the campgrounds often shut their doors at 7 p.m. and impose quiet hours on people who show up after 9 or 10 p.m. Do they really expect overnight travelers to show up and pay \$45 to park on their property from 9 p.m. to 8 a.m.? Apparently so because more and more cities are restricting overnight RV parking in business lots.

I’ll talk about the consumer’s role in that issue in an upcoming segment.

If campgrounds continue to play this game, watch for hotels and motels to add 50-amp outlets and water connections to THEIR parking lots, which are already approved for overnight parking by vehicles of all types.

Campgrounds and RV parks are fun places to be, when managed properly. They offer a reason for people to buy RVs and get away from home. Even if they don't change any of the things mentioned above, they will continue to thrive, but the industry will suffer because people will have fewer and fewer places to park their RVs while enjoying their adventures.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 6: Associations can influence change**

[Original story with comments](#)

If there is any hope of having a serious discussion about the myriad of problems facing the RV industry, the hope lies in the ability of the RV industry's associations to muster courage to first broach the subjects in the first place and, second, to work toward common solutions.

The problem is that the associations are deeply siloed around their own special interests. Worse, the voices within the groups are being silenced as big players buy up smaller players and remove their seats from the table.

What's the purpose of an association? To conduct meetings and give out awards. What's the purpose of a meeting? To schedule another meeting. There is a lot of talk at industry meetings, but can anyone point to concrete resolutions that have been implemented to improve the RV industry as a result? Perhaps the new definition of RVs for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. But, nothing earth-shattering comes to mind.

When two manufacturers, one supplier, one distributor and one dealership controls a huge swath of the RV industry, the associations are weakened by the lack of diverse thought and lively debate. Worse, they are subject to the control of big players through funding.

Let's look at each of the industry's major associations.

### **RV Industry Association**

The big kid on the block, RVIA is well funded, well organized and in an ideal position to serve as the "voice of the RV industry" through its public relations and marketing initiatives.



According to the most recent Form 990 filing available from its fiscal year ending Sept. 20, 2014, RVIA brought in \$13.5 million in program service revenue, \$1.3 million from investment income, and \$188,000 in other income for a total of \$15,137,094.

At the end of the year, the association had total assets of \$35.2 million, liabilities of \$14.7 million and a fund balance of \$20.5 million.

RVIA derives its money from several sources:

- \$5.8 million from the National RV Trade Show
- \$5.8 million from the sale of seals on new RVs
- \$1.9 million from membership dues

- \$55,000 on seminars and clinics

It spends more than \$528,000 on lobbying alone and had \$246,000 in cash, \$7.1 million in savings and \$24.5 million in publicly traded securities in 2014. We won't need to worry about RVIA going broke any time soon.

With money comes some perks. It pays its executives very well in salaries ranging from \$140,000 to \$476,000 plus benefits averaging nearly \$50,000 per person. Total salaries of \$7,550,627 paid to 75 people averaged \$100,675. That allows it to attract and retain extraordinarily talented people to its team.

As the voice of the RV Industry, RVIA by its nature should represent all segments. But, in reality, its mission is focused more on protecting RV manufacturers than it does suppliers, dealers and campgrounds, although there is some crossover work on key issues.

### **RVIA is great at scheduling meetings**

RVIA is known for sponsoring Committee Week, a series of meetings involving members serving on various committees that takes place each June in Washington, D.C. The committees discuss issues and make proposals for the RVIA Board of Directors to consider when it comes to allocating funding and other resources.

The problem is that RVIA's board is and has been chaired by representatives of the industry's two largest manufacturing firms.

Locating the meeting in Washington gives members the opportunity to spend a day on Capitol Hill lobbying senators and representatives regarding whatever legislation RVIA is interested in promoting that year.

The meetings are closed in that journalists are allowed to sit in the back of the room, but can't participate in discussions or even report on what transpires. Everything said is "off the record" unless approved for release by RVIA. It is felt this encourages free discussion and the ability to propose ideas without having to worry about it appearing in the press somewhere.

That's why I stopped going years ago and now simply wait for RVIA's press releases that relay results of various meetings and speaker presentations.

RVIA also hosts an annual meeting each spring at a different location around the country. The meeting is not as well attended as Committee Week, but does provide an opportunity for members to gather to meet informally and listen to presentations about important issues.

This year's meeting featured a fascinating speaker who talked about the role millennials will have on the industry, as well as another speaker that described the current political climate in Washington.

RVIA is best known for sponsoring the National RV Trade Show, which takes place the week after Thanksgiving in Louisville, Ky. Once the RV industry's premier event, it has dwindled to second place behind the Elkhart Dealer Open House in September.

When I first started in the industry in 2000, the three-day "Louisville Show" as it is popularly called, was packed with so many people that it was hard to navigate hallways and aisles to look at the displays. Today, the show is basically a 1.5-day show attended by more exhibitors than buyers. In fact, corporate executives who had previously camped out in their displays all three days, now hop on jets and head out before the first day ends, or the next day after dinner meetings.

The show has operated on the idea that "if we build it, they will come." However, the timing of the show around a holiday, the expense of traveling on a holiday weekend, and the fact there are too many shows competing for dealers' attention, has left the folks at RVIA scrambling to improve the show's significance.

Last year, it offered technician training to boost its attendance and was surprised at the result. I've been told by one of their public relations vendors that this year's show will be completely different from others, but I have not yet heard details as to what that involves.

The show starts off each year with the Outlook breakfast, an event where pretty much the same players recite the same scripts with updated figures talking about the economy, demographics and the success of the Go RVing campaign. But, many see the show as having value in networking with others and to showcase new products.

Many manufacturers already wine-and-dine their dealers at the September open house in Elkhart. Suppliers, who don't have access to the open house, complain about the falling dealer attendance and the fact that manufacturers no longer send anyone other than sales reps to the show. Buyers, designers and engineers generally don't get to spend much time in Louisville.

The third day of the show is well known for its poor attendance and boredom. Many companies pack up and leave one person at the site to collect business cards for the others.

### **Go RVing**

RVIA was influential in developing the Go RVing program years ago as a market expansion effort. It is funded from the sale of seals on each new RV. The most recent figures I have from 2013 show Go RVing gets \$46 for folding campers and truck campers, \$61 for travel trailers and fifth wheels and \$74 for motorhomes.

That money is pooled and used to produce some top-quality commercials as well as to buy TV, print and online advertising on dozens of different platforms all designed to promote the benefits of the RV lifestyle.

But, as a market expansion effort, Go RVing has failed miserably. As noted in the first column I wrote, there were 9 million RV-owning households in 1997, 8.9 million in 2001 and 2011, and 9 million today.

The market has not expanded since just as many people are getting out of the lifestyle as come in each year.

