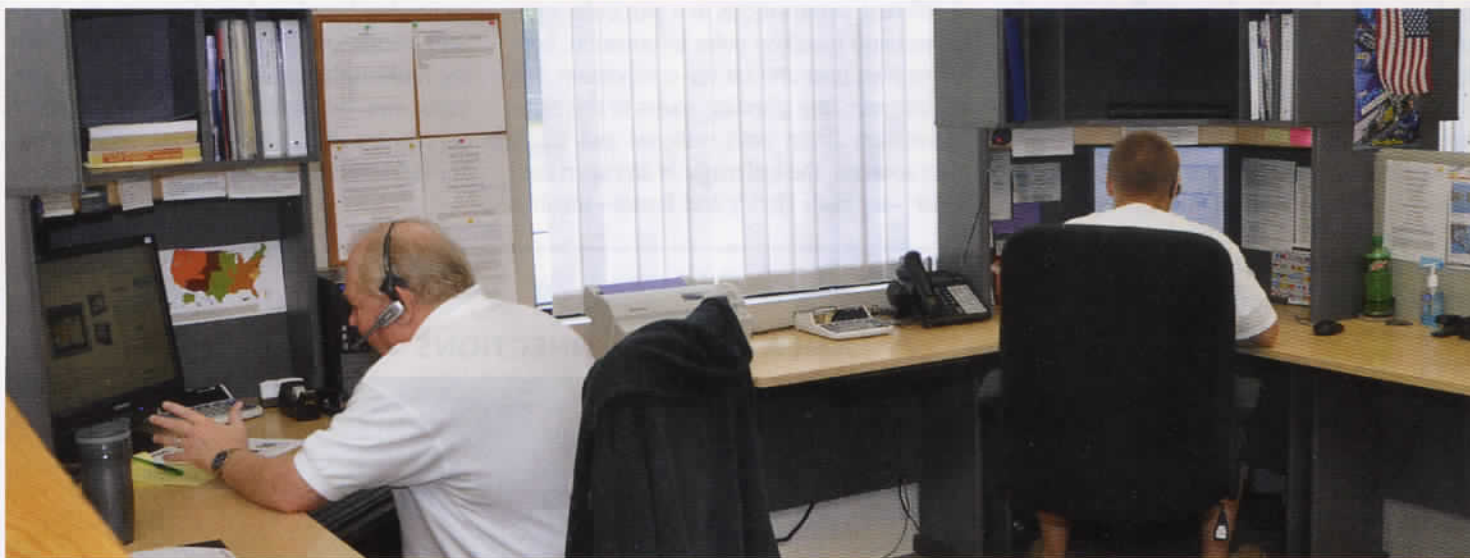


Member Profile

TheGPSStore.com
Automotive ■ Outdoor ■ Marine Electronics



The GPS Store

An Internet powerhouse with a small-town dealership feel

Stepping into The GPS Store, Inc.'s 5,000 square foot facility in Ocean Isle Beach, NC, is like visiting a top-tier, NMEA member dealership in any vibrant, coastal boating/fishing community around the United States. You'll find product display shelves packed with glowing LCD screens, sales representatives demonstrating the latest features of this product or that to customers, perhaps a do-it-yourselfer or two hanging around the counter to "talk shop" with the resident experts and pick up some useful advice.

At first glance, you would never think that The GPS Store is a leading Internet retailer of marine electronics (along with land-based and automotive GPS technology), known to a nationwide audience primarily for its extensive e-commerce site, www.TheGPSStore.com. Instead, it gives customers the feel of a typical neighborhood marine electronics shop; the kind of place that—to borrow a line from the TV show "Cheers"—everybody knows your name.

According to Sales Manager Scott Heffernan, this atmosphere is purely intentional. He adds that the company's growth and staying power over the past 15 years comes largely from a commitment to provide customers everywhere with this same feeling. "We pride ourselves on customer service and support, whether that customer is standing in our showroom or sitting in front of his laptop on the other side of the country."

Right place, right time, right idea

The course The GPS Store navigated to where it is today had much to do with shaping the company. The GPS Store was founded in 1997 by husband and wife team Drew and Gina Reger,

at a time when both GPS technology and e-commerce were growing rapidly. The marine electronics business was being driven in part by the rapid evolution of GPS technology. Manufacturers seemed to engage in a features and benefits "arms race," with consumers being the big winners. "With each new introduction, GPS units were getting smaller, more advanced and less expensive, and this helped keep interest and sales on an upward arc," said Heffernan. "At the same time, consumers across the country were getting more comfortable with the idea of online shopping and realizing they could save time and money by doing so."

