



Signed, Sealed and Delivered... Later

Gauthiers' RV Center discourages customers from taking same-day vehicle delivery because the dealership spends hours conducting inspections, adding helpful accessories and applying sealants to thwart a common Louisiana RV problem—water damage.

By Jennifer Brauns

Photos by Kelly Morvant Photography

On a summer day in Scott, Louisiana, a Gauthiers' RV Center customer practiced setting up his new fifth wheel in anticipation of departing on his first camping trip. Backing his truck toward the trailer, he felt the hitch engage, and the truck came to a stop.

The customer exited the truck to admire his handiwork when the leveling jacks began retracting. That was when things went south.

Inadvertently, the truck had been left in gear. Suddenly, the driverless tow vehicle and trailer started rolling backward toward Gauthiers' RV Center's main building. The leveling jacks had held the truck and trailer in place when the consumer exited the vehicle.

General Manager Nick Gauthier came running to the rescue. Seeing the unmanned truck and trailer rolling backward,

(L to R) Jonathan, Jim, John and Nick Gauthier run the day-to-day operations at Gauthiers' RV Center. Jim and John founded the dealership in 1989.

Gauthier hustled to the truck, dove in and engaged the brakes.

Unfortunately, the unmanned vehicle's rescue wasn't quick enough to prevent the fifth wheel from colliding with a large commercial fan. The impact left a gaping hole in the unit's fiberglass. The consumer hadn't even left the lot yet.

Co-General Manager Jonathan Gauthier said while the event was unfortunate, in a roundabout way, the collision happening at the dealership was probably lucky. Gauthiers' RV Center's principals also own RV Collision Louisiana, a specialized RV paint and collision company located behind the dealership.

Nick Gauthier said the business' owners have gone to great lengths to care for customers in the past. He cites the collision as a prime example of how the company implements its customer service mission.

"We fixed the fiberglass for the guy and didn't charge him for it, even though it was his fault," Jonathan Gauthier said. "We just took care of him and he was ecstatic."

Prior to the mishap, the dealership had spent hours conducting an extensive pre-delivery inspection (PDI). During the PDI, employees performed a set of "value-added" tasks they include with every new or used RV sold.

Prior to Hand Off

"We tell them, 'We're going to go through a whole process,'" he said. "It's not something we're going to charge you for; it's not an add-on. It's just something we do as part of this purchase. A lot of things we will do will ensure you have a better experience as an owner. As much as possible, we try to prevent you from having to bring the unit back to us for some little thing that could have easily been done while it was here."

Several of the extra PDI steps the dealership includes are driven by an attempt to proactively combat the impact of Louisiana's consistently heavy coastal rains. Nick Gauthier said as a result of the rain it's not uncommon for RVs sold at competing dealerships to have water damage when they are traded in.

All vehicles sold at Gauthiers' RV Center are washed/dried, and a Tundra Kool Seal coating is applied over the manufacturer's OE roof sealant prior to handoff.

"We've really eliminated a large number of roof leaks and headaches down the road by spending a little extra time and money during the PDI process, by resealing all the roof seams," Jonathan Gauthier said. "If you never go up there and look at it, by the time the customer finds a problem, it's too late."

"By recoating on top of the OE roof sealant, if there is a small issue that isn't obvious, you're going to catch it whether you know of it or not. We

try to eliminate the most common problems. Out here, it's water."

Looking at the hours of technician labor, Nick Gauthier said washing and sealing roofs probably adds a few hours to the PDI. Sometimes technicians must remove and replace sealant, which adds time. It takes time to tape off and then reseal. He estimates time and materials cost the business approximately \$250 per unit. Most customers would pay \$300 to \$500 to get the unit resealed if charged for it elsewhere.

Silicone sealant is also added around all windows, compartments, doors, wall seams and, inside units, around all shower-pan bases before being handed off.

A deep-cycle marine-grade battery is yet another Gauthiers' RV Center upgrade. A good deep-cycle, marine-grade battery would likely cost the consumer between \$90 and \$120 retail. It only costs the dealership \$70 to \$90.