For the reasons alluded to in my other columns – the biggies being inability to get RVs serviced and product quality – the RV lifestyle is a dream of many until they buy one and run into the problems that force them out of the lifestyle as the fun dissipates.

RVIA is in the prime position as the leader of the industry’s manufacturers to dictate product quality as part of the seal requirements. Like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, an RVIA seal should convey to consumers that the RV has been inspected, tested and is ready to be used. However, the seal only indicates that it has been constructed according to RVIA’s standards.

However, people cannot review RVIA’s standards, nor are they offered for sale on the association’s website. Therefore consumers really don’t know whether the RVs they buy are built to those standards. Some of the standards are available through other organizations, like the National Fire Protection Association. But, there is no one central location where consumers can find the standards dictating RV construction.

The Go RVing campaign has done a wonderful job of finding replacement consumers for those abandoning the lifestyle. But, if just a bit of the \$16.5 million annually spent promoting the RV lifestyle were reallocated toward fixing the problems that cause consumers to leave, the industry would truly be in expansion mode.

For example, several people I have talked to have indicated that for \$1 million, RVIA could create a comprehensive online training program to educate technicians on every aspect of RV repair. Others have suggested that RVIA create comprehensive RV driving safety class as well.

How much benefit would come from investing just \$500,000 in recruiting people to become RV service technicians? Making videos available to high school guidance counselors or tech school job centers would go a long way toward ensuring the industry has enough people to keep 9 million RVs on the road.

With more technicians, the industry can ensure an ample labor supply – and offer a wonderful lifestyle for technicians to “follow the snowbirds” by moving with their families to Arizona in the winter, Montana in the summer, Florida in the winter, New England in the summer.

RVIA funding could go a long way toward establishing accredited tech training schools throughout the nation to provide live, in-person training that pump out quality, certified technicians in one- and two-year programs.

### **Market studies**

Another thing the RV Industry Association is known for is its ability to capture and analyze data. It produces the monthly RV shipment report, which serves as the barometer of manufacturer health by showing how many RVs have been shipped to dealers that month.

The association also produces a consumer demographic profile, family vacation cost comparison study, and it surveys lender experiences to show banks that making RV loans is less risky than other types of lending.

Earlier this year, the association produced RVs Move America, an economic study of the RV industry that showed how far the tentacles of economic impact reached into the nation's overall economy.

RVIA does a fine job in producing data regarding the size and strength of the industry. Where it's lacking is in measuring consumer satisfaction. Years ago, the industry produced its own consumer satisfaction reports that always showed how happy RV owners were.

Then, at the Outlook breakfast in 2010, RVIA President Richard Coon promised "to help develop and drive new programs to bolster aftermarket service as RVIA wrapped up a groundbreaking demographic study that surveyed technicians, RV owners and RV dealers."

The study was to provide "much-needed data about the RV service technician career path and the impact of the industry's training and certification programs on service delivery and customer satisfaction."

Partnering with JD Power, a well-recognized name in gauging auto industry satisfaction, RVIA was going to show the world how happy RV owners were with the products they purchased. However, the results were never made public.

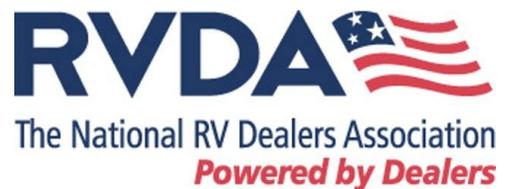
In fact, rumor is the report was shredded, the shreds burned and the ashes scattered by a fishing trawler along 10 miles of the north Atlantic on a moonless night in September. That way RVIA could ensure that the industry in general would never, ever find out how badly consumers viewed the products, service and customer experience.

To the best of my knowledge, no consumer satisfaction studies have been completed since then.

RVIA has within its power to be the game changer to champion the resolution for many long-term pesky problems facing the industry and consumers. Will it?

### **RV Dealers Association**

RVDA has to be the most efficient organization when it comes to doing the most for members with as few dollars as it receives.



According to the association's most recent Form 990 filed for its fiscal year ending June 30, 2014, the group brings in just over \$2 million in annual revenue from these sources:

- Program service = \$1.7 million
- Investment income = \$39,000
- Other revenue = \$358,442

The biggest money makers for the association include:

- Convention/expo = \$790,000
- Membership dues = \$435,000
- Royalties on publications = \$347,000
- Newsletter/directory = \$204,000
- Sponsorships = \$150,000
- Market expansion = \$92,000

It spends the bulk of its income on salaries and closed the year with a “profit” of \$91,072. There is not much wiggle room for RVDA to hire the consultants RVIA does, nor to lobby as effectively as RVIA. In fact, it spent nothing on outside lobbying in 2014.

RVDA had a total fund balance of \$2.5 million in 2014. Its key executives earn between \$110,000 and \$175,000 with average benefits of just over \$17,000. RVDA’s budget for salaries for 15 employees was \$1,063,582 – an average of \$70,905

At the end of 2014, RVIA had \$100 in cash, \$866,000 in savings and \$877,000 in investments.

RVDA has been hammered big time by industry consolidation. Camping World alone has accounted for a huge loss in income from membership dues and attendance at RVDA’s convention/expo.

Despite the public proclamations of its leader, Camping World does not generally buy troubled dealerships. The firm acquires solid companies run by people who have a track record of supporting RVDA’s programs. That’s likely why the dealerships become so successful.

Then, after buying the dealership, Camping World doesn’t renew RVDA membership nor does it allow its staff to attend the convention/expo. The lost revenue from Camping World is taking its toll.

Combine that with the impact from supplier and wholesaler consolidations, and there are fewer exhibitors at its convention as well as fewer associate memberships bringing in dues revenue.

RVDA is put into an unfortunate position in that it relies on sponsorships to make ends meet. Take away the \$150,000 in sponsorship revenue and RVDA is in the red.

As much as RVDA would like to represent the best interests of its members and attempt to lead discussion on critical issues, the association can’t really risk irritating the big manufacturers, distributor and supplier that helps fund its efforts. It’s yet another reason why consolidation around a handful of major players is having a ripple effect on the industry.

Of all the associations, RVDA likely understands the needs of its members best due to the diversity of the board and its board of delegates that funnel input from dealers in all 50 states to the board level.

But, without the income to truly advocate on behalf of its members – especially around issues in which the association is in direct opposition to RVIA – its voice is reduced from a roar to a plea. The passage of

franchise laws is just one issue in which both RVIA and RVDA have stakes that are polar opposite of the each other.

The fact that RVDA is so effective in standing up for itself and its members is a testimony to the involvement of dealers in the day-to-day operation of the association and in guiding its future.

RVDA's biggest event of the year is its annual convention and expo in Las Vegas. The association has done everything it can to increase participation – reducing prices, changing venues, adding more tracks. But, the fact that so few dealerships make the investment to send employees to the quality training sessions demonstrates a lack of investment in any dealership's long-term success, in my opinion.