It takes more than auspicious timing, of course, for a business venture to succeed. Among other things, success requires finding a way to differentiate your business from the competition. Consumers nationwide were getting used to shopping online for anything from books to backscratchers. The convenience of shopping from the comfort of your couch helped to launch a whole new segment of the economy, with retail websites popping up everywhere seemingly overnight.

Selling marine electronics, however, was

far different than selling the latest sci-fi thriller. These were (and are) complex, technologically advanced systems that require explanation and guidance from trained experts. To coin a common phrase, the marine electronics sales process can require a significant amount of "hand-holding" by the dealer. The founders of The GPS Store worked on finding ways that an Internet-based business could meet this standard of customer support.

The Regers decided to move their venture from New Jersey to coastal North Carolina, a boating/fishing hub for the mid-Atlantic region. They opened their new storefront in September 1998, focusing on growing their local North Carolina business through traditional methods, printing semi-annual catalogs and launching a website that would begin to build a national presence. At first, the new company concentrated solely on GPS products and accessories, but the Regers' extensive marine experience made product expansion practically inevitable. Drew and Gina met while working at Consumers Marine in New Jersey, where Drew was general manager. Both had gained valuable experience with Internet



Daily operations include dealing with internet customers on the company's website (facing page) as well as its bricks-and-mortar store in Ocean Isle Beach, NC. Although the staff regularly attends manufacturer training sessions and a few are Marine Electronics Installer-certified, the company does not install electronics. Instead, it refers customers to NMEA-certified installers.

commerce during this period, and the seed for what The GPS Store would eventually become was planted in their minds.

Sales growth required the expansion of the company's North Carolina facility in 2000, after just two years in their initial location.

Another two years of steady growth saw the company expand again, moving into its current warehouse and storefront facility in 2002, the same time The GPS Store joined the National Marine Electronics Association as a member dealer.

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The GPS Store 'family'

Back row, from left: Scott Heffernan, Brian Rock, Nick Carpenter, Drew Reger, John Lawrence, Todd Newton. Front row, from left: Charlene Muniz, Noelle Cruikshank, Ashley Howard, Gina Reger, Jamie Reme.

Today, The GPS Store offers customers an extensive inventory of marine electronics from all major manufacturers. Radar, sounders, chartplotters, multifunction navigation systems, autopilots, safety equipment—if a boater needs it, chances are good they have it. They often carry hard-to-find items such as connectors, terminators, patch cables and

accessories even many specialty shops aren't able to deliver.

Again, the decision to feature both a traditional marine electronics storefront and a nationwide e-commerce website was made with a purpose in mind. "Having a traditional retail showroom keeps us connected with the technology, consumers and the industry in ways that no strictly e-commerce business could ever match," explained Heffernan. "Selling the products and helping customers face-to-face equips our staff to help customers who shop through our website, as well. I guess you could say that we're trying to make the experience of online shopping as close as possible to a personal, in-store experience. This has helped us create trust and loyalty with our online customers, resulting in repeat business, positive reviews and referrals on a national scale."

Staff training is key

This is not to say that the process has been easy. Two of the biggest challenges in the early years were training new employees and establishing the company as a reliable and competitive source for marine electronics. "In many ways, customer expectations of online stores are even higher," said Heffernan. "They expect you to stock everything, offer the best prices and provide immediate turnaround when they need something in a hurry. We strive to meet these expectations, but at the same time, we try to provide additional services and expert advice to earn their trust."

To maintain this high standard, The GPS Store puts a lot of emphasis on staff training. The company's 11-person team regularly attends manufacturer-sponsored training sessions to stay up on the latest technology and

features. Because they carry more brands in inventory than traditional electronics stores, keeping on top of rapidly evolving technology is an ongoing process. Even though The GPS Store doesn't perform installation services, the company has NMEA Marine Electronics Installer-certified staff on hand to assist customers with their needs. "It's important that customers know that we use the equipment ourselves and we know what we're talking about," Heffernan said. This understanding is aided by the staff's natural passion for boating and fishing, which includes sponsorship of local saltwater fishing tournaments and participation in these highly competitive events with The GPS Store company boat.

Communicating with customers

Any successful marine electronics retailers would likely say that providing customers with expert information and post-sales support is just as important as the products you sell. This is a different challenge altogether when most customer interaction takes place over a phone or high-speed modem. "Our website is often the first exposure customers have with The GPS Store," said Heffernan, "so we must differentiate ourselves. Our site has to be more than a virtual store that carries a wide selection of products. We've worked hard at making www.TheGPSStore.com a resource center where boaters can research FAQs, compare products from every major manufacturer in one place, read how-to articles, view short informational videos, and more. We are right now in the process of expanding these components of our website to give boaters everywhere the useful information they need, whether they're active shoppers or just doing some research."

