

Meeting a Need Prompts English Expansion at True Riding Inc.

True Riding Inc. at Brighton Riding Stable in Michigan was a small, Western-only shop for years before Pat Althouse decided to expand her lines.

“When I decided to open a store in 1992, my research showed that there were stores offering mostly Western products with a very small section, if any, devoted to English riding,” said Althouse, whose retail operation is based in Howell, Mich. “These stores were at least an hour or more drive each way from my location and did not always stock what riders were looking for.”

The spark came partially from her own adventures in the saddle, as well.

“My experience riding at that time was Western and English trail riding and some showing in both at A and B shows,” Althouse said. “I saw how difficult it was for riders to find English products and get good advice. I also had a successful trainer, and that helped somewhat to see what the market was looking for.”

She started small.

“I tried to dovetail my products that would overlap and those things that wouldn’t be expensive to stock,” Althouse said. “The old adage that you can’t sell from an empty wagon is true. My beginnings were mostly headstalls and saddle blankets.”

Shoppers began to take notice.

“I found that my biggest customers were teenage girls and their moms,” Althouse said. “I had to develop a strategy to attract the girls and allow the moms to feel good about paying for the products. I kept the colors current for the time, and the headstalls, while not always sterling silver, had some nice decoration or weaving that looked good for practice, trail or show.”

Her inventory focuses primarily on Western hats and beginner to midrange saddles. Boots would be a close third.

“Since we have an unusual customer profile,” said Althouse, “we have had to tailor our approach to appeal to them.”

The store is located in a riding stable and also serves as the place the public enters to reserve and pay for a trail ride. The land is owned by the Department of Natural Resources.

Althouse advises doing a good deal of research before crossing over into English products.

“The evolution of my store took many curves,” she said. “If I think it’s a good idea, you know someone else will find the idea also good.”

Shortly after she opened, another store

opened about 20 minutes away.

“They were very aggressive about attracting the showperson,” Althouse said. “Their expertise was Western, but they added an English section. I decided to continue to specialize in English with Western as a convenience.”

Althouse closed her first store after three years for family reasons, then developed a partnership with the riding stable operator. She has been in her current location for five years.

“Know who your customer is,” Althouse advised. “That may be a tricky thing to do, but why stock the top-of-the-line saddles when all you have in your area is 4-H people on a budget?”

Other advice:

“Get out to shows, local riding clubs, talk to horse owners, attend the trade shows. No store is complete to everybody. Listen to what people are asking about—needs, wishes, how they want to be treated. I have now at least five other stores within an easy drive of me. I still hear things about each one both pro and con, so you know your customers are talking about you to them. And don’t be afraid to try something different.”

Pat Althouse of True Riding Inc. in Michigan admits that her expertise was in Western, but she enlisted the help of those in the know to develop her English side.

