

Weber's aftersales service pleases customers

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20/08/2019 Small parts—big results: The grill maker delights its customers with premium service.

Hans-Jürgen Herr selects his company's own "grill oasis" for the photo. It might also be called the company's test lab. This terrace on the eighth floor of a building in the center of Berlin has a number of smoking charcoal grills. It also looks out over the capital city with a splendid view of the television tower on Alexanderplatz. There are surely other labs with less enticing locations. And with less sophisticated fare for their employees. Herr lifts a tomahawk steak with a pair of tongs. The meat and bone weigh a good 1,500 grams, and would easily make a meal for three people. The beef steak gets its name from the impressive-looking rib.

Barbecue aficionados might already guess that we are paying a visit to Weber, the world's most famous manufacturer of grills. Anyone who values the practice will have a Weber in their yard. Or on their

balcony. Today we are trying out the Summit charcoal grill. Hans-Jürgen Herr is Weber's president of the EMEA region (Europe, Middle East, Africa). Like so many other top executives, he is facing a transformation. He has a clear idea of what digitalization has in store for him and his company. For example, smokers that immediately upload measurement data to a cloud storage service and promptly notify owners when they should order replacement parts, or when a gas canister is just about empty. Which will be delivered, of course—in this case, in-house. Farewell to the frontier mentality of smoke and soot. And welcome to the new programmed world of grilling.

"Just like with cars, there's no limit to what technology can offer to Weber grills," says Herr. "I'm sure we'll also be seeing fuel systems that go beyond gas and charcoal. Even more so than they do today. The only question is when." As Weber's president of the EMEA region, it is Herr's job not to miss this point in time—like the perfect point at which to remove a steak from the grill. And he won't miss it. Because to judge from past experience, he has a sense for the right products at the right time.

The barbecue lifestyle has since flourished

As recently as 2000 only a few people in Germany were willing to spend more than €39 for a grill. And most people who barbecued were ready to eat exactly the same sausages and steaks for all of their weekend dinners. Herr calls this the "disruptive low-price sector." As he describes it, "We turned the conventional sales environment in the barbecue business upside down, with a strategy that focused 80 percent on specialized dealers. We wanted grilling to become a lifestyle—with everything that entails." The fact that the barbecue lifestyle has since flourished everywhere from urban cottages to luxurious villa gardens can be traced to the idea of making grills into high-end products. Accompanied by recipes and food preparation ideas that encourage customers to experiment. And the idea has worked.

It has worked so well that Weber nearly lost a unique selling point, or what it called its 360-degree customer service promise. For every buyer. Basically an all-around package. With a quality guarantee based on well over half a century of grilling experience. After all, Weber has a tradition of creating the perfect barbecue ambiance. Back around 1950, company founder George Stephen was already dreaming of innovative globe-shaped grills with outstanding functional properties and long-life materials. Those quality standards have remained in place to this day. Including a plentiful supply of replacement materials available to every grill owner. That is just one of the reasons why barbecue fans in Germany compare Weber's high-performance grills to Porsches in the automotive industry. These grills are status symbols.

For its part, the company consistently pursues both a down-to-earth approach and visionary ideas. That is the only way to combine more than 70 years of perfectionist practice with the barbecue experience of the future. A responsibility that Hans-Jürgen Herr has taken on for today. "The grill business has also always meant merging apparent opposites. We want to be a reliable partner for our customers. And as a premium maker, to guarantee the highest degree of flexibility in our customer service."

Weber seeks to design its processes with customers, business partners, and other companies as

effectively as possible. That starts well before the phones on its customer service lines begin to ring. Although barbecuing has long since ceased to be a seasonal activity, more than six million Germans will fire up their stainless steel grills from March to September. But they frequently have to wait quite a while if their device is missing a part. That can happen. Delivery times for the small silver Phillips screws and hexagonal bolts can be considerable in the high season with its correspondingly high level of demand. Not because the delivery service as such takes so long, but because response times to customer queries are longer throughout nearly the entire grilling season. “We work with a very discerning clientele, which is willing to pay as much as €4,000 for a gas grill. So our customer service needs to have the highest possible levels of flexibility and dependability,” says Herr. To uphold these standards, Weber asked Porsche Consulting for support.

The specialists at Porsche Consulting were commissioned not only because they command classic methods but also because they could provide a customized set of instructions for improving customer service. One tailored specifically to Weber and all the applications on its European market. Which can differ widely. From customers in Denmark who fire up their grills along the country’s rocky coastline in winter or any weather, to occasional users in southern Italy who only roll out the smoker for a family gathering on the sunny terrace of their estate. David Blecher, a partner at Porsche Consulting, sketched out the project at the end of the high season, and three weeks later it began. The Porsche consultants carefully examined the situation, analyzed how Weber could shorten response times, and used the extensive data to derive a new customer service approach—including a new strategy to let barbecue fans keep their garden parties going even if problems should arise with their grills in summer. “We’ve worked with Porsche Consulting’s experts a lot in the past to improve our service quality and shorten waiting times instead of ‘stamping out fires’ in unsystematic ways,” says Herr. “As a grill developer with a long tradition, we place a priority on consistently improving customer satisfaction. Because you don’t become a leader on the market overnight.”

To put the new service concept into practice and to meet higher expectations for the barbecue experience, the Porsche consultants worked together with a team of Weber employees. The next barbecue season was fast approaching. In less than two months, Herr and his colleagues had a new system on hand to respond faster to customer queries. A standardized system. And one that could be used throughout Europe. Good planning has now measurably improved the results, and Herr has the figures to back it up. “Our new concept has enabled us to shorten response times to customer queries by 90 percent. Customers used to have to wait more than two weeks at the start of the barbecue season for a response and replacement parts, but we now solve every query within two days at most—with the same level of quality.” This was brought about by the new concept and an intelligent IT system that connects Weber employees at different sites and enables them to work together in providing the relevant services. The result is both digital and customer-friendly.

Back to Berlin. It’s one in the afternoon on the rooftop terrace. Herr lifts the lid of the black grill. Very slowly and carefully. The suspense is palpable. All eyes are on the steak. He cuts fine pink slices and serves them. Here too the service is superb. As is the timing.

Info

Photo: Porsche Consulting GmbH

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