



# RETAIL INNOVATORS of the YEAR AWARDS

# BREAKING the MOLD

## Ten Retailers Honored as 2010 Innovators of the Year



Brad Battles of Marvin's Building Materials and Home Centers in Alabama, James Cabirac of Kief Hardware in Louisiana, and Charles Cole from Cole's Home Solutions in Tennessee all received awards in the overall winners category.



Convention attendees listen intently as this year's innovators explained what they're doing to make their stores unique.



**W**e all know what it takes to succeed in running a home improvement store — solid inventory, strong customer service, competitive pricing, just to name a few. These are the bread-and-butter parts of businesses that set up any operation for success. But some retailers consistently strive to go beyond the usual, taking risks and blazing trails along the way. These retailers, and the need to recognize their accomplishments, have shaped the Retail Innovators of the Year program.

IN ITS SECOND YEAR, THE PROGRAM, organized by the North American Retail Hardware Association (NRHA) and *Hardware Retailing* magazine and sponsored by Vermont American, recognized three overall winners and seven category winners. Winners received their awards at the 2010 NRHA Convention and All-Industry Conference in Savannah, Ga., in July.

“These retail innovators are not only impacting their local markets, but are also changing the way other retailers think about business,” says Dan Tratensek, director of publishing at NRHA, before introducing this year’s recipients. “These innovators are really raising the bar for other retailers.”

Hundreds of convention attendees were in the audience at the award ceremony,

which included a panel discussion with the overall winners and featured videos detailing their accomplishments and showcasing their stores.

Vermont American, a company well versed in innovation, once again sponsored the awards. “Vermont American has been in the innovation business for 60 years, and from what we’ve seen, there are a lot of retailers out there who are innovating in a lot of areas,” says Kevin Enke, marketing director for Vermont American. “It really was a great partnership with NRHA to pull together this program and recognize those innovations.”

In the following pages, meet this year’s 10 Retail Innovators of the Year and learn about the groundbreaking ideas that helped earn this recognition. ➔



For an inside look at how each of this year’s three overall winners lead the way in innovation, watch their exclusive videos at [www.nrha.org/retailinnovators](http://www.nrha.org/retailinnovators).

## BRAD BATTLES OVERALL WINNER

Marvin's Building Materials  
and Home Centers  
Albertville, Ala.

**F**or many employers, their company's mission statement can sometimes get lost in the shuffle of a long list of daily duties. But for Brad Battles, store manager of the Albertville, Ala., location of Marvin's Building Materials and Home Centers, his company's more than 60-year-old mission — to develop “a friendly hometown store where people like to shop and associates like to work” — is one basis for his leadership each day. Battles stands out in the home improvement industry for his ability to create a truly innovative retail outlet for his customers as well as his employees.

Battles started his Marvin's career in 1999 as a part-time lumberyard associate at the Marvin's Gadsden, Ala., location. Growing up in nearby Attalla, Ala., Battles knew intimately the characteristics and needs of his community and was driven by the motivation to serve those needs.

It didn't take Battles long to move through the ranks at Marvin's. He entered a manager training program offered through Marvin's in 2005 and quickly climbed the ladder from inside sales to team leader and eventually to yard manager. Then in 2008, when the company made the decision to open a new store in Albertville, Battles jumped at the chance to manage it.

“Brad really typifies what we're looking for in a manager,” says Darrin Gilliam, CEO at Marvin's. “He leads by example, which has allowed him to develop an amazing team. He makes his associates feel like they can be innovators, and that's something not every manager is able to provide.”

His unique out-of-the box thinking coupled with his lead-by-example management style has developed Albertville as one of the highest functioning stores in the 26-store chain. In 2009, under Battles' direction, the Albertville store produced a 25 percent gain in sales over 2008 with



some months posting a jaw-dropping 40 percent increase over 2008 sales. By encouraging continuous training and empowering his team members, Battles was able to lead his store to 109 percent more profits. And although the pressure of increasing sales in a tough economy can often lay a heavy hand on employees, Battles was able to keep employee turnover low, always putting his employees first by tailoring his management style to support the needs of his associates.

“He's just an all around good guy,” says Linette Phillips, an employee at Marvin's. “He's very cool headed but is able to strongly lead when it's time. When you enjoy the person you work for it makes you want to work so much harder.”

Battles' favorite part of working in the retail sector is providing customer service. It's a passion that has landed him a positive reputation around the community. Oftentimes customers come in and ask for Battles by name.