Really, people who are professionals in their trade don't ignore the largest trade show, educational and networking opportunity of the year to stay home and play golf. Coming home with just one new idea could more than pay for the expenses of attending the show.

Imagine the impact RVDA could have on product quality, customer experience and discussion of critical issues if the group had more money for lobbying and education. Until some significant estate-funded donations come in, perhaps the group should budget \$6 a week for a Powerball and Mega Millions ticket.

### **National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds**

The National Association of RV Parks and Campgrounds, often referred to as ARVC, is the voice of the campground industry. But, its public mission is unclear. Does it represent campgrounds or is it an association of state associations that represent campgrounds.



A lot of effort is being paid to get word out to campground owners regarding the benefit of partnering with ARVC, and the campgrounds need all the help they can get.

According to ARVC's most recent Form 990, filed at the end of its fiscal year Sept. 30, 2014, the group enjoys annual income of \$2.3 million, the bulk of which comes from program services (\$2.1 million) and investment income (\$21,000).

The report showed the income came from:

- Member benefits program = \$926,000
- Membership dues = \$673,000
- Convention and trade meetings = \$445,000
- Business forum = \$78,000

Total salaries for the 12 employees were \$759,620 – an average of \$63,301. It, too, paid nothing for lobbying, but did invest \$109,000 in advertising.

At the end of the year, the association had \$468,000 in cash, \$438,000 in savings and \$612,000 in investments. It made a "profit" of \$25,781.

ARVC claims membership of 3,100 private RV parks and campgrounds. It oversees the Outdoor Hospitality Education Program which certifies professional campground owners through the National School of RV Park and Campground Management. To the best of my knowledge, it is the only RV industry trade association to certify its members as professionals.

Although the association spends no money on outside lobbyists, one of its staffers, Jeff Sims, is regarded as one of the best people in the industry for staying on top of legislative issues that will impact campground owners at the state and national level.

ARVC's voice is critical in this area when it comes to breaking the log jam of regulations that slow down or stop construction of new campgrounds. RV park owners are facing a plethora of challenges in rising property taxes, increased utility fees, ridiculous annual permit costs, and befuddling wage rules (how much does a free campsite for work campers really cost?) They need a strong voice representing their interests at the state and national level.

ARVC made one of the best moves ever by relocating its association headquarters out of the politically volatile, expensive and crowded Washington, D.C., area in 2010 and relocating to Denver. I'm convinced the move put ARVC much closer in touch to members who live and work in the outdoors.

The association has also made moves to build bridges with public campgrounds, which are often seen in a negative light by private campground owners. They resent being taxed on their property, and having their tax money spent to build and improve public campgrounds that charge rates often one-third as much of private parks. Private parks are required, by law, to fund its competition.

ARVC voted in 2011 to allow public campgrounds as non-voting members. That allowed public campgrounds to take advantage of the association's education and training programs which, in the end, improve the camping experience for all RV owners.

There are a few things ARVC could do to help campground owners that it really isn't embracing. The first is compliance with Americans With Disability Act provisions. Too many campground owners are being sued for non-compliance.

As American baby boomers, who are still the primary population of RV owners, continue to age, mobility will be a big problem. ARVC should work to provide ADA inspectors to evaluate campgrounds and help owners develop plans to comply with ADA provisions.

ARVC could follow KOA's lead in developing standards for different types of parks, such as resorts, to reduce confusion among RV owners for whom the word "resort" implies a certain level of service that is not usually available at many campgrounds labeled as such.

Go Camping America, a website run by ARVC on behalf of its members, does a fabulous job in helping RV owners find campgrounds. The association should be doing far more to promote the site with the myriad of other campground directories competing for the attention of RV owners — and campground owners.

In fact, if ARVC wanted to do RVers a big favor, the association could work with member campgrounds to set up online reservations directly from the Go Camping America website. If Go Camping America became the go-to site for camping reservations at private campgrounds like Reserve America is for public parks, membership in ARVC would be a no brainer.

Right now, GoCampingAmerica.com is ranked as the 48,233 most popular website in America, according to Alexa.com. It should be equally as popular, if not more so, than Camping World, which is ranked 2,221.

### **RV Aftermarket Association**

RV industry suppliers are represented by the RV Aftermarket Association, which is, in my opinion, the weakest of all trade associations in the industry.



The association exists solely to orchestrate an annual conference that connects companies making parts and accessories to a dwindling number of wholesale distributors that ship them to dealers and manufacturers.

For years, RVAA was managed by a full-time executive director and a few part-time assistants. That formula worked well. However, in 2011, the association moved in a new direction and contracted with the Kellen Company to “manage” the association.

The company, with locations throughout the world, actually represents 122 clients, including the RVAA, according to their website. Contracting with the Kellen Company enables RVAA to offer programs and services to its members by taking advantage of an economy of scale. The costs for an executive director, marketing director and meeting planner, for example, are shared among eight or so different associations.

Meeting planning, benefits management, communications and advocacy — all of these essential services can be provided by the shared work of a team of 15 to 20 people, which makes it more affordable for the association.

However, RVAA offers little in terms of communication to the industry and advocacy is rare. For example, the association, which counts suppliers and wholesale distributors as members, has no formal position on the impact of consolidation on the RV aftermarket.

With product quality being such a concern today, you would think RVAA would have a much stronger voice in advocating on behalf of suppliers to manufacturers. But, the best the association can do is produce a member-only newsletter a few times a year. As long as the group’s annual meeting goes off without a hitch, the association has done its job.

The RV Aftermarket Association is an Ohio non-profit agency, according to legal documents. However, no current Form 990 can be found for the non-profit either in Ohio, where it is incorporated, or in Illinois, where the Kellen Group’s office is located.

This is an association that has seen its membership decline and influence wane as wholesale distributors have merged over the years. The annual meetings once featured dozens of wholesale distributors looking for products to deliver to dealers. Today, there is one behemoth company that controls 80 percent of the aftermarket, and a half dozen or so smaller wholesalers competing for the scraps.

Here is a group that could jump to the forefront of dealer education and training, especially in the area of service and repair. The group represents companies that make and sell almost every part found on, in and outside of a recreation vehicle.

The company could also help dealers better market products through improved store designs and enhanced product education. Sure they offer a webinar once every month or so. But, so much more could be done.

If RVAA had any power at all, the RV industry would have a uniform system for identifying, labeling and ordering parts, much like the auto industry does today. In the RV industry, each wholesale distributor often uses its own database system. Perhaps that is by design so that RV dealers – and ultimately consumers – cannot find the best price for RV parts.

### **What's missing?**

Among all the associations impacting the RV industry today, from big national associations mentioned above to smaller statewide groups of dealers and campgrounds, there is one group that has absolutely no voice at all in shaping the direction of the industry.

