

The Gun Tailor

Fitting a shotgun to a shooter is a service the big boxes can't provide



Finding a niche is a proven method for differentiating your business from dozens of competitors. Do something very, very well that other shops are ignoring, and customers seeking that service or product may beat the proverbial path to your door. Specialization is no cure-all, but if you choose the right niche, the rewards can be tremendous.

AS PROOF, I OFFER Marc Murphy. Murphy owns Michael Murphy & Sons, a shop in Augusta, Kansas, that specializes in fitting shotguns to shooters.

Yes, Murphy makes a living at this. And no, Augusta is not a secret breeding ground for gun nuts that you've never heard of. Like many red-blooded American shooters, most of the folks around Augusta check the "fit" of their scattergun by mounting it once or twice in a gun shop. Then they plunk down their cash and take their new toy shooting or hunting. They come to Murphy when they realize they can't hit a bull in the butt with the thing.

"My dad started this shop in 1974 as a full-line gun shop," says Murphy. "He learned about gun fit from the English guys, and we've been doing it ever since. We're one of the few places that offers gun fitting in the United States. We've fit guns for more than 20,000 customers over the years. They come to us from all over the nation and as far away as Australia. We've fit guns for everyone from hunters to Olympic competitors."

Though the service is often overlooked, gun fit is critical to effective shooting, Murphy insists. "The average American shooter shoots four to six inches high

and four to six inches to the left," he says. "That's a function of not enough cast and drop in the stock."

But don't look for Murphy to follow any hard-and-fast rules before he starts working magic on a shotgun stock. He'll spend a long time watching a customer mount his gun, then look for other subtle signs, such as the shooter's foot placement and weight distribution, before deciding on how to doctor the stock to better fit the shooter. That process can eat up an entire day.

Stocks are fitted by bending them, and the process can be laborious. "We do a dry-bend process, where we heat the stock with what is basically an industrial-strength blow-dryer," Murphy says. "Then we start bending the stock, very gradually. It's not a difficult thing to achieve, but it takes time. Some guns may need four weeks of heating and bending for us to achieve the measurements we want."

AMP UP YOUR TEACHING SKILLS

Like many full-line gun shops, Murphy & Sons offers shooting instruction: private lessons, group tutorials, even a popular video. Regardless of the venue, owner Marc Murphy continually strives to take his teaching to a higher level. He does so by never resting on his own skills—or forgetting what it's like to be a student. "I've taken lessons from a dozen different instructors over the years, and I've made it a point to try to take away at least one new way to teach something to my own students each time I take a class. It keeps my shooting sharp and keeps me looking for new or different ways to teach a skill that I wouldn't have thought of on my own."

Naturally, some guns take to the process more readily than others. "Generally, the older the gun, the more difficult it is to fit, since the wood is drier," Murphy notes. "And we've found some guns are not good candidates, like the Browning A-5, which has a steel tang projecting back from the receiver that prevents much of a bend."

Murphy charges \$200 for an initial fitting and \$50 for additional guns. Not a whole lot of cash if you've already purchased a nice shotgun, and chump change if you're a serious (or competitive) shooter. Results vary according to the firearm and the shooter, of course, but in some cases Murphy has seen up to a 50 percent improvement. "We're still talking moving the pattern only a few inches," he says. "That may not seem like much to a casual shooter, but if you're competing on any level, the results can be huge."

I should note that Murphy & Sons does not live and die by gun fitting alone. The handsome shop features a lineup of distinctive guns, including Benellis, Winchesters, and on up to Krieghoffs. Not a bad inventory, but one that other full-line gun shops can also boast. What those places cannot offer, however, is the means to make your gun hit your shoulder like it grew there.

And that's where Michael Murphy & Sons truly shines. (316-775-2137; murphyshotguns.com)

Got a business issue you'd like answered? Contact Scott Bestul at sbestul@ridge-runner.com.