Even though the store is just miles from a big box, it leads in lawn and garden growth by taking advantage of micro season and product differentiation. In many instances, Battles encourages the

store to be the first in the market to try a different item or service. He is constantly trying out new product lines, merchandising techniques and special events. For example, while others in the industry were hesitant about home centers carrying lines of furniture, Battles welcomed the opportunities to present his customers with something new and out of the box. Today, furniture sales at the Albertville, Ala., location are the highest of any of Marvin's stores. And under Battles' leadership, the Albertville store was voted the “Best Lawn Garden Products Store” and the “Best Building Materials / Supplier” by readers of the local newspaper, *Sand Mountain Reporter*.

Although you'd never know it from his humble disposition, Battles is no stranger to awards. For his dedication and commitment to the company, employees and customers, Battles was awarded Marvin's 2009 Eagle Award, similar to a manager of the year award; but for Battles, it's just a day's work.

“Brad shows excellent analytical skills being able to solve complex store-related issues,” says Craig Cowart, president of Marvin's. “But maybe more noticeable, he is an engaging friendly person who is willing to assist others.” —

# JAMES CABIRAC

## OVERALL WINNER

Kief Hardware, Louisiana

**J**ames Cabirac's easy-going leadership style and casual Cajun accent belie the aggressive attitude he takes toward pulling customers to his three Kief Hardware stores nestled in the bayous of Louisiana. His ability to think outside the box in his advertising and promotions has earned him fierce customer loyalty and a steady increase in sales.

"I don't think of myself as innovative," says Cabirac. "This is just the way I think." He knows that customers think price, so he's done everything he can to create the perception that his store can compete with anyone. To drive that value message home, he doesn't blink at going head-to-head with his competitors. He starts by running full-page newspaper ads comparing prices, item for item, with his big-box store neighbors. Then he gets more creative with coupons, discounts and a cable television program. This isn't the first time Cabirac has been in the spotlight for his innovation. He was one of NRHA's Young Retailers of the Year in 2001 and was given a Young Retailer of the Year Alumni Achievement Award in 2007.

Cabirac was 23 when he purchased Kief Hardware in 2001. In that first year, he boosted sales from \$400,000 to \$1.2 million. Just a few years later in 2006, after doubling the size of the store to 8,000 square feet, sales topped \$4.4 million. In the meantime, he's opened two additional stores in the area.

But with big-box stores all around, Cabirac doesn't rely on his product mix and merchandising alone to bring in customers. He's gotten aggressive with advertising and promotions. "We try to convey that the store is a fun place with an 'anything goes' type of atmosphere," he says. To let his customers know just what he means by "anything goes," Cabirac recently offered gift cards for 20 percent off on Black Friday. "We discovered that 25 percent of gift cards never get used, and that people generally spend five times the amount of the gift



**James Cabirac — Overall Winner**  
Kief Hardware,  
Louisiana

card they bring in," he notes.

Then, a customer tried to take it a step further. Would Kief Hardware accept a competitor's gift card? Cabirac didn't have to think about it long. If the customer would spend 500 percent more than the original price of the card, Cabirac would take any gift card in any amount. Since Christmas of last year, he's accepted \$14,000 in gift cards from all types of stores and restaurants. Instead of thinking of those cards as a loss, he thinks they represent new customers and profits he wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

Cabirac has also used the opportunities provided by Facebook to build more loyalty. With more than 2,400 followers on the site, he realizes social media isn't all about selling something. "Only about one out of every 10 posts is about selling something," he says. "Our customers say they look forward to our Facebook posts because they're funny."

The posts also drive sales. During the NFL playoffs, Kief's Facebook fans found a promotion that would knock \$1 off New Orleans Saints jerseys for every point the Saints scored. Within minutes

of posting the promotion on Facebook, customers began flooding the store looking for jerseys. "We sold \$100,000 in Saints jerseys," he says. "Even though we sold them at a discount, it was great fun and created huge goodwill for us."

The crown jewel of Kief's marketing campaign is a twice-weekly, hour-long public service program dubbed "Do it Best on the Bayou." Aired by the local public TV station, the loosely organized and lighthearted show covers topics of local interest and features products carried by the store. One show explained various types of fishing tackle, how to clean the fish and then how to prepare the fish using seasonings sold at the store. A few members of Cabirac's staff shoot the show then compile and manage the show's content and style. The store's vendors also support the program with their advertising.

