

Inside This Issue

- 1 Sharing Stories to Strengthen the Industry
- 2 2 Reasons Your Seasonal Field Crew Can Help You Grow
- Take Advantage of the Winter Downtime
- 3 Keep Your Ship Sailing Smoothly
- 4 Don't Let Fall Laziness Ruin Your Spring



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THE MOST GENEROUS BUSINESS I KNOW

Where Competitors Still Help Each Other

***A Note From Steve:** Tony Ehrbar of American Tent is someone I've come to respect a great deal. I've been a guest on his podcast, and I'll have him on Better Lives Better Business soon. He's one of the good ones in this industry, and I wanted you to hear from him this month.*

When I got into the tent rental business, somebody warned me it would be cutthroat. That is the opposite of what I found. Tent rental is the most collegial industry I've ever been a part of. People share what they know, help each other out, and genuinely want the person down the road to succeed.

There's a reason for that beyond simply being nice. In this business, we are all a reflection of each other. When somebody sets up a tent with a third of the stakes it needs, and it blows over and hurts someone, that story doesn't stay with that one operator. It lands on all of us. Doing the job right is a shared responsibility, and most people here feel it in their bones. I just wish I had understood how much help was out there when I started because I learned everything the hard way.

handled setup and tear-down, so I was a hybrid weekend warrior with a foot in each world. But the day I bought that business was the day I knew I was an entrepreneur. Getting to control my own destiny and have a hand in people's lives rang the joy bell of my heart.

That rental company eventually led me somewhere I never saw coming. I bought a struggling tent manufacturer and turned it into American Tent, which now builds tents for rental companies across the country out of a plant in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I got to see this industry from every side: as a renter, an owner, and a maker. Through all of it, I kept wishing I'd had someone who already made the mistakes and could tell me how to steer around them.

So, I set out to build the resource I never had. "How I Rent It" is my attempt to be that for somebody else. When we started the podcast, I worried we would run out of stories. That isn't about to happen. Every journey in this business is different, and there's always something in someone's story you can carry into your own. I hoped to create something that would give people a way to learn from someone else's hard-won lessons without earning every scar themselves.

I'll even put my own competitors on the show, and I have. If Nick Dennino from Block and Roll and I can talk honestly about when his solution is the right fit and when ours is, the person listening wins. The podcast was never about me or the downloads. It's about starting something. Somebody hears a guest, picks up the phone, joins a networking group or starts one of their own, and the whole industry gets a little stronger and safer.

Wherever you are right now, whether it's running tents on the weekend or scaling up faster than you expected, there are people just a conversation away who have been where you are and want to see you make it. That's the part of the business nobody told me about, and it turned out to be the best part. So, lean into it. My door is open, and so are a lot of others.

-Tony Ehrbar
Guest Writer



Back in 2013, I bought a rental company off of Craigslist from a guy who'd done it all wrong. I was starting almost from scratch, learning by falling on my face and making plenty of obvious mistakes. I still had my corporate job at American Airlines then, and my brother-in-law

WHY SKIPPING FALL MAINTENANCE RUINS SPRING PROFITS

We've all been there. It's late October, the rain won't stop, and your crew is exhausted from the busy season. You look at a pile of damp, dirty vinyl on the warehouse floor, and it is so tempting to just pack it away and say, "We'll deal with it in March."

But I can tell you from experience that is one of the most expensive lies we tell ourselves in this business.

When you roll up a damp tent and shove it into a dark corner for four months, you aren't just storing it, you're incubating a disaster. Moisture trapped in the folds goes to work immediately. It eats away at the UV topcoats, weakens the structural integrity of the scrim, and breeds deep-seated mold and mildew that even the harshest chemicals struggle to remove.

I still remember the sinking feeling of opening a storage tote in April and being hit with that unmistakable sour smell. You unfold the top, and what was supposed to be your A-stock for graduation season is now peppered with black spots.

Taking the time in October and November to properly wash, mechanically dry, and inspect every square foot of your vinyl is not a punishment for your crew; it's a protection of your capital. Thoroughly washing and completely drying your tents before long-term storage saves you thousands in premature replacement costs. Do the hard work now, so when the first busy weekend of spring hits, you are ready to rent, not scrambling to clean.

