

Wisconsin Campground Owners Experience 'Fantastic' Business Boost in Year One with KOA

When you ask Jim Kersten to describe his family's decision to affiliate with KOA a year ago, his answer is kind of long, but, oh, so clear.

"Fantastic. Wow. Unbelievable. Chaotic. Wonderful. Overwhelming."

You get the idea.

This was no overnight decision. Jim and his wife, Marcia, have operated their campground in Milton, Wisconsin, for more than 24 years and had explored franchising their campground with KOA for more than 10 years.

"I had a KOA rep visit my park 10-12 years ago, and we both concluded that at that time it would not benefit either one of us," Jim said. "The last three years I got serious about it."

"We run our park at 100% capacity on weekends, but during the weekdays it was only about 30%," he said. "When I studied KOA, I saw that a huge chunk of the KOA business was done during the weekdays. That was one of the deciding factors."

Another factor was a fear that "down the road the campground industry would follow the motel industry, in which non-franchised motels were left in the dust," Jim said. KOA also offered "fantastic support" in management, expansion and marketing.

STRUGGLING WITH WEEKDAY CHALLENGES

"I was tired of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to expand my park to increase my camper nights on weekends, but the campground was still at 30% capacity weekdays," he said. "I had tried dozens of promotions to beef up midweek, but nothing worked. So I decided to go KOA."

When trying to sell the KOA idea to the rest of his family, Jim said he hoped to increase sales \$20,000-\$30,000 per season.

"We were stunned at what happened," he said. "We ended up doing over \$300,000 in just KOA business in the first year. Weekdays were at 70-80% capacity in the summer. It was amazing.

"To gain that amount of business with no extra effort on our part was fantastic. We did have to pay the KOA 10% commission, but I will gladly pay the 10% to get a extra \$300,000 of business."

Jim was in a lawn-and-garden equipment business with his father, who was a camper and thought building a campground would be a good investment for his son.

“I looked into the idea and agreed. I thought I could build a nice campground for couple hundred thousand dollars, and a million dollars later it was done,” Jim said.

A RICH HISTORY AS HIDDEN VALLEY

For more than two decades, Jim and Marcia, with help from their daughters Mindy and Amber, operated Hidden Valley RV Resort and Campground. Today the campground has 264 campsites, including 32 pull-throughs and 224 full hookups. There are two cabins and four tent sites.

Jim said that though their sign changed to KOA a year ago, the philosophy toward campers hasn't:

- Treat the customer with respect and be friendly.
- Try to settle problems immediately if possible.

“We have always had a immaculately maintained park – our goal has always been to maintain the park so that it always looks new,” Jim said. “We get a tremendous amount of comments on how nice the facilities are. We also spend a lot time training our employees to be friendly and helpful.”

Their jump in bookings and great feedback from customers helped earn the campground a Founder's Award and President's Award in their first year.

He has five full-time and 30 seasonal employees. The challenge of finding quality seasonal help “seems to get harder every year,” as does keeping up with the latest needs of campers.

NEW OWNERSHIP ALL IN THE FAMILY

The KOA affiliation is the first of two big changes coming to the campground. In the next year, Jim and Marcia are selling the campground to daughter Mindy and her husband, Matt. Mindy has worked there for 16 years and now manages the office. Matt has been there for six years and is the outside manager.

“We love working at the campground, our kids love being at the campground,” Mindy said. “It's a fun job!”

The transition to KOA has been great,” Mindy added. “We absolutely love that we made this transition and a good one at that!”

Amber, who has worked at the family campground for eight years and is the counter manager, agrees with her sister.

“My take on the KOA affiliation has been great,” she said “We were definitely busy last year!”

“Our campground is popular due to the cleanliness of our facility, bathrooms and grounds,” Amber said. “We also put on a lot of activities throughout the season.”

The campground also features a 7,500-square-foot clubhouse that has three levels of amenities.

The top floor has offices and a lounge area with tables and chairs for people to play cards, games, etc. There is also an exercise area and enclosed deck overlooking the pool where groups get together.

The main floor has bathrooms, showers, check-in counter, the Snack Attack Shack, a 1,000 square-foot store and another lounge. The lower level has a laundry, game room and a meeting room that seats up to 80 people at tables.

WORRIES UNFOUNDED

Making the change to KOA wasn't without some worries.

“Being a independent owner for 24 years, I was concerned with oversight from KOA, but it has been nothing but good,” Jim said.

“It has brought in tremendous extra income, more than I ever dreamed of. It has done a tremendous job of filling our sites on weekdays. So far it has been a great experience.”