Service Manager Jason Soileau handles manufacturer warranty work at his desk in the service department. The other service manager is Michael Gauthier, youngest brother of the dealership's founders.



Service Technician Yorniel "Gordo" Suarez applies roof sealant to an RV. Suarez, who has worked at the dealership for seven years, was born in Cuba but became a U.S. citizen in 2017.



Donald Journet caulks an RV window in Gauthiers' RV Center's service department. Everyone at the dealership calls him "Duck." An employee for 18 years, Journet also has a side business cleaning RVs.

"The bare necessities of an RV are that they need propane and 12-volt, so why not supply the customer ahead of time, instead of saying, 'By the way, if you want your camper to function, you need to buy X,Y and Z,'" Nick Gauthier said. "It makes customers feel like they are able to take their unit home without getting nickel-and-dimed for every little thing."

Slick discs are automatically added to all fifth wheel hitches for extra protection of the hitch plate. The amenity only costs Gauthiers' RV Center \$10 to \$15. Technicians install them in mere seconds.

"It's just one of those simple, basic things. It eliminates the need to grease a fifth wheel hitch, and it keeps things clean," he said. "While it's a relatively small item, you'd be surprised—it goes a long way with customers. They are going to need it, so why not put it on from the get-go, instead of them having to go find one? It's a small price for us to pay."

Jonathan Gauthier said the dealership does these added things at its expense.

"You hope that if you do those things for customers, they will see it and remember it," he said. "They will come back or tell their friends not to deal with anyone else. We try to impress upon our customers during the selling process that they are not just buying an RV."

Other added steps taken on every unit include water-system-pressure tests before the unit leaves the lot. Appliances, gadgets and vehicle systems are tested. LP tanks are filled.

"Think about a water line that is not tight. All of a sudden, a customer turns the water on and 'boom!' They've got water running down the walls or floor or coming from who knows where," he said. "It could be a black tank that's not properly connected or a seal that's broken; there are so many things that can happen."

He said there's nothing worse than "that phone call"... a happy, new customer who, in short order, has something preventable go wrong.

The Extra Mile

Gauthiers' RV Center uses an extensive PDI checklist they've developed and refined over time.

"I know for a fact," he said, "that many dealers just fill out the form, do their gas check and say, 'Here, Mr. Customer, sign the papers today and take your unit home.'"

Nick Gauthier said their Louisiana dealership typically schedules a two-hour delivery window. If they need to set up hitching equipment, they will make sure the customer is comfortable with the process before they leave.

Delivery walk-throughs are performed by a service manager, a service advisor or one of the owners during busy times.

"We leave our technicians to do technician work," Nick Gauthier said. "It also helps to have the customer gain that point of contact, so whenever they do have an issue and have to call for service, they've already met the service manager or service advisor and have a relationship established."

For savvy RVers, the delivery process might not take very long. For first-time customers, however, it could easily take two to three hours to answer questions and go back over things.

"If towing, we'll have them hook it up several times and pull it around the parking lot," Nick Gauthier said. "If they are towing for the first time, we'll show them how to set their brakes and how to hook and unhook in different situations. We'll help with setting up and leveling the camper. For some people it's much more in-depth, but we want them

to feel like we're not going to rush them through it. We want them to feel as confident as they can when they leave."

Jonathan Gauthier said the dealership used to provide a starter kit with a basic sewer hose, water hose, water pressure regulator and electrical adapters to 15-, 30- or 50-amp power. It now provides a \$100 parts store gift card, instead of the starter kit.

"It goes hand in hand with the propane and batteries," Jonathan Gauthier said. "Over the years, we've found people didn't always want the basics—many wanted to upgrade certain components to premium versions. It's just easier this way."

Every customer also receives a 10 percent discount on parts—forever. Nick Gauthier said the dealership started offering the discount years ago to thank customers for their business.




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Humble Beginnings

Siblings Jim and John Gauthier founded the dealership in 1979. Originally a manufactured home business, they opened an adjacent RV dealership in 1989. A third brother managed the manufactured housing business, leaving Jim and John Gauthier to manage the RV venture. In 2003, the RV dealership moved to a new location with better visibility and more traffic.