**THE TRUE
COST OF
"WINTERIZING"
WET VINYL**

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A Post-Season Wake-Up Call

Your Warehouse Knowledge Is Walking Out the Door

How good does it feel when the fall rush finally starts to slow down? You can finally catch your breath, look at the schedule without wincing, and start letting your seasonal help clock out for the year. But honestly, letting them walk out the door without picking their brains first is a huge missed opportunity.

When you just wave goodbye at the end of the season, all the operational intelligence they gathered in the field leaves with them. Here are two critical reasons why you need to sit your guys down before the season wraps up:

Your field crew knows where the leaks are. You might sit in the office and look at the bloated labor hours on a job, but your guys out on the grass are the ones who know why a load-out took twice as long as it should have. They know which trucks are most difficult to get around town with, which tops are difficult to deal with, or what tools are broken. If you don't ask them about these specific headaches while the busy season is still fresh in their minds, you are going to completely forget about them by the time spring rolls around.

Turn complaints into a winter action plan. Before your seasonal crew scatters, order some pizzas, pull everyone into the warehouse, and run a structured postseason debrief. Ask them what consistently slowed them down, what felt unsafe on job sites, and what gear made their lives harder. It might feel a little bit like a gripe session at first, but what you're actually doing is building your winter maintenance schedule. Finding out which ratchets need rebuilding or which workflows caused bottlenecks gives you the exact blueprint you need to fix your operations before you get busy again.

Turning Your “Befores” Into “Afters” This Winter

WHY WINTER DOWNTIME IS YOUR BEST INVESTMENT

Take a look at the before and after photos on this page. If you've been in the rental business long enough, you know exactly what it feels like to look at a stained, dingy top and wonder if the client is going to complain. You know the dread of sending out a tent that looks a little too close to that “before” picture.

During the chaos of peak season, we often survive by just keeping things moving. If a top comes down dirty, we do a quick spot-clean on the lawn, cross our fingers, and send it right back out to the next job. But as the weather turns cold and the schedule finally thins out, you have a golden opportunity to hit the reset button.

A lot of owners think the only way to get that pristine “after” look is to buy brand new

inventory. But replacing tents every time they get a little tired is a surefire way to drain your cash flow and kill your profit margins. This is where your winter maintenance strategy comes in.

The off-season is the time to fire up the tent washer and let the machine do the heavy lifting. Mechanical washing pulls out ground-in dirt, mold stains, and grey buildup from pollution over time that manual floor scrubbing just can't touch. When you process your aging inventory through a proper wash cycle over the winter, you aren't just cleaning vinyl; you are moving B-stock back into your A-stock rotation.

Don't let your dirty tops sit on the shelf until spring. Invest the time now to run them through the wash, and turn your “befores” into “afters” so you can command premium rental rates when the busy season returns.



Before & After

Photo Credit: Jason Wells, Owner of Elite Tent

FINDING THE LEAKS IN YOUR SHIP

Stop Bailing Water and Start Plugging the Holes in Your Rental Business

When I look back on my early days in the rental business, my mind immediately goes to standing in the warehouse holding a stopwatch.

I recently sat down with Tony Ehrbar on the *How I Rent It* podcast, and digging into my background brought up some of the hardest lessons I had to learn during those early years. There was a specific turning point for me when I realized that surviving in this industry wasn't just about driving more sales. It was about profitability, which meant tracking exactly where time and money were quietly draining away.

I used to literally stand out of the way with a stopwatch. I'd time how long a phone call took to become a sales order, observe how the guys navigated the warehouse, and watch how long it took to load a truck. I was looking for the leaks.

The reality is that every business is a bit like an old wooden ship taking on water. There will always be a leak somewhere, and it is your job as the owner to find the biggest hole and plug it. You will always be bailing a little bit of water out of the boat and putting out daily fires, but you have to minimize the major leaks if you ever want to see real profit and growth.

During the first part of my conversation with Tony, we dive deep into those early days of the startup. We talk about the transition from just being busy to actually being profitable, the mistakes I made along the way, and how looking for those operational leaks eventually led to the biggest realization of my career and the birth of Teeco Solutions.

If you've been running your company on the treadmill of just trying to get the next job out the door, I highly recommend giving Part One of my *How I Rent It* episode a listen. Take an honest look around your warehouse this week. Where is your biggest leak, and what are you going to do to plug it?

How I Rent it
PODCAST