The company's 800 phone line is another place where consumers often form a first impression of The GPS Store. "We're fortunate to have a great team of people who pride themselves on customer service. "We often get thanked by customers for helping them in ways they consider above and beyond the call of duty. Truthfully, it's just the way we would like to be treated ourselves as customers," said Heffernan.

It's not uncommon for The GPS Store staff to travel to a customer's boat to help them troubleshoot problems or set up the perfect package. They'll have customers ship chartplotters to them and then return them with updated software. On at least one occasion,



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they built an NMEA 2000® network in the store, shot digital images of it and emailed them to a customer to help him better visualize the layout. DIY customers often email photos of their boats so the company's trained experts can help them troubleshoot performance issues, or advise on things like transducer location or thru-hull fitting placement.

If these sound like the same types of support customers would love to receive from their trusted hometown marine electronics dealer, that's the whole point.

Proper installation

Even though The GPS Store has NMEA certified installers on staff and stays on top of the latest training and technology, it doesn't perform installation services at its Ocean Isle Beach facility. Instead, it focuses on connecting customers with NMEA-certified installers locally or across the country. "Over many years of connecting purchasers with qualified installers, we have excellent relationships around the country with businesses who focus on installation and set-up, rather than sales. It's a win-win. We take our responsibility as an NMEA dealer seriously, and strongly discourage customers from working with fly-by-night operations, regardless of cost. Proper installation is critical to performance and customer satisfaction, and it is even more important with today's complex networked systems," added Heffernan.

Unique marketing challenges

Online retailers like The GPS Store face unique challenges when it comes to generating sales and corporate image building. Not surprisingly, e-mail communication with customers plays an important role, whether the message is a holiday sale or the newest addition to the website's Tips & Advice section. On the local front, The GPS Store promotes itself through traditional media advertising, sponsoring and participating in fishing tournaments and community events, and the like.

To reach its nationwide clientele, The GPS Store also does a fair amount of advertising in mainstream boating and fishing magazines. "Whether you're talking about a local store or an online business, people tend to shop at a place they know and feel comfortable with. A regular presence in trusted media outlets like this helps create this comfort level on a national basis," said Heffernan. They receive the same types of advantages from exhibiting at major national consumer boat shows like the Miami International Boat Show and the United States Sailboat Show in Annapolis, where the entire management team attends to interact with current and potential customers.

There's also the specialized, ongoing work to maximize the company's search engine optimization (SEO), a fancy term for popping up at the top of the list when a consumer searches online for "GPS," "EPIRBs" or even just

"marine electronics." According to Heffernan, this has a lot to do with providing relevant website content and constantly updating it to keep information fresh. It's a skill set all its own and doesn't allow a web-based company to rest on its laurels.

Brighter times ahead

Being an online business hasn't sheltered The GPS Store from effects of our rough economy over the past several years. Like every business, it has had to work harder and smarter just to hold its ground. Still, the company has genuine reasons for optimism looking ahead.

The coming post-baby-boomer generation of boaters has grown up on technology and is "all-in" with the online shopping experience. The entire population, in fact, is buying more things online, and this trend doesn't seem likely to change any time soon.

The recent flood of product innovation is another trend that bodes well for marine electronics sales. "The past few years have seen amazing advancements, in everything from navigation electronics to recreational sonar to safety equipment, to name just a few," said Heffernan. "We expect these innovations to keep coming, which will be great for all marine businesses. There's an old saying that 'new products drive sales,' and nowhere is it more true than in the marine electronics industry."



NMEA 2012 Education Program Schedule

Advance your career!

September

Halifax, NS

- 9/11 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 9/12 NMEA 2000® Training
- 9/13 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer*
- * Int'l Regional Meeting

Conference & Expo, Orlando, FL

- 9/26 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 9/27 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer
- 9/28 NMEA 2000® Training

October

Charleston, SC

- 10/24 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 10/25 NMEA 2000® Training
- 10/26 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer

November

Providence, RI

- 11/14 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 11/15 NMEA 2000® Training
- 11/16 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer

December

New Orleans, LA

- 12/5 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 12/6 NMEA 2000® Training
- 12/7 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer

Note:

Tentative schedule, subject to change.

December (cont.)

Atlantic City, NJ

- 12/5 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 12/6 NMEA 2000® Training*
- 12/7 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer
- * Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting

Seattle, WA

- 12/12 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 12/13 NMEA 2000® Training
- 12/14 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer

Long Beach, CA

- 12/12 Basic Marine Electronics Installer
- 12/13 NMEA 2000® Training
- 12/14 Advanced Marine Electronics Installer

For more information visit: www.nmea.org or call the NMEA office at (410) 975-9425