

Scott Tuttle, president of Livin' Lite Recreational Vehicles, is pictured next to some of his company's lightweight camper units, which are proving very popular with customers who want something that can be towed by cars and minivans. Overall business for the company is up 350 percent compared to a year ago, Tuttle says.



Much of the RV industry is in a slump, but Livin' Lite Recreational Vehicles is thriving with its ultra-lightweight products.

Scott Tuttle, president of the Wakarusa, Ind.-based manufacturer, says Livin' Lite's core market is customers in their 20s and 30s who are not looking for luxury travel experiences, but who still want a quality product. Tuttle adds that those new buyers could be the salvation for the industry, which he believes has focused for too long on a small group of retirees and baby boomers focused on luxury.

In a recent interview with *RV PRO*, Tuttle shared his plans for the company and offered his thoughts about the future of the RV industry.

Tuttle stands next to the frame of one of his company's new Camplite travel trailers, the company's first foray into the travel trailer market. Tuttle says the all-aluminum trailers appeal to consumers who want a quality product at an entry-level price.

As most *RV PRO* readers probably already know, a fire destroyed Livin' Lite's manufacturing facilities in October 2008. Despite that, it doesn't seem to have slowed down the company at all. Did it?

Tuttle: Because we build our trailers out of all aluminum, the day after the fire we got our production team together and we didn't lay anybody off. We started working on what parts we needed to get on order.

We had saved the welders, so we knew that we could start welding right away. So, we ordered aluminum and it was delivered two days after the fire and we started welding two days after the fire in a temporary facility that was just 50 yards away from the fire location.

Two weeks from the date of the fire, we produced our first complete unit. That was a great response from the team at Livin' Lite. We just started rolling.

Talk a bit about Livin' Lites production levels. What are they now and how do they compare to before the fire?

Tuttle: Our sales and corresponding production are up 350 percent over that time. It's been very unique to be in an industry where most people are struggling and most segments of the market are struggling, yet we are soaring.

Part of that has to do with the fact that gas prices did go up. The same things that hurt traditional RV manufacturers actually helped Livin' Lite because, as more and more people traded in their trucks and SUVs for smaller, fuel-efficient vehicles, they still wanted to go camping. That's exactly where our product hits the sweet spot.

Our Quicksilvers are automotive campers and our Camplites are automotive campers, which means they can be pulled by cars and minivans. VRV products are designed so they can be pulled by SUVs and smaller trucks, not (just) the bigger trucks.

While some of the auto manufacturers shut down their larger-truck plants and larger-SUV plants, that didn't hurt us. In fact, it helped us because it put more fuel-efficient vehicles out on the roads and that's our sweet spot.

Livin' Lite recently debuted its VRV Camping/Cargo Trailer. Talk a bit about this product's features.

Tuttle: It's a very unique product in that it introduces a sleeping arrangement in a cargo trailer that doesn't go inside the garage area, but actually goes outside. That really opens up some doors for us because, believe it or not, there are some people with some very expensive motorcycles and they would never just park those outside while they were sleeping. With our tip-out bunks, they can keep their expensive toys inside the garage and still sleep and not be all cramped and crowded in there.

It definitely catches people's eyes to see a VRV product with the ramp down and the two tip-out bunks open. The first reaction of most people is "Wow, what is that?" It's so different; it catches their eyes. ...

Then, when they start to inspect it a little closer and they see that it's made of all aluminum instead of plywood and steel. Literally, our big trailers are weighing half of what the competition weighs ...

Demographically, who does that RV appealing to?

Tuttle: I'm not going to tell you it's a specific age group, but it may be more of an economic segment of the market. There are a lot of dreamers that have ATVs and motorcycles and they dream of buying one of those big RV toy haulers, but those cost \$40,000 ... to \$60,000.

We have a product that allows them to still take their toys and still sleep in that they can buy for \$15,000 or maybe \$20,000 for the largest one. It's found its own niche in the market and it's been kind of fun. We are finding that there are a lot of people out there that this fits their budgets.

What are your projections for sales in 2010 for the VRV?

Tuttle: I would say the VRV has potential to do \$10 million by itself next year. That's a good number of them.

Livin' Lite also recently debuted its Camplite line of travel trailers, the company's first foray into the travel trailer market. Why did the company decide to enter the travel trailer market, and what differentiates this product from other travel trailers on the market?

Tuttle: To really understand the Camplite, you have to understand where we are coming from as a company with the Quicksilver. The Quicksilver is a camper that we have been building for six years and it's a soft-top built out of all aluminum, including the cabinetry and the flooring. It's a very unique product and it's so lightweight you can tow it with the smallest little cars.

We've had dealers for a couple of years asking us to do an enclosed version of the Quicksilver, so finally we did it. ... We've produced an enclosed travel trailer that is 100 percent wood-free. ... I could take it and back it into the lake and pull it out and it would be no big deal; you can't hurt it. It's a product that's 98 percent recyclable.

Larger cars can pull it and every minivan can pull it. A Jeep Wrangler — which for years has been in no-man's land in terms of what it can tow because it can only tow 2,000 pounds — can tow an enclosed, bunkhouse travel trailer. We've found a nice niche with Jeep owners.

We've kept it very back-to-the-basics. It's basically a place to sleep at night, to make some meals and maybe play games. But, for the most part, our customers are going to the campgrounds to have fun enjoying the outdoors. And while a lot of RV dealers think it needs more options and amenities, there are tons of people out there who say they don't want or need any of that.