Jim and John Gauthier's sons, cousins Jonathan and Nick, worked at the dealership during the summers washing campers. Both eventually earned engineering degrees and pursued engineering careers before joining the family business. Jonathan and Nick Gauthier now help run the day-to-day business. They are assuming increasing responsibility as they prepare to eventually accept full ownership from their fathers.

"The whole premise of customer service was started by our fathers," Nick Gauthier said. "It was based on the way they were raised. They treat customers the way they want to be treated. They would expect this from anyone they do business with, and they expect it from themselves. That's how it is in the south—you go the extra mile for people."

Back then people really did appreciate that, he said. Dealers could sell people on the benefit of dealing with somebody locally, that really cared about the customer and product they were selling.



Clark Alderman has worked as a parts clerk at the dealership for more than two decades. He also plays horns for local bands playing events—including the wedding of General Manager Jonathan Gauthier.

An employee personally walks customers through the aftermarket store to discuss the good/better/best options for requisite camping supplies. Employees take time to explain everything the customer needs. They also provide customers with a printed list of everything needed to use the trailer.

While in the parts store, delivery staff make a point to introduce each customer to the parts team members, to give the customer yet another familiar face and contact.

Team Players

As Nick Gauthier said, one contributing factor to the dealership's success is its long-standing sales team commission-sharing program. With sales people occasionally being tied up for hours with a single customer, the company implemented the program to ensure nobody has to wait when they are ready to make a purchase.

The service department also has a profit-sharing program that has been in place for 20 years.

"Rather than each guy having his own independent workstation and not wanting to help anyone else, our guys have a base rate, then there's a per-

formance commission that goes into a pot for all of them," he said. "They are more inclined to help their fellow technicians or stop what they are doing to help a customer. Everyone works together to do that, and everyone benefits from it. No one has to feel like they lost money because they stopped to help someone."

Destination Required

Another way Gauthier's RV Center helps new customers is by providing free nights at dozens of campgrounds around the state. When the program began, Jonathan Gauthier said small local campgrounds used the opportunity to advertise and solicit new business.

Recalling how a few vouchers in the past had limitations and strings attached, Jonathan Gauthier said they now tell campground managers they have to offer something valuable, and cannot require a four- to five-night minimum stay. Offering a free night with a one- or two-night stay is encouraged. The dealership places numerous camping vouchers in its closing packet. RVers immediately have places to go when they drive off the lot.

"It gets them into places they never would have thought to go before, places they didn't know existed," Jonathan Gauthier said. "These campgrounds probably would not have been on their radar, and now they can go try them for free. They are more likely to return if they have a good time. It also makes the whole camping experience nice, because now they are not relegated to just one or two campgrounds they knew about. Now, maybe there are 15 to 20 within a two-hour radius that they didn't even know existed before buying the camper."

Service Time

When customers return for maintenance or repairs, technicians always take a few minutes to walk around and inspect the entire exterior. Techs are trained on what to look for and to identify and deal with small problems before they compound into large ones.

"It's telltale—you walk by a unit, and you see a bubble sticking out the side," Nick Gauthier said. "That's an expensive repair. The older the unit gets without being repaired, the more its value nosedives. That bubble indicates a visible leak, not to mention what is happening on the inside."

Closing Transparency

Perhaps the most important thing Gauthier's RV Center does, happens at closing, Jonathan Gauthier said he hears stories repeatedly about consumers getting into an F&I office and suddenly discovering an extra \$3,000 added into the financing.

He said four-square games and shady sales tactics do not exist at Gauthier's RV Center. They make sure customers are included on everything regarding the front and back ends of the deal.

"We've all been on the other side of that. You're at a dealership and trying to figure out a deal. You know someone is trying to take advantage of you," he said. "There are a lot of shady salespeople out there, and there is a lot of obscuring of information. We want the opposite here."

"We want full confidence and relaxation. We want customers to feel like they are choosing good things and making good decisions. From our standpoint, we hope it always circles back around and brings them back to us. Referral business is a big part of what we get. When you get a referral that says, 'My buddy told me to come here and not go anywhere else,' it makes you feel good. It makes you feel like you're doing something right."

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