

by Cinde W. Ingram

LIVING THE DREAM

BELL TOWER OUTDOOR LIVING COMPANY

WHILE GROWING UP IN CHICAGO, JACK KOSIN enjoyed spending his summers and weekends on the lakes that span Michigan and Wisconsin. His wife Ashleigh recalls it was only their second date when he first told her it was his dream to own an outdoor living store.

The couple was involved with their individual careers and had two young sons by the time they decided to take a chance on making his dream into a reality. "We live in a lake town and there were not a lot of professional options out there, but we were in careers where we thought, 'This isn't working for us,'" Ashleigh said. "I know the economy was bad, but it was based on the fact that our kids were still young enough. So we had that window awhile and we thought if we're going to try, let's try to make this happen."

They incorporated Bell Tower Outdoor Living Company in 2008 and attended their first Casual Market in Chicago. In 2009, they opened the doors of their 3,000-sq.-ft. store in Richland, Mich.

"In a way, the not-very-good economy worked for us because a lot of the vendors were more accommodating to allow you to bring product onto your floor without having huge minimums that were required when the economy was doing great," Ashleigh said.

Last spring, Bell Tower won *Casual Living Merchandising Awards* for Best First-Time Entry and Best Overall Merchandising. "Winning the award and receiving that recognition really just reaffirmed what we were doing and gave us a lot more confidence," Ashleigh said.



Seaside Casual's recycled plastic tables and chairs are bestsellers at Bell Tower Outdoor Living, which selectively layers its displays with related accessories.

Winning a consultation with Retail Makeover owner Barbara Crowhurst, one of North America's leading retail busi-

ness coaches, added another level of confidence.

Early in their communication, Crowhurst recognized

Ashleigh as an extremely talented retailer. "The first thing I noticed was her preparedness for the meeting and her list of what she wanted to focus in on," Crowhurst said. "There was a lot to cover. Her website was the top thing on her list – and this actually is one of the reasons that Retail Makeover took on partnership with my life partner, Steve, and he now spearheads both our retail Web design services and our affiliate program services, which are huge areas of untapped development."

Crowhurst often hears from retailers who resist building a Web presence, who have never purchased their domain name or who complain they were



Barbara Crowhurst, retail business coach, has worked with some of North America's largest corporate retail stores. She now consults with thousands of owner/operators and conducts online Retail Makeover University classes.

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overcharged for Web services. Crowhurst prepared herself to make sure the Bell Tower website supplied good search engine optimization and the information needed.

“I wanted to make sure the website is a true reflection of the brand,” Crowhurst said. “One thing it brings top of mind to me as a business coach is to make sure once you have an image for your brand that it rolls over appropriately no matter what application – that is huge. The responsibility really is for the retail owner – whether they’re applying it to a website or to an ad or any type of promotional activity – to hold true to the brand application.”

Her next focus was a review of the marketplace around the Southwest Michigan store. “We found out where most of her

clients come from,” Crowhurst said. “She now owns the physical area, the mileage area around her store, and understands that she has a lot of work to do because if more rather than less of her customers are traveling a far distance, what it does is just broadens the marketplace. A marketplace zone, the physical area around your store, tells you a lot of things. It tells you what potential you have for your customer base.”

Crowhurst provided good tips, which the Kosins began putting into action immediately after the consultation. The session also reinforced fundamentals, such as the need to get customer information, Ashleigh said. “When they’re in your store to find out how they arrived at the store and to get some contact information

so we can re-communicate with them,” she said. “We’re just trying to streamline it a little better, to really make sure we know who our customers are and be able to follow up with them.”

Ashleigh described their store as a combination of three categories. “I like to say outdoor furniture is our bread-and-butter. About 75% is custom order. We also sell the Backyard Adventures play sets, Alley Oop Trampolines and Stand Up Paddle Boards. Backyard Adventures helped us define our territory because we’re the dealer for all of West Michigan – Grand Rapids through Indiana. That’s helped complement the furniture aspect because we’ve had people from Indiana drive back up and buy furniture a year after they bought a



From top, Jack and Ashleigh Kosin with sons Scott and Chase on a Backyard Adventures play set.



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play set. They knew we had furniture and they came back and bought furniture, so that's created more of a drive, a destination shopping.

"The remainder we do is accessories and the 'Life is good' brand works in there," she said. "The reason Jack and I thought that worked for us is overall the philosophy of the company is optimistic and positive, and that's the kind of environment we wanted to create. Plus they do wonderful things for children and the community. 'Life is good' is a really nice option for us, especially in the winter months for Christmas gifts and other things."

No matter what season, the Kosins' sons Scott, 7, and Chase, 5, are a big part of the family-owned business.

"They come into the store all

the time," Ashleigh said. "They love our outdoor furniture. They play, obviously, on the trampolines, play sets and they're already stand-up paddle boarding. We laugh because they sometimes help us seal the deal. At one point, I was talking to this couple and selling a swing set. All of the sudden I turned around and Chase was showing their twins how an 11-ft. cantilever works. He was literally cranking the cantilever up and down to show them how easily it works. At that time, he was 4 so we laughed and said 'Our 4-year-old can do it.' People can relate to us, especially new furniture owners." **CL**

As the fall season arrives, the store installs end-of-season signage to promote sales and promise free delivery.



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