While Cabirac looks for every opportunity to keep the creative ideas rolling, he knows the biggest part of his advertising and promotions strategy is how he can get shoppers talking to other shoppers about his store. "If we can create word-of-mouth advertising by doing something fun, we'll do it," he says. **➔**

## CHARLES COLE OVERALL WINNER

Cole's Home Solutions  
Millington, Tenn.

If you would tell a young Charles Cole, while he was working long hours in his family's home improvement business in central Tennessee, that he would one day grow up to lead the way for home improvement retailers around the country, odds are he would respond with his notorious deep chuckle. But now, decades later and after a short hiatus from the industry, Cole is charting the course for his family's business and is quickly earning himself the unofficial title of industry rock star.

Cole's unique and progressive entrepreneurial spirit was first tested when he invited an industry consultant into his store and the expert explained to Cole that his store made it difficult for customers to shop. Cole took this criticism to heart and launched an all-out mission to revamp the store in a way the industry had never seen before.

His advisers encouraged him to travel around the country to visit other superior home improvement outlets. And while he said the time he spent on the road was inspiring and informative, he found the most inspiration in the unlikeliest of places — like the Cracker Barrel where he and his team stopped for lunch.

"I was really impressed," he laughed. "You can't come out of Cracker Barrel without buying something."

Cole noticed a common thread that creates an inspiring and motivating shopping experience for the customer and is the same no matter what the retailer is selling. He was determined to mix traditional home improvement style with a unique and progressive modern retail experience. Over the next two years, Cole began studying business plans from stores like Bass Pro Shops and Victory Motorcycles, as well as



industry heavy hitters, in order to get a clear idea of how retailers are catering to today's customers.

Cole eventually led an endeavor that almost quadrupled the size of the Millington location of Cole's Home Solutions, from 18,000 square feet to 69,500 square feet. Throughout the process, Cole was adamant about customers being able to test and touch products directly in the store.

"Why do grocery stores let customers test food, or why are customers encouraged to test drive cars at car dealerships?" asks Cole. "You want to give the customer the chance to really understand the quality and style of the products you carry. You want them to take it home and be happy with it so they come back. It's the same reason we're attracted to product at trade shows."

Today, customers of Cole's Home Solutions can enjoy a long list of innovative merchandising layouts and product assortments including running

faucets and toilets, demonstration products, a home decor department, a working garage and a completely enclosed lumberyard. Cole also placed an emphasis on building an entire brand around the store's positive reputation in the Tennessee community.

Today, many of the same qualities from the young, wild-eyed boy who grew up in his family's Tennessee home center are still visible. When our editors asked Cole about his greatest business triumph, he said that learning to ask for help and advice and trusting people is the key for any success, and he encourages retailers to embrace change, think outside the box and focus on their strengths.

"We are all taught to work on our weakness so much that we don't take time to really focus on what we are good at," he says. "Retailers should take this to heart and make sure they spend enough time focusing on what they're good at." ➔

## STAN YATES GREEN MARKETING

Yates Building Supply  
Philadelphia, Miss.



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**A**ny retailer can stock eco-friendly products and promote the green trend among customers, but it takes a special dedication and lots of extra effort to put the green principles into practice. Stan Yates, manager of Yates Building Supply in Philadelphia, Miss., doesn't stop at pushing green products — he puts eco-friendly innovations to work in his store and inspires others in the community to follow suit.

Yates Building Supply is the only building supply store in the nation to earn LEED (Leadership in Energy and

Environmental Design) Gold certification for embodying the principles of sustainability and environmentally responsible building. "Our store is an example to the general construction environment," Yates says. "It shows our owners are committed to a new way of thinking and a new way of construction. It's also a resource to contractors who want to pursue green building initiatives."

The store received its eco-friendly face-lift in April 2008, which included the addition of many green features: permeable concrete in the parking lot that channels rainwater for use in toilets

and irrigation; a white roof coating that reflects sunlight and keeps the interior of the building cooler; skylights and sensors that adjust interior lighting; floor stain made from soybean product; and more.