Who represents RV owners – the 9 million household group upon which the entire foundation of the industry rests? Answer that question and you'll know why we're in such a predicament today.

Years ago, Good Sam Club used to be the "voice of the RV owner." Today, it is nothing more than the marketing arm of Camping World in that members are flooded with offers to buy RVs, parts, accessories and services from Camping World dealerships and associated companies.

You won't ever see Good Sam taking manufacturers, suppliers or its own network of dealers to task.

The Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA) is an association by name, but it represents only people who own motorhomes – and is generally focused on serving the needs of members age 70 and older. FMCA's big deal is conventions, and attendance at those is dwindling.

According to their website, Escapees Club has "fought to uphold full-time RVers' right to vote; defeated unfair RV-specific taxes; protected overnight parking rights; and stood up to city, county, state, and federal regulations that threatened personal freedoms."



They may be the closest group to represent RV owners en masse, but I don't see the Escapees holding manufacturer's feet to the fire when it comes to product quality concerns or parts availability, passing Lemon Law legislation, or trying to influence standards upon campgrounds and RV parks.

Until a consumer association emerges, it will likely be business as usual as firms that make up the RV industry talk among themselves on what to do to improve "the customer experience" without having a single RV owner at the table.

When that association emerges, it could have a game-changing impact on the RV lifestyle by addressing issues that prevent people from abandoning the industry. Then, we'll see true market expansion.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 7: RV owners share the blame**

[Original story with comments](#)

The entire RV industry revolves around RV owners. They buy the motorhomes and travel trailers that keep manufacturers, dealerships and service centers employed. They stay at RV parks that keep amenity-filled campgrounds open.

RV owners are a fun-loving bunch of people who are “living the dream” of travel and adventure they have seen advertised all over the internet, television and print publications. They have a lot of untapped power.

But, they too, are contributing to the demise of the RV industry. How can that be? How can they be the foundation of the industry and be weakening it at the same time? Let’s take a look.

### **They are enablers**

Anyone who buys an RV should be doing due diligence on the purchase by investigating the manufacturer that built the unit and the dealership that sells it. There are plenty of venues on the web where people can read what others are saying about products and companies. It won’t take much effort at all to stumble upon them.

Buyers can go on a host of social media platforms and simply post a question in active RVing groups, go have lunch and come back to find dozens, if not hundreds, of responses. They can go to a campground, pay the \$5 to \$10 visitor fee and simply walk up to current RV owners to ask questions. Most don’t mind talking about their experiences.

So there is no excuse for ignorance. If a buyer walks into a transaction blind, he does so by choice. But, when it comes to plunking down hard earned cash, why do RV owners reward companies with the worst reputations for product quality and customer service? It comes down to cash.

“Yes, the forums say this brand has a hideous history of product quality right off the lot, but look at that price! It’s too good to be true!” Indeed it is.

“I know that dealership has horrible reviews for service after the sale, but I can’t buy that RV anywhere else for that price!” Spoiler alert: There’s a reason for that, and we’ll talk about it soon.

“The reviews I read all say the RV breaks down repeatedly, but I just LOOOOOVE the floorplan and the cute little backsplash behind the kitchen sink!”

If you want to know why some companies in the RV industry continue to sell junk, it’s because someone is willing to pay for it. Like huckster David Hannum so famously said, “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

Don't get me wrong. There are some RV manufacturers with wonderful reputations for producing quality RVs and standing behind the products they build. Sure, a problem might sneak out of the factory every now and then, but the companies quickly respond and make it right for the customers.

These firms have a long-term plan for their companies that involve creating customers for life. They know if customers are happy with their first RVs, chances are good they'll upgrade to a bigger or better unit within a few years. They understand brand loyalty and really, truly want to stake the success of their company upon a foundation of quality and service.

However, there are other RV manufacturers, which are quite easily identifiable on social media, that take a different approach. The more RVs the president sees driving off the factory lot, the happier he is. He doesn't care if the customer ever comes back or buys another one someday, nor does he care if the dissatisfied owner trashes his firm on social media.

His philosophy is "If we build it cheaply enough, they will pay." Indeed they will.

When complaining about poor quality RVs, people often hear the phrase, "An RV is a rolling earthquake traveling against hurricane force winds – you need to expect things to break." It is true that RVs bounce around A LOT.

The potholes on some highways and campground roads are big enough to knock the RV back to 1982. But winds aren't considered to be "hurricane force" until they exceed 74 miles per hour, and most RVs aren't driven that fast – nor should they be.

After repeated problems with broken buildings caused by hurricanes and earthquakes, government agencies in many states insisted that building materials and structural designs be beefed up so that homes could withstand the wind and shaking with minimal problems.

RV owners should insist that manufacturers do the same and use building materials and structural reinforcements to ensure that the products don't fall apart when traveling one or two hours down the road.

Again, it all comes down to cost. Would you rather pay more for a quality RV that allows for joyful, hassle-free experiences and maybe one trip to a repair center a year? Or would you rather save money up front, but invest hours of time and thousands of dollars later having the RV serviced after every use?

Just like family members of addicts who look the other way at self-destructive behaviors or claim that the problem is being "managed," RV owners enable poor quality and hideous service within the RV industry by financially rewarding those companies providing it.

There is indeed a sucker born every minute.

### **Internet shopping**

Okay, everyone loves a bargain. I get it and I shop for bargains, too. But some RV owners are taking up the time of RV salespeople to demonstrate and test drive RVs at one dealership, then going home and

buying the same unit from another online dealership that has absolutely no vested interest in the customer.

The buyer shows up, signs a contract and drives off with an RV thinking it is exactly the same one he saw at the other dealership. They pat themselves on the back for their financial prowess. Then, a few weeks later, the new owner screams at the top of his lungs in frustration because he can't get the new RV fixed.

Internet retailers proudly claim they are doing customers a favor by saving them significant money by selling RVs at \$1,000 over invoice, or something crazy like that. Yet, they don't truly inspect the RVs to make sure everything is working well when the buyer picks it up.

The dealership washes the outside, dusts the inside, makes sure the lights work, the stovetop lights, the microwave comes on, the air conditioner starts, the furnace ignites and that there are no glaring irregularities that might catch the attention of a first-time RV buyer. But, that's about all.

When doing business with these dealerships, RV owners beware! You are being duped and the money you save now will be spent later exponentially in fixing the RV. In fact, you'll spend far more than you ever hoped to save when factoring in your time to transport and pick up the RV from a service center – if you can find one – and the time lost because you can't use the RV.

There are RV dealerships in America that understand the greed of consumers so well that they actually price the RVs lower and lower based on how far away the customer lives from the dealership. Buyers will get a nice discount if they live 500 miles away, a significant discount if they're 1,000 miles away and a jaw-dropping bargain if they live 2,000 miles away.

