

# Focus Is Survival:

## How Products and Partnerships Drive Showroom Success

BY TOM NEVIUS

### **The *Field of Dreams* Fallacy**

At some point, every growing hearth business reaches the same crossroads.

You've outgrown the truck.

You've outgrown the garage.

And now, a showroom starts to feel inevitable.


A few fireplaces. A handful of inserts. Some freestanding stoves. Put a sign out front, open

the doors, and let customers pour in.


After all, it worked in *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come."

In the hearth industry, however, that philosophy has buried more dealers than it's saved.

Today's market is crowded. Competition exists on nearly every corner, and many of your competitors operate with lower overhead. Without technicians, installers, or service departments to support, they can often sell similar products



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for less. That reality changes the equation entirely.

Successful hearth showrooms aren't merely clean and attractive (that's just the basic cost of doing business).

Instead, they're *intentional* and *strategic*.

My own experiences attest to that.

You see, after more than 20 years of visiting hearth dealers across the U.S. and Canada, I've walked through countless clean and beautiful showrooms that didn't survive long-term. These weren't poorly built spaces. They didn't lack quality brands. They weren't hidden in the wrong part of town.

Yet they failed.

Not for a lack of commitment, passion, or effort.

But because of one consistent issue: a lack of focus.

## The Common—and Costly—Mistake

Hearth professionals are, by nature, problem-solvers. When a customer walks through the door asking for something specific, our instinct is to say, "Yes."

"Yes, we do that."

"Yes, we carry that."

"Yes, we can get that."

That instinct is understandable—and it's also the most common showroom mistake.

When a showroom carries five fireplace brands, three stove manufacturers, and four insert lines, confusion becomes unavoidable. Team members grapple with guiding sales conversations. Customers struggle to understand product differences. And the buying process slows to a crawl.

This isn't just anecdotal; it's also common sense.

We all know that each decision we make takes something out of us, especially in our age of distraction. By the time customers walk into your showroom, they've already been bombarded by information overload and navigated a morning full of choices: what to wear, what to eat, which emails to answer, which route to take—the list goes on and on.

Your job is to reduce that load, not add to it.

Yet many showrooms unintentionally overwhelm buyers with endless options, slight variations, and overlapping features. The result isn't more sales—it's customer hesitation, sluggish sales cycles, increased discounting, and margin erosion.

## The Surprisingly Simple Solution

Building a showroom is ultimately about increasing profitability—but, as I've just pointed out, a lack of focus makes that nearly impossible.

**“REMEMBER THAT  
DISPLAYS ARE SALES TOOLS,  
NOT DECORATION.”**

The good news? The solution to this problem is surprisingly simple: just decrease the number of displays.

When customers are presented with a smaller, well-curated selection, decisions happen faster. Instead of comparing endless variations, buyers focus on a handful of clearly differentiated solutions that fit their needs.

Confidence also increases because the selection feels intentional. Customers assume—correctly—that what you show them is what works best. That confidence reduces second-guessing, comparison shopping, and post-sale regret.

What’s more, shorter sales cycles and greater buying confidence naturally lead to higher close rates. Objections decrease. Decisions happen on the first or second visit instead of the fifth.

And when customers understand the value of your offerings, price becomes less of a lever. As a result, focused selling enhances margins by minimizing discounting stemming from indecision.

In short, **decreasing your displays doesn’t limit opportunity—it directs it.**

### **The Value of Sales History**

Once we see that fewer options drive better results, a new question comes up: What stays and what goes?

If you’re already in the hearth industry—whether as a chimney professional, service company, or installer—then you’ve got a valuable planning tool that can help you effectively answer this question: sales history.

Rather than guessing what might sell, use what has sold. Turn your historical data into a showroom “pie chart” that reflects actual customer demand.

#### **Here's a simple example:**

- 1,000 square feet of showroom space
- 100 total units sold last year

#### **Now suppose those 100 units broke down this way:**

- 10 electric units
- 25 gas fireplaces
- 15 wood stoves
- 10 gas stoves
- 25 gas inserts
- 10 wood inserts
- 5 wood fireplaces

Regardless of your exact breakdown, these numbers should directly influence three critical showroom decisions: what you display, how much space each category gets, and what doesn’t make the cut.