Our biggest challenge at Livin' Lite has always been — and it seems will be for a couple more years — educating traditionally minded RV dealers that there's a huge market out there for our products. ...

It's typical. I get frustrated with what I would call traditionally minded RV dealers who put all their eggs in one basket, and that is luxury recreational vehicles. They've left behind a whole segment of society, which we go after at Livin' Lite: It's the first-time RV owners, some of whom have never been on an RV dealer's lot and never thought about going onto an RV dealer's lot because they didn't know they could tow a camper with their current family cars.

Why do you think some dealers have been resistant?

Tuttle: A lot of them just don't get it. The RV industry for 20 years has been about bigger, better and fancier and more amenities and more expensive and heavier. That's every year and in every segment of the market. It keeps trickling down and now we call entry-level travel trailers (those) that cost \$18,000-\$20,000. That's not entry level.

I'm talking about Joe and Mary Wal-Mart. That's who our customers are and these are people who love to go camping and they camp in a tent.

What do you see as the risk if dealers don't pick up on that message?

Tuttle: (If RV dealers) don't start bringing new blood into the industry, they are going to be hurting down the road. The industry used to have true entry-level campers that you could tow with your car, but that was back in the '70s. Ever since then in the '80s, '90s and in this decade, campers have gotten bigger and heavier and more expensive.

Livin' Lite has made it our mission to introduce entry-level campers that everybody can afford. And instead of being built out of cheaply made wood products like fiber wood and plywood, ours are made out of all aluminum. This new generation of customers see that right away; they've seen people's cheap RVs rot out and they see the Quicksilver, the Camplite and the VRV being all aluminum and they understand that there's inherent value built into that.

It's fun being in the RV business right now for us. We have growing-pain problems and growth-management problems here at the factory, but those are good problems to have in a market like this.

Who are the dealers who are receptive to your products?

Tuttle: A lot of the dealers who do get what we are doing are second-generation dealers, so it may be the sons or the sons-in-laws who have taken over for their fathers. They understand that there's a segment missing on their sales lots and that's an entry-level segment that you can tow with cars and automotive campers.

And amongst all automotive campers, we are the only ones that sleep six. To me, by definition, if you only sleep two people, that's not family friendly. Our campers are attractive to families with children and the dealers who come onboard with us see that market and see that's how a big segment of the market is going. They are not only open to investing in a new segment of the market, they embrace it and they're excited about it. ...

Do you ever see a time where you will build a much larger travel trailer? Maybe even a fifth wheel?

Tuttle: Probably not a fifth wheel, but (we did) build a Camplite version for the Louisville show that has a wet bath in it. It's very basic and it's for people who want to be able to use the restroom in the middle of the night and it has a hot and cold shower, but is very basic.

How does Livin' Lite seek to differentiate itself in the marketplace?

Tuttle: One of the things that we do to really differentiate ourselves from others is the amount of time and effort that we invest in our Website to educate the consumers. We've done a very good job at educating the consumers to the point where they make their buying decisions before they ever call the dealers or go to the dealers.

A lot of times, it's out of necessity for a small company like us. If we get on a big dealer's lot — even if a dealer says he thinks it's a neat product and he puts it on the lot — a lot of times the sales guys would rather sell the more expensive RVs and so they don't invest a lot of time in learning how to open and close the Quicksilver.

We take all that under our responsibility and we feel that it's our responsibility. We do a lot of that through the Internet and through e-mails.

It's amazing the kind of traffic we generate now through our Website. To me, it's extraordinary for a small company. We get between 600 and 700 unique visitors a day on our Website...

Who is Livin' Lites typical customer?

Tuttle: There are two different versions. Our typical customers are families that the parents are in their late 20s to late 30s with young children, and who don't own a truck or a SUV. That is a huge demographic, just huge.

The other side — which is amazing to me because I didn't design the products for this — but we have a whole lot of retirees who are buying our littlest one, our 6.0 Camplite, and they've moved down from their bigger vehicles and they just want something that's small enough that they can pull with their minivans or their small trucks. It's amazing to me how many retirees are buying our little ones. I bet it's 50-50, young families and retirees.

Livin' Lite was recognized as Green RV of the Year in 2008. But lots of people, including RV manufacturers, are using that "green" term to describe themselves these days. What does "green" mean to you and how does it relate to Livin' Lite?

Tuttle: I don't want to "out" anybody, but let's just be honest and frank. There are companies out there that call themselves green because they have taken one little area of their coaches and gone from a wood-based product to a composite-based product. A lot of those guys are only doing it say, in a wall-paneling area; everything else is in their coaches is still made out of wood and steel.

At best, some of these people that call themselves green, their RVs are maybe 20-30 percent recyclable. Our products are literally wood-free, formaldehyde-free and you can recycle everything that's in them because they are made of all aluminum and composites. That's one of the reasons why we won the Green RV of the Year award.

You've grown very fast in short amount of time. Can you offer predictions about where your company will be say, three to five years from now?

Tuttle: Hopefully, in three to five years from now, we are going to be recognized as probably one of the leaders in entry-level recreational vehicles and for bringing new blood into the industry. I think our campers, automotive campers and even our VRV products, will be mainstream.

Any ideas as to how many dealers might be carrying your products?

Tuttle: Right now, we are at about 45 dealers (in the U.S. and Canada). My goal next year is to be at 100 dealers. Every month that goes by that a dealer is having trouble in sales and he's carrying only the high-end stuff that you need a truck or an SUV to pull, it makes him think that maybe those guys at Livin' Lite are on to something.