Why? Because the dealers know darn well the buyer is highly unlikely to ever drive back for service, which means his firm won't have to futz around with unreimbursed warranty claims.

The dealer just chalks up another sale and the more sales his company makes, the bigger discounts it gets from manufacturers. Apparently the builders could care less whether it is ethical to produce orphaned owners so long as the president sees another RV hobbling away from the plant at warp speed to replace the one just sold.

The industry tolerates these internet sellers and RV owners reward them, so why change?

### **Is Amazon really your friend?**

Many RVers are turning to Amazon to do their shopping for RV parts and supplies. They can place an order online 24/7 and, thanks to Amazon Prime, have it delivered to their door within two days – if not the same day in some markets.

Consumers enjoy the pricing and convenience up until the point they are traveling and need a replacement part or supplies. Then, they appreciate the convenience of having a local dealership stocking products for immediate purchase.

Some dealerships have \$500,000 or more of inventory just sitting on shelves waiting for people to come in and buy the products. Yes, they need to mark up the price to cover the cost for store space, display equipment, people to staff the department and to make a return on the money tied up in inventory.

So owners shouldn't balk at paying a bit more to walk into a store and walk out with products five minutes later. However, if people don't buy products from dealerships, the dealers won't stock them. And when you really need something hours before you leave on vacation or after you arrive somewhere, don't get upset when the local dealer doesn't have the supplies you need on hand.

### **Social media "experts"**

I love social media, especially Facebook. I have found RV owners to be tremendously helpful when I ask questions and need advice. It's like having a big family willing to share their experiences to ensure you don't make the same mistakes.

Then there are the flamethrowers. These social media "experts" are like 12-year-old boys. You can't tell them anything and they don't listen, yet they have all the answers.

A buddy of mine shared a story about raising his son. Every night at dinner my friend would ask, "So, what did you learn in school today?" Every night the answer was the same. "Nothing." This went on nightly from kindergarten to seventh grade, at which time the boy knew everything about every subject. It was truly a miracle.

You see these flamethrowers disrupting conversations on social media all the time. They are opinionated and down right nasty. They hide behind their anonymity to start a war of words over the silliest of topics.

I saw a mother pose a question as to where she could take her family to church in a community she was visiting in a few weeks. She got some helpful suggestions until Mr. Flamethrower shows up to start an anti-religious crusade.

I had my Jeep blow up last winter on my way through Texas when the gear somehow popped out of neutral and into drive while towing at 65 mph. The transfer case literally exploded, which blew a hole in the floor of the Jeep. It also took out the transmission and drive train, severed a fuel line and sliced all the wires underneath the car. It was totaled and needed to be replaced.

So, I explained what happened and asked for advice on a good vehicle to flat tow. Dozens of people chimed in to recommend cars and SUVs they own and enjoy.

Then Mr. Flamethrower showed up to blast me for not properly maintaining the Jeep. He demanded to know the service history and the steps I took to put it into "tow mode" insisting that there was no way possible a gear just slips.

Not satisfied to get in my face, he jumped on people recommending vehicles by calling them idiots for buying such and such a car. His advice was "appreciated" by all.

I love it, too, when Mr. Flamethrower berates a new RV owner for failing to ask this question or that question before buying a unit, or for insisting that this component or that part wasn't installed at the time of sale. This moron obviously forgets what it was like to be a new owner. Really, if you don't know what questions to ask, how can you seek the answers?

Sharing advice and experiences, good and bad, is welcome by all. But, for those RVers who are tempted to start arguments and resort to name calling online simply because you can hide behind a keyboard, I have just one recommendation. STHU!

People say the rudest things online that they would never, ever say to someone in person. This does not contribute to the RV lifestyle in any way. Thank goodness the moderators in the most active groups are jumping in to ban those bozos fast.

### **Manners? Who needs manners?**

Camping is supposed to be a fun experience and people go camping to escape the stress of life and enjoy a memorable time with their friends or family. But, campgrounds are like big crowded neighborhoods, especially on summer weekends – and especially when parks separate campsites by the length of an awning plus 8 inches.

That's why it is essential for people to play nice, extend grace and work to maintain some semblance of community. For the most part, 98 percent of all people showing up at campgrounds are responsible adults who bring kids who may be rambunctious and full of energy, but generally understand rules and boundaries.

But, it only takes that 2 percent to ruin a weekend or vacation for the rest of the families at the campground. They play loud music or keep their outdoor televisions blaring well into the night. They shout, scream, swear, berate their kids in public, throw trash into the fire pits or leave it all over the site.

Their kids think they own the campground and begin to bully other children, take things that don't belong to them, harass dogs, disobey street signs on their bikes, and cut through other campsites.

If you think Mr. Flamethrower is nasty on the internet, wait until he starts drinking at 10 a.m. and opts to voice his opinion after beer 24 at 6 p.m.

Being parked next to one of these dipsticks for a night or two is enough to discourage RVers from using campgrounds. The bad behavior doesn't just impact immediate neighbors, but campers a row or two away.

Campground owners who would much rather listen to their customers' fun stories being shared around campsites are forced to be babysitters or call in real police to evict problem campers.

People often complain that restrooms and showers at campsites are "dirty." Well, who makes the mess? It's certainly not campground owners. Is it too much to ask that you wipe off a counter or the shower after you're done, and that you demonstrate proper aiming skills when using toilets?

If you buy an RV thinking that every weekend is going to be a non-stop drinkfest with your buddies, then consider boondocking where you can be as loud and obnoxious as you'd like in the middle of the desert or woods or plains or anywhere you won't share space with adults.

A few months ago, I asked RVers to share their pet peeves when it comes to campground etiquette. You can see the results in a story we published on our LetsRV consumer site by clicking [here](#).

### **Walmartians go camping**

Stores like Walmart, Lowes, Flying J, Cracker Barrel and others offer a very valuable service to the RVing public. They allow people to spend the night in their parking lots at absolutely no cost – BUT THEY ARE NOT CAMPGROUNDS.

People traveling from Point A to Point B over a few days just want to pull in and get some rest before heading out again at the crack of dawn. They are very appreciative of the no-cost option. They generally go in the store and ask for permission first. Then they reward the generosity by purchasing a few groceries, tools or other supplies. The next day, they pull out without any fanfare and head on down the road.

But, dipsticks are ruining it for the rest of us. These people show up, park wherever they want to, drop the levelers, extend the slides, pull out the awnings, plop down ground mats and fold out camp chairs – and bring their loud music, all-night generators and trash with them.

They may spend a night or two – or three – in the parking lot applauding themselves for their frugality. Not only don't they buy anything at the stores, they leave behind all their trash in the parking lot for employees to pick up.

They yell out harassing comments to shoppers and make themselves so annoying that neighbors complain to the store and to city officials, who eventually ban overnight parking on those lots.