Yates' store not only sets an example and sparks ideas, but also directly helps community members implement eco-friendly aspects in their own buildings by providing many of the necessary materials. "The new store has generated a lot of calls from the construction community wanting to know how to do things, and we sell a lot of the products they need," Yates says. ➔

## ROBIN MILLER TECHNOLOGY

Cole Hardware  
San Francisco



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**T**echnology has changed the way home improvement retailers do business, and there is no better example of that change than at Cole Hardware in San Francisco. The four-store chain was one of the first stores in the country to computerize its inventory, and the store continues to streamline operations through technology.

Robin Miller, IT manager for Cole Hardware, says implementing technology has made the store managers' lives much easier. "When I started with Cole Hardware six years ago, each store manager was processing the order for their store twice a week by printing the whole order and reviewing it item by item. This took each manager an average of six hours, twice a week, for a total of 48 person-hours per week spent on the

orders," he explains. "By centralizing the purchasing and utilizing custom-built viewers in the purchasing function, we no longer print the reports and a single person does all four stores in about 4 hours. So we reduced the time spent to eight hours a week by one staff member (saving 40 person-hours and freeing the store managers to do other more productive tasks) as well as eliminating hundreds of pages of printout."

Cole Hardware has also been an alpha tester for developing software. The store uses a variety of methods to communicate with customers and employees including sending out daily, weekly and

monthly sales reports to personnel; sending a daily blog to all employees with updates on sales, new products and special events; and sending a twice-monthly e-newsletter to customers along with mobile text messages to customers.

Miller says that thanks to the support from store owner Rick Karp, he can continue to integrate new technology. "It is very rewarding to be recognized for my efforts," he says. "However, I would be remiss if I did not point out that without Karp's belief in, acceptance and support of technology, this recognition would not be possible." ➔

# RICK ARENA, MICHAEL ERVOLINA COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Valu Home Centers  
New York and Pennsylvania

**S**ince 1993, Valu Home Centers has raised more than \$2.5 million for 15 chapters of Habitat for Humanity throughout western New York and northwestern Pennsylvania. Valu President Michael Ervolina and Executive Vice President Rick Arena said it was important to them to give back to the communities they serve. "We quickly realized that almost all the Valu locations throughout western and central New York and northwestern Pennsylvania were in close proximity to Habitat chapters in the same townships," says Ervolina. "We were encouraged by the fact that any money raised would



Rick Arena (right) and Mike Ervolina (center) present a check to Habitat for Humanity.



stay right in the communities where the money was raised, and we knew consumers would appreciate that."

Each year, Valu Home Centers holds a six-week fundraising sweepstakes in June and July. Cashiers solicit \$1 contributions from customers, which then enters the customers into weekly drawings for \$1,000 in Valu gift cards and other donated prizes. "We immediately felt that raising money for this effort would allow Valu to help families in our communities, and

allow us to give back to the people and neighborhoods that have supported Valu Home Centers," says Arena.

Valu Home Centers has also helped raise money for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Salvation Army and Kids Escaping Drugs. "We hope that our efforts will inspire other retailers around the country to follow our lead and try to accomplish something similar that will continue to help those less fortunate," says Ervolina. ➔

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## DAVE RALPH MERCHANDISING

Marchwood True Value  
Exton, Pa.

**D**ave Ralph's tenure with Marchwood True Value in Exton, Pa., began more than 32 years ago when, as a high school student, he cleaned and stocked shelves at the store. Ralph worked his way through the ranks, transitioning to manager then to co-owner. Ralph's merchandising expertise and commitment to a well-stocked and organized salesfloor has positioned the 12,500-square-foot store as a go-to destination for Weber grills and paint. Under his leadership, the store also received the 2010 "Best Hardware Store in Town" award from True Value.

"We're very vigilant with keeping the store fresh and organized," he says. "Our Weber grill department is right

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inside the door; we keep it fully stocked and the grills are cleaned every other day."

Ralph has also created a deep paint department, with six exterior paint lines, four interior paint lines from multiple manufacturers and 32-linear feet of sales space dedicated to the category. The paint center's three color computers, six paint shakers and six-aisle span attract homeowners and contractors alike. Ralph attributes his store's merchandising success to professionally made signage along with keeping the store spic and span.

"One of the things we do and probably go overboard about is shelf facing.



Dave Ralph and his wife Dominique are dedicated to a well-organized store that is easy for customers to navigate.

"I've never seen a retail store that does as good a job as we do making sure the merchandise is faced and the aisles are clean," he says. "This makes our store inviting to customers and easier for them to shop. Even though we have plenty of associates on hand to help, any time a customer can take a shopping cart and fill it on their own, that's great for everybody." ➔

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## AMY KAPLANIS EMPLOYEE TRAINING

Country Ace Hardware  
Granby, Colo.

