

BEHIND THE COUNTER

WITH CLARENCE RAGLAND, A.B.C. TRY BEFORE YOU BUY HOBBIES, OLCOTT, N.Y.

Let them fly before they buy

A model-aero club is a great way for people interested in R/C aviation to get involved with the hobby. In addition, an active, thriving club can translate into increased sales of R/C products.

However, these clubs are most often led by volunteers who are under no obligation to steer business your way. Furthermore, these clubs have more incentive to keep their membership numbers low, rather than promote a true open-door policy. After all, no one wants to hang around a flight line all day waiting for a single 15-minute flight.

How, then, do you as a retailer tap into this market? Suppose all hobby stores had salespeople who could teach beginners flying basics without the fear of crashing. At my store, A.B.C. Try Before You Buy Hobbies, that's exactly what I've been pushing for.

Over the past 30 years, I've come to realize that R/C flight, be it fixed-wing or helicopter, appeals to just about everyone who has come into the store. However, it's the fear of crashing that really keeps them from taking that all-important first step.

So, I started offering my customers the opportunity to take the controls of an R/C plane or heli for a few minutes and get a taste of the flying experience. This is usually enough to get them hooked on the idea.

Still, buying an R/C plane or helicopter is a big investment, and getting a customer to pull the trigger on such a purchase, especially a beginner, can be difficult. It's the fear of crashing and, ultimately, either having to perform extensive repairs, pay someone else to do the repairs, or replacing the whole model that gets in the way. For me, I didn't view this as an obstacle so much as a challenge. But what to do?

First, I expanded the "test drive" session to include any plane or helicopter that we carry in the store. That way, if a novice comes into the store and points at a model, we can get him or her in the air with that model right away.

Next, I began offering free-flight instruction with the promise that customers wouldn't have to worry about crashing their model. I did not, however like the use of a buddy box, and developed my own tech-



Clarence Ragland (center) believes more people will get into R/C aviation provided they have a chance to fly before they buy.

nique for teaching.

Essentially, I stand to the right of my student, and while they have their thumb on the elevator/aileron control stick, I grasp the stick with my index finger and thumb. I let them have most of the control, but will make adjustments when necessary.

All the while, I'll coach them through the different maneuvers we're performing. I've found that in as few as seven sessions, I've been able to teach a novice the basics of flight to the point that they've been confident enough to come into the store, take a plane out for a test run and land it in perfect condition.

It's my sincere belief that every R/C shop can and should offer this sort of service, even if it's only for an hour or two, once or twice a week. I am available to teach hobby store owners what I do. Please check my Web site at www.abchobbyshop.com.

Not only will it help bring in sales, as it has done for my shop, but it will also help build the R/C flying hobby. After all, what's good for the hobby is good for the retailer. ■

If you have advice or observations you think could be helpful to other retailers, contact Sue Brettingen, sbrettingen@modelretailer.com; 262-796-8776, ext. 489.