There were a few well publicized stories last year about people being shot or assaulted by RVers staying in Walmart parking lots. I would hate to see this valuable benefit eliminated because of the selfish actions of a few.

### **Proper waste disposal**

It's just wonderful when RV owners find it too inconvenient or too expensive (\$10) to dump their holding tanks in an appropriate place and simply open up the valves in parking lots, highways, rest areas and residential neighborhoods. Some have even dumped tanks on campsites that don't have sewer connections just before they drive away.

Not only is it a major violation of every health law, it's just plain wrong and disgusting.

I've heard stories about newbies accidentally putting the sewer connection in underground boxes where campground owners place water hookups to help keep them from freezing. That's bound to happen given the lack of proper education for RV owners.

What I am talking about is deliberate efforts to dump holding tanks and simply drive away leaving the stench and mess behind for others to deal with.

RV owners need to be especially mindful of ensuring proper sewer connections at campsites. The dirty little secret is that there is so much fecal matter in the ground around some septic drains that if government health departments ever tested the soil, the site would be cordoned off as a hazardous waste zone.

I was at an RV park in southern California a few months ago where a woman was attempting to dump her holding tanks for the first time at the campground dump station. Rather than asking someone for help in connecting the hose, which she didn't even have out, she just opened the valves and jumped out of the way as black and gray water poured out of the compartment and splattered all over the dump station, surrounding area and herself.

The industry plays a big role in teaching people how to dump holding tanks, and most dealerships don't actually take customers to a septic station and allow them to connect the hoses under the watchful eye of a technician. And, yes, manufacturers have been known to incorrectly install the dump valves, and the equipment has been known to fail or disconnect while in use.

But, there are ample videos on Facebook that demonstrate the proper way to empty tanks as well – and the videos are accessible by smartphone right at the compartment bay. So, consumers really have no excuse for not doing it the correct way. In the end, it is consumers who bear full responsibility for dumping the tanks.

Yet, if the industry does not get serious about addressing this issue, it is only a matter of time before government agencies declare dumping tanks to be a health hazard. They will dictate that only trained technicians in hazmat suits be allowed to dump tanks for consumers.

Just imagine the lines on checkout day as everyone waits for the one certified campground employee to dump tanks for dozens of RV owners at the only dump station on property. You can expect that campgrounds won't offer the service for free either, considering the regulatory red tape with which they must comply to create a certified and cordoned off dump zone.

### **RV parking**

Community after community after community it seems is passing ordinances that prohibit RV parking in residential neighborhoods. This is especially true in southern California and major metropolitan areas. Many times the laws are passed to prevent vagrants from parking RVs in residential areas for days or weeks at a time.

Other times, the laws are passed because non-RV owners run to elected officials to complain about the "unsightly blight" caused by an RV parked in the driveway, front or back yard, or along the side of the house.

In these cases, it is RV owners that bear the brunt of the blame for not being good neighbors. It is, in fact, difficult to see around RVs parked on the street, and nobody likes seeing RVs parked in yards with 3-foot weeds growing around them.

Before buying an RV, owners must give serious consideration as to where the beast is going to live when it's not in use. RV storage can be an expensive proposition costing hundreds of dollars a month in some areas, which contributes to a decline in the lifestyle's affordability.

It is because the storage problem is so prevalent in some areas that people simply opt to park the RV permanently at a campground, which diminishes the number of sites available for weekend and traveling RVers.

In communities that still allow RV storage at home, owners would be wise to be good neighbors and be proactive to ensure the RV is parked out of the way.

### **The right way to complain**

When problems come up, as they are sure to when owning an RV, there is a right way and wrong way to go about getting things corrected.

The wrong way is to barge into a dealership or call a manufacturer and unload a stream of profanity at the first person encountered or whoever answers the phone. I assure you, receptionists are not paid enough to listen to your tantrum, nor are they in any position to do anything to resolve the situation.

The people who can effect change are often isolated behind multiple layers of bureaucracy and you'll never get in front of them when you're on the war path. They'll stay at their desks pouring over balance sheets while their foot soldiers take the bullets.

It is true that you catch more butterflies with fruit than with acid. You're more likely to get things done to your satisfaction by simply being nice. You can go "momma bear" later, if necessary.

The right way to complain is as follows:

- Call or visit the business and calmly explain the problem and ask to speak to someone who could render assistance.
- When that person arrives on the scene, again calmly explain the problem and provide as many details as possible, but don't ramble on and on and on. If you have called before, remind the person of that and politely point out you're just trying to get the problem fixed
- DOCUMENT EVERY INTERACTION. Get the date, time, person's name and title and write down the response that was offered and, if possible, get the company to put the resolution in writing, too. Even if you have to call again and again, get the name of every person you talk to. If the business owner has to get involved, he or she will want to know where the weak link is in the process.
- If that didn't work and the problem still exists or the company failed to follow through on a call back, then escalate the problem to the manager or owner. Again, calmly explain the problem

and the desired solution. Chances are good this person has the power to ensure that a problem can be corrected to your satisfaction. In fact, you may be offered a perk for your patience.

- If that doesn't seem to do the trick, go public with the issue. Now is the time to vent on social media or go to the local media with your story – armed with the volume of documentation you've been collecting. You may learn others had similar experiences with the same problem. That gives you even more ammunition to push your case forward.
- If the company still won't back its product or deliver on promises, then it's time to bring out the heavy artillery. The RV industry is, for the most part, self regulating and it wants to stay that way. Complaining to government regulators and consumer protection bureaus and by showing every documented step you have done to seek a proper resolution will be helpful. Many times the regulators can apply pressure on the business to force a particular resolution.
- If that doesn't work and you get caught up in a barrage of red tape, then take the complaint to state AND federal elected officials. RV transactions may take place at the local level, but the products cross state lines to become a federal issue. Elected officials are the key holders to the law books. Too many complaints will invite regulation the industry desperately wants to avoid. Farmers know that if the pig gets its snout in the door, it's only a matter of time before the whole hog is in the room.
- If all you get is a form letter reply or referral back to one of the agencies you've already contacted, then it's time to go nuclear and hire an attorney. If the industry refuses to voluntarily change and do what's right in standing behind the products it sells, then it will be forced to do so by the courts through monetary judgments.

If law firms sense there are many RVers with similar problems, then it becomes a class action case. It won't help you much, but it will bring the industry to its knees. Many times product liability lawyers will represent clients for free in exchange for a significant part of any settlement that is paid out.

As the industry is made more aware of the problems consumers face, I don't expect that to be necessary. The big carrot is self-regulation. There is a lot of freedom in being able to set your own standards and rules. The RV industry will do everything it can to preserve that autonomy.

The stakes are high for consumers who invest tens of thousands of dollars into buying recreation vehicles and other products. They may not be allowed at the discussion tables yet, but they do hold an ace in their pockets.