**B**efore recruiting Amy Kaplanis of Country Ace Hardware, the Rocky Mountain Ace Stores (RMAS) board of directors played their training by ear rather than taking a proactive approach. Now, thanks to Kaplanis' work with RMAS, the group has a robust, cutting-edge training program to offer its members.

"Training goes straight to the bottom line by contributing to increased sales, increased customer loyalty as well as increased employee loyalty," Kaplanis says. "If my staff is well trained, my customers will walk out of my store having



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everything they need including helpful advice to get the job done. This leads to customers being extremely satisfied with their experience at my store and more likely to return for future needs. Likewise, my associate will feel empowered that they were able to help that customer and contribute to the success of our store."

A new webinar series was launched in March, and seven webinars have already been presented, covering topics such as

exterior stains and common Colorado pests. The webinars have filled a gap in employee training, allowing staff members to interact with experts and ultimately become more knowledgeable sales representatives.

"Although webinars have been around for a long time, it is exciting to use them to pull together a group of independently owned hardware stores to leverage training to drive sales and profits," she says. ➔

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## ALAN BRYANT ADVERTISING AND PROMOTIONS

True Value Homecenter  
Oakhurst, Calif.

**T** rue Value Homecenter in Oakhurst, Calif., is known for its unique promotional events, many of which are regarded as community traditions. Co-owner Alan Bryant has organized and overseen many of these promotions, including yard sale-type events, like “The Community Clutter Clearance” and the “Motorsport Swap and Sell,” and has fronted several projects with local non-profits like the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and Toys for Tots.

“Advertising and promotions are an integral part of the success of our store. In this ultra-competitive environment, we are constantly searching for ways to



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keep our store at the forefront of our customers’ minds,” Bryant says. “Anybody can provide quality products at a fair price, but we think it is important to constantly remind our customers of our local presence in the community. By planning new and exciting promotional events here at our store, we not only provide a fun shopping experience, we also provide a reason for our customers to think of us first when they have any type of home projects.”

Bryant has also been recognized by True Value for his contributions — he sits on the company’s 12-member

Marketing Advisory Council and helped lead his store to a 2008 “Best Hardware Store in Town” award. He says winning the Retail Innovator of the Year award supports his belief in advertising and promotions.

“Receiving this award puts a big smile on my face. It reaffirms to me that we are on the right track,” he says. “Our customers’ responses to our advertising and promotional efforts have been extremely positive, and I am very pleased that people within our industry and the North American Retail Hardware Association seem to agree.” ➔

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# STAFF OF LLOYDMINSTER HOME HARDWARE STORE OPERATIONS

Lloydminster Home Hardware  
Alberta, Canada



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Sarah Rurka (front), her brother David Rurka (right), and Tasha and Jeff Hilderman are all members of the Rurka family that purchased Lloydminster Home Hardware in 1999.

**W**hen the Rurka family purchased Lloydminster Home Hardware Building Centre in Lloydminster, Alberta, Canada, in 1999, they had some big plans. They wanted to stretch the business beyond basic building supplies to a unique home emporium with something for everyone.

“Our vision was to provide a relaxing shopping environment for our customers and a stress-free work environment for our staff,” says Sarah Rurka, who handles marketing and public relations at the store. “Focusing on this simple goal, while maintaining an emphasis on

profitability, has guided every decision we make. We like to challenge the concept of what a traditional hardware store should be. We want to offer our customers a shopping experience that is different, interesting and fun.”

As that vision worked itself out, the family grew the store from 8,600 square feet to 25,000 square feet, added four greenhouses, expanded the lumberyard and increased sales by 370 percent. A 20,000-square-foot garden center is more than just a place to sell plants and ornaments; it’s an enjoyable place to walk. They also sell gourmet coffee, snacks, lunch and ice cream.

Even with plenty of competition in the area, the owners’ careful approach to creating a destination store has helped them maintain a loyal customer base. Half of the store’s business comes from contractors and half comes from do-it-yourselfers. Even so, Lloydminster has been able to limit its hours to Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., so the staff has time to take a break, too. The store has an aggressive public relations and advertising campaign that has helped establish its dominance in the market. And store management places a high emphasis on developing staff who continue to raise the bar for customer service in the market. ➔

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