

quality is key

When choosing which merchandise to carry, focus on high-caliber products from top-notch manufacturers. **by** KIMBERLY RODGERS **photography by** JESSICA FREY

Specialty outdoor retailers have an abundance of options to choose from when determining which products to display and sell at their stores. The almost limitless choices give retailers a great advantage in tailoring merchandise for their customer bases. Many alternatives, however, can also make product selection a time-consuming task—and one of the most difficult aspects of running a specialty retail business. There are many factors to consider, including quality, popularity, product diversity, margins, and manufacturer support.

Focusing on a few key factors in product selection for Bell Tower Outdoor Living Company (Richland, Michigan) has been a key to Jack and Ashleigh Kosin's success since they opened their business, in 2008. Those factors include buying high-quality, high-end furniture lines that are made in the United States (when possible) and working with manufacturers that offer environmentally responsible products and practice green initiatives in their production processes.

The quality of a product, whether it is made in the United States or elsewhere, is the foremost driver for all of Ashleigh Kosin's purchasing decisions for Bell Tower. "My first criterion for furniture lines is to buy U.S.-made products when I can (except, of course, for cork and wicker, which are made abroad). Then, the environmental aspects of the company really come into play for me," Ashleigh Kosin says. "For example, we just picked up



Kingsley-Bate this year. It has a great approach to the environment and is Forest Stewardship Council certified, and the quality and price point are there."

Seaside Casual's Envirowood (100% high-density polyethylene lumber made from recycled plastic bottles and other containers) has traditionally been a big seller for Bell Tower, and it fits perfectly with the store's merchandise standards. Made in the United States, the com-

pany's high-quality, environmentally responsible products are also able to handle the extremes of Michigan's weather, which Kosin must consider. "Recycled-plastic furniture and accessories (such as rugs and doormats) hold up very well in our weather, from extreme humidity to harsh winters, since they don't mildew or fade," she says.

Terri Lee Rogers, co-owner and president of OW Lee, a manufacturer of high-end furniture, firepits,

Top left: Valerie Garewal

Top right: After purchasing The Patio Shoppe, Tim Clark opened Outdoor Galore in the same location in 2011

Bottom: In addition to featuring high-quality furniture and accessories, Outdoor Galore oversees design and construction for major outdoor projects