The fastest way to bring about change in the RV industry is to simply stop rewarding horrible quality and poor service. That's harder to do with all the consolidation giving enormous power to a few key players, but it is a necessary step.

The bottom line is to remember that owning an RV is a luxury, not a necessity.

[To read comments on the original story, click here.](#)

## **RV Industry Death Spiral – Part 8: Industry media falls asleep**

[Original story with comments](#)

Let's face it, part of the reason the RV industry is in the pickle it is today is because the media is fast asleep at the wheel. As a journalist, it's confession time.

I started in the industry in January 2000 as the editor of RV Trade Digest, a monthly business-to-business magazine headquartered in Fort Atkinson, Wis. Before I even knew where my desk would be, I boarded an airplane and headed to Las Vegas for the Coast Distribution show.

At the time, RV Trade Digest was the No. 1 trade journal in the industry, but as the editor, I didn't know the difference between a "pull behind" and "driveable" RV, as I called them that first day. I thought Winegard was a subsidiary of Winnebago Industries. The only qualification I had for the job is that I worked as a newspaper editor for several years prior to that.

But, I found the industry to be very gracious and forgiving as people educated the new kid on the block. I also learned that there is a world of difference between newspaper journalism and magazine journalism.

Newspapers generally don't care who they tick off. They report the news and let the chips fall where they may. At the weekly newspaper I worked at before joining RV Trade Digest, a big insurance agency in town was censured by a state review board. The frequent advertiser jumped up and down and demanded that we not publish the story.

The publisher, my boss, correctly explained that it's news and the paper will report it. As a favor, the story appeared on an inside page, not the front page. But, when the agent pulled all remaining advertising, the publisher shrugged her shoulders and said, "Either he'll be back, or someone buy the space."

Magazine publishing, on the other hand, is more akin to public relations than journalism. A happy writer becomes a PR person, while a skeptical writer gravitates toward journalism. Especially in the RV industry, magazines avoid controversy at all cost.

A few months after I started work as the editor of RV Trade Digest, I remember being called into a vice president's office after we published a story titled Storm Clouds Ahead. The story came from an RVIA annual meeting I attended where a speaker convincingly pointed out some signs he predicted would cause a recession.

I was told the purpose of the magazine was to sell advertising and we can't get advertisers to make commitments if they think the market is going soft. I explained that I thought our readers might appreciate the information so they could decide for themselves whether to prepare for a market correction. After all, it's no fun having a million dollars worth of inventory on the lot and no buyers.

I was told in no uncertain terms that stories like that were not to be published again. And I complied. Still the recession of 2001 did, indeed, impact the RV industry – just as the speaker predicted.

That was one of the primary reasons why I wanted to venture out on my own as an online journalist to be able to cover the industry as it needed to be covered.

### **A duty to protect**

The media has a responsibility to promote the industry, the companies and people that make it work, as well as the products being sold to consumers. But, the media also a duty to protect the industry from the corruption, warn against monopolies, fight against unnecessary government control, discourage favoritism and protect free enterprise so that all companies can compete fairly in the same arena.

During the great recession, we reported a big story in that Thor Industries made a \$10 million loan to the executives of Camping World late in the day Dec. 23, 2009. Thor followed that up with two more \$10 million loans over the Christmas holiday that year.

Naturally, dealers were incensed to read that one of their manufacturing partners was, in essence, bailing out a big competitor. As dealerships around the nation were folding left and right, the special loan was particularly aggravating for dealers struggling to stay afloat. Suppliers were also concerned that a big customer was experiencing financial difficulty.

As a result of the article that went out on Christmas Eve, Thor Industries was forced to respond by sending a letter to all its dealers just after Christmas justifying the loan and promising that no special relationship existed between the two companies.

Our competitor first covered the story five weeks later in an interview with Camping World and Thor officials again reassuring the industry there was no special relationship between the two firms.

Six months later, my competitor received the RV Industry Association's David J. Humphreys RV Industry Unity Award. You could say June 9, 2010, is the day journalism died in the RV industry.

### **Show me the money**

There is a reason why the owners of RV Trade Digest – as well as the owners of every industry magazine – don't want to be seen promoting negative or controversial issues. Doing so may impact ad sales.

The best way for an industry to shut up voices it doesn't want to hear is by financially penalizing misbehavior by the media. The media is funded through either advertising dollars or subscriptions or both.

Since nobody in the industry charges to receive a publication, the goal is to snap as many ad dollars as possible.

As a result, the tiny RV industry has five media outlets – RV Daily Report, RV Business, RV Pro, RV News and, to some extent, RV Executive Today – all chasing the same players and all promoting the same press releases and writing the same stories.

Prior to the Great Recession, magazine publishing was a literal gold mine. In 2006, the last full year I was at the helm of RV Trade Digest, the publication brought in \$1.1 million in sales and dropped \$685,000 to the bottom line – a profit of 62 percent. That’s after paying all expenses for a publisher, an editor, two salespeople, a graphic artist, a subscription clerk, travel costs and all printing and postage expenses as well.

It’s no wonder the company didn’t want any negative spin that could disrupt the money press.

Those days are long over, thanks to a decline in print publications and the advance of the internet as a way to deliver information immediately. But, the “no bad news” philosophy remains.

### **All rise for the kingmakers**

There are seven, maybe eight, individuals in the RV industry who fancy themselves to be kingmakers. Everyone must genuflect in their presence and kiss their rings if they want to be perceived as a player in the industry.

Either subtly by suggestion or directly through orchestrated efforts to cut off funding to uncooperative people, the kingmakers deliver a clear message not just to the media, but to suppliers, dealers and even some manufacturers, too. The message is to curb your tone and go along to get along. Remember, “unity” is more important than just about anything else in the RV industry other than bottom line profitability.

Strict obedience to the kingmakers’ dictates and turning a blind eye to their agendas is rewarded handsomely. But, those people who rock the boat and ignore the kingmakers’ edicts can find themselves shut out of competitive markets, subject to excessive competition and low ball pricing, or simply forced out of the industry.

Rather than invite problems, most people simply back up slowly and ignore the men behind the curtains pulling strings. They are allowed to get away with those shenanigans as long as nobody shines a light on their activity.

Lord John Dalgberg-Acton famously noted, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority.”

Our nation’s founding fathers understood this to be true, which is why they wanted to guarantee a free press to expose the foundations of power and ensure that the light of truth shines bright upon all endeavors. They believed this so much, they enshrined that right into the very first amendment of the Constitution.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

The media has a very specific role to play in the affairs of men. Unfortunately, in the trade press, the media become willing lapdogs of the powerful and influential as they seek to snuggle up with people who can do them favors.

Rather than embracing controversy as a way to stimulate discussion toward a course of action to make everything stronger, the media dutifully sit at their desks and await the arrival of the next press release.