For starters, you should use this data to decide what gets displayed. As you do, remember that displays are sales tools, not decoration. Floor space is expensive, and every unit on display should justify its presence by representing a meaningful percentage of annual sales. Products that rarely sell shouldn’t dominate valuable real estate simply because they look impressive. That’s why it’s important to do an annual audit of your displays. Are they giving you at least 12 turns a season? If not, it’s time to try something new in that space.

The data you collect from your sales history should also dictate how much space each product category gets. Not all categories deserve equal emphasis. If gas inserts account for a quarter of your sales, they should command roughly a quarter of your showroom focus—through display count, signage, and sales

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training emphasis. Space allocation should reinforce buying behavior, not fight it.

Finally, your past sales data should determine what gets cut from the showroom floor. This is the hardest decision, and it's also the most important. Slow-moving or niche products don't need permanent displays. They can still be offered through catalogs, spec sheets, or special-order conversations without cluttering the showroom or confusing buyers.

Simply put, a focused showroom reflects reality, not aspiration—and that's why leaning on past sales data to streamline displays makes so much sense.

### **The Right Partners**

Of course, new businesses don't have the luxury of past data, and that raises another crucial question: What if you don't have sales history to guide your showroom design?

If you find yourself in this situation, you can use information from trusted sales reps as your compass. After all, many sales reps in our industry see hundreds of showrooms annually. They know what's selling in your region and why. Regional fuel preferences, climate conditions, housing stock, installation constraints, and price sensitivity all play a role. A coastal market behaves differently from a rural wood-burning region. New construction markets differ dramatically from retrofit-heavy areas. A good rep knows these distinctions—and can help you navigate them before your own data starts rolling in.

But **concentrating your volume with a few trusted partners creates meaningful advantages beyond market data:** It builds deeper relationships with partners who truly understand your business, strengthens your financial position through better margins and lower freight costs, and allows your team to master what they sell.

**"Customers don't want endless choices. They want clear guidance."**

First and foremost, you stop juggling multiple reps who barely know your operation when you work with fewer partners. This frees you up to build real relationships with partners who understand your business, your goals, and your market. And that leads to better communication and faster problem resolution.



Fewer partners also tend to strengthen your bottom line. Selling higher volume from fewer manufacturers allows freight consolidation, reduced shipping costs, and improved per-unit profitability. Concentrated volume often unlocks better pricing tiers, rebates, and promotional support. Partners reward commitment, and those benefits compound over time.

And, perhaps most importantly, fewer product lines allow your team to master what they sell. Deeper product knowledge leads to better demonstrations, fewer mistakes, higher confidence, and a more professional customer experience—all of which contribute to more sales.

Here's a quick story to illustrate the larger point: Back in the early 2000s, I worked with a hearth business that was buying about \$25,000 from me annually. After a few years, I asked if we were their biggest supplier. They said yes—but our share was only 15% of their business. They carried over 10 brands and weren't getting volume discounts from any of them. I suggested they focus their offerings to unlock better pricing. They cut their brands by half. Nine months later, their overall business had grown by 45%. Fewer brands meant better margins, lower freight costs, and a team that actually knew what they were selling.

The takeaway? Fewer, better partners create meaningful business advantages—just like fewer, better products create intentional hearth showrooms.

### **The Crystal Clear Offer**

Here's the hard truth: You can't just build a

showroom, fill it with a bunch of fireplaces, and count on customers to come in and buy (sorry, *Field of Dreams*).

Because customers don't want endless choices. They want clear guidance.

Yet too many showrooms make the mistake of saying yes to everything—more brands, more lines, more options—until confusion grinds sales into the ground.

That's why a focused showroom leads to a bigger bottom line—because fewer displays mean faster decisions, confident buyers, and better margins.

It's also why you've got to let the data (from your own sales history or that of your reps) determine what earns floor space.

Then, the trick is finding a few partners worth trusting, concentrating your volume with them, and watching the advantages multiply.

**After all, successful hearth showrooms aren't the ones with the widest selection of products or the longest list of brands.**

**They're the ones with the clearest offer.**

So plan your showroom intentionally and choose your partners strategically.

Because in today's hearth industry, focus isn't optional.

It's survival.