### **Press releases – undisguised commercials**

Years ago, companies wanted media to pick up press releases. When these matter-of-fact documents were printed, it provided valuable third-party endorsement of a company, its people and its products.

Press releases are essential elements of any company or group’s public relations program. They are the cornerstone of a good communication strategy. However, public relations has been kicked to the curb in favor of marketing.

There are truly a handful of people in the RV industry that can write a valid press release any more. It used to be that press releases were neutral in tone and written according to Associated Press style, which was drilled into public relations professionals starting the first day of college. When specific features and benefits we mentioned, it was attributed to someone in the company by name and title.

Today, marketing departments issue press releases and they are filled with glowing, unattributed statements about the company or product. Here’s an example of a press release I received earlier this week from Ford. See how many glowing, unattributed commercial-like statements you can find in just a few paragraphs. I have eliminated half the release.

*DEARBORN, Mich. — Ford, America’s truck leader, is taking heavy-duty trucks to the next level with the all-new 2017 F-Series Super Duty – empowering customers with the most towing and hauling capability and the most horsepower and torque of any heavy-duty pickup truck.*

*Super Duty’s enhanced capability starts with high-strength, military-grade, aluminum alloy and high-strength steel that help reduce weight by up to 350 pounds. Ford reinvested that weight savings in more robust components everywhere it counts to give customers more towing and hauling capability than ever before.*

*Foundational improvements for every Super Duty pickup truck include an all-new, fully boxed frame that is more than 95 percent high-strength steel and up to 24 times stiffer than the previous frame to support increased towing and hauling. The all-new high-strength, military-grade, aluminum-alloy body is more dent and ding resistant than the previous steel body.*

*The 2017 Super Duty is the undisputed leader in towing, offering available best-in-class performance in all towing categories, plus smart technology no other competitor has to enable greater confidence when towing.*

*Super Duty can haul more than any other heavy-duty pickup. Maximum payload of the 2017 Ford Super Duty F-350 is 7,630 pounds – more than any competitor, period. F-250 Super Duty boasts the same dominance over its peers; with maximum payload of 4,200 pounds, it can haul more than 600 pounds over its nearest competitor.*

*The Ford-designed, Ford-engineered, Ford-built second-generation 6.7-liter Power Stroke® V8 turbo diesel that powers Super Duty now delivers a best-in-class combination of 440 horsepower and a staggering 925 lb.-ft. of torque.*

*This industry-defining capability is matched by never-before-seen towing technology. Super Duty is the first truck to offer adaptive cruise control and collision warning with brake support for heavy trailers, allowing truckers to traverse steep mountain grades while maintaining speed – even with a trailer weighing 32,500 pounds.*

Gag me with a spoon. Yet, many bloggers and media outlets will cut that rubbish right out of the release and paste it into a “news story” to give the company the benefit of a media endorsement. Is it any wonder why people don’t trust the media anymore? That’s also why we clearly indicate the source of the content we publish.

Now the latest trend is to submit press releases with the company name and brand name in ALL CAPS. My guess is that some marketing school or consultant is telling people that when readers scan a page, words in ALL CAPS will garner more attention. To me, it’s shouting and it’s a violation of the foundation of Associated Press writing.

### **Lazy reporters**

The trade press is supposed to be the cheerleaders of the industry in celebrating everything good about the companies, people and products. It is a different kind of writing and subjects than you’d find in the New York Times or Wall Street Journal.

But, by avoiding controversy and looking the other way all the time in the name of “unity” and improved ad sales, the media – myself included – short-changes the industry of a genuine service.

People have criticized this eight-part opinion series for its lack of “investigative journalism.” One dealer in Montana, who has since unsubscribed, felt the story would have been better if I had spent weeks at several manufacturing facilities, dealerships and campgrounds to report what’s being done right, rather than focusing on the negative.

With this series, I am outlining the problem. We can only get around to solutions once the problem is identified and agreed upon.

But, the idea that this series should be avoided because it's giving people the "wrong impression" of the RV industry and could impact future sales is so misguided. Trust me, poor quality products and lackluster customer service is already giving people the wrong impression and it is already impacting sales – even though deliveries are at a near record high for the past 25 years.

Few companies will simply allow journalists to wander around their facilities talking to staff and taking pictures for a story. In fact, most companies now demand that journalists submit a list of questions in advance of the interview so they can decide whether to even schedule one. Then, they insist upon the ability to edit the finished product before it is disseminated to the public.

The press has no alternative other than to comply. You see, the internet has ushered in an insatiable demand for information. When I started in the industry 17 years ago, industry news was published in the pages of a magazine that was assembled and sent to press six weeks before it arrived in a mailbox.

Today, Google Analytics shows people are checking our website around the clock, some do it multiple times a day to see what's new. That creates a conundrum in that demand for information is higher than it has ever been, but ad revenues are declining which means that fewer resources can be devoted to big stories and in-depth analysis.

RV Daily Report employs an ultra-full-time editor, one part-time assistant editor and two part-time independent contractors to publish a daily newsletter often with dozens of stories.

I envy my print competitors who can show up at a trade show with a publisher, two or three writers, two or three salespeople, a photographer and a videographer. When it's just one guy with a notebook, it is hard to cover shows the way they need to be. But, we manage.

Going forward, this series has caused me to do some serious soul searching as to the role RV Daily Report needs to play in the industry. Even though I was the pioneer in developing the first opinion blog as the editor of RV Trade Digest, and the first daily email newsletter as well as the industry's first business-to-business podcast, something inside gnaws at me suggesting that even more could be done.

### **In conclusion**

As I conclude this series, these columns have been difficult for me to write for I truly love the RV industry and want to see it succeed spectacularly. For many years, with blinders on, I thought that was it was already succeeding.

Then, two years ago, when I hit the road in my own RV and actually started talking to the people upon which the foundation of the industry rests – the end users – I learned a different story. A lot of work needs to be done if the RV industry not only hopes to grow, but even wants to survive 20 years from now.

I am confident that the industry will pull it together by assembling teams of knowledgeable professionals who already know where the problems are and will ignore the kingmakers and truly seek to craft a solution.

I need to applaud my advertisers. They have been absolute troopers through all this even though, I suspect, a few of the columns made them cringe. We didn't lose a single advertiser and I really find that remarkable. So remember the people you see on these pages when contemplating purchase decisions.

We did lose 56 subscribers since the start of the series. As best I can tell, that includes one campground owner, one manufacturer rep and four RV dealers. Some industry professionals subscribe using gmail and other email accounts, so it's hard for me to tell by looking at the domains.

However, we did pick up 793 new subscribers – the bulk of which appear to be industry professionals.

So, thank you for listening and please offer your suggestions on how to fix the problems outlined in these eight articles. The microphone is open and I'm happy to share the ideas with the rest of the industry.

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