

BAG PROFITS WITH FEED SALES

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R E T A I L E R


Serving the Apparel,
Health-Care, Tack & Stable-
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7 Stall-Confinement Solutions Your Customers *Need*

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Saddle Up!



Consider saddle fit before you close a sale to ensure customer satisfaction, and enhance the comfort, stability, and freedom of horse and rider.

Article by Bonnie Jeter

If “bridging,” “rock” and “dry spots” aren’t part of your everyday tack-shop vocabulary, it’s time to brush up on saddle-fit specifics. Although steady saddle sales swell bottom-line numbers, promoting ill-fitting saddles increases your and your customers’ frustration levels, and also multiplies returns and reorders. So, it behooves you for your customers to achieve a good saddle fit from the first ride.

A hasty, misguided saddle purchase might yield an irritable and unresponsive horse that’s prone to back problems. A balanced saddle, however, enhances an equine athlete’s performance. A jumping horse can freely lift his shoulders to clear a tall, wide obstacle; a cutting horse can quickly sink to his hocks to lock in a cow.

Saddle fit shouldn’t be a hit-or-miss process, no matter what kind of riding your customers prefer.


Through awareness of modern equine anatomy and dynamics, and improved materials, manufacturers are creating equipment that allows horse and rider to perform with comfort, stability and freedom of movement. Unfortunately, customers often lack the knowledge necessary to make informed saddle choices for their mounts. That’s where you come in.

When selling saddles, Roger Allgeier, owner of Brighton Feed & Saddlery in Brighton, Colorado, cautions retailers and their employees to avoid telling customers only what they want to hear. “Honestly express what you see and feel about the fit,” he says. “I advise my employees not to bluff through a

fitting session, because the saddle will be returned. I’d rather miss a sale if I don’t have the right saddle for the horse [than sell a poor-fitting saddle].”

Noelle Carlier, owner of Tack Et Cetera in Cave Creek, Arizona, agrees. “Once a customer has ridden an ill-fitting saddle and dealt with a horse that’s become uncomfortable in his work [due to poor saddle fit], the rider becomes in tune to correct saddle fit. My philosophy is this: We don’t care what the saddle is made of, if it works on the horse and the rider is comfortable in it, please don’t fix the problem.”

To help you establish a saddle-fitting program in your store, our experts explain the benefits of such services and how they work. The pros also offer western and English saddle-fit tips, and advice on getting started.



A saddle should fit both horse and rider.

Mechanics and Measurements

On average, Carlier sells a dozen saddles each month; an impressive number she maintains by keeping her riders and their equine partners working without painful interference. Carlier's typical saddle-fit sessions last two hours. She's teamed with a local horse trainer who's also a trained saddle-fitter. The two pool their experience and split travel time to nearby farms. For \$50, they'll drive to any stable in metropolitan Phoenix; trips farther out cost \$100. The saddle-fitters arrive equipped to measure and photograph each horse they're fitting.

"We go prepared to complete a back tracing and might do one just for our own edification," Carlier says.

Carlier credits much of her saddle-

fitting knowledge to Jan Jacobsen, founder of Performance Saddlery, and a dressage judge, trainer and certified Master Saddler. Jacobsen says that saddle fit has become fashionable for good reasons, and now almost everyone is concerned with it.

"My western trail riders are just as interested in having their saddles fitted properly as any competitive English rider," Carlier affirms. "In some ways, a western saddle won't do as much damage to the horse's back as quickly as an English saddle. But when poorly fitted, a western saddle can actually do more damage than an English one."

Historically, Carlier has relied on Jacobsen's fit guidelines in lieu of carrying saddle-fit kits or other wither-tracing gizmos in her store. Jacobsen's

videotape, *Saddle Fitting with Jan Jacobsen: An In-Depth Look*, covers five saddle-fit basics: how to fit the horse and rider; how to do wither tracings; how to maintain a saddle; how tree sizes affect performance and how a poorly fitted saddle can mimic lameness. (For more on Jacobsen's video, see "Retailer Resources" on page 50.)

"I also refer our customers to Jan's how-to saddle-fitting article [posted on www.performancesaddlery.com], which details exactly where to take proper measurements and how to do them," Carlier adds.

Armed with a flexible curve, available at drafting stores for roughly \$15, or a soft piece of solder wire, a piece of tracing paper and a pencil or colored chalk, a savvy equestrian can

adequately measure his or her horse at home. "We concentrate on four main areas when we do a wither tracing: The withers area an inch behind the shoulder blade, the low point of the back and the last rib," Carlier explains. "Finally, we do a spine tracing."

Although measuring kits are difficult to find in local tack stores, one innovative kit reduces measuring mistakes. Equimeasure, an accurate, easy-to-use way of creating a 3-D model of a horse's back, can assess saddle fit, assist in the selection of a new saddle and evaluate a horse's back for asymmetries.

"We like the Equimeasure kits and resell them at a minimal markup," Allgeier says. "Our profit comes in the amount of time and freight we save not shipping trees and saddles back and forth to the manufacturer. Equimeasure is the only kit we carry, but I'm working on our own kit to market directly from the store. It'll retail for approximately \$20."

If The Saddle Fits...

Imagine trail riding for hours in pointy-toed western boots that crunch your toes and rub painful blisters. A horse is just as miserable, saddled with equip-

ment that pinches his withers, presses on his spine or cuts into his flank. These are some of a saddle-fitter's biggest challenges and, most importantly, can leave a horse in significant pain, causing long-term damage.

Allgeier believes that correctly fitting saddles "pay good dividends." He began offering saddle-fit service to his customers three decades ago. "The time it takes to fit a saddle varies directly with the customer," Allgeier explains. "Most fitting sessions take 25 to 40 minutes, but we've spent up to four hours with a customer. Saddle fitting is an entertainment factor for some people, but if they're buying a good saddle from us, we cooperate."

Currently, about 98 percent of Allgeier's saddle-fitting sessions take place in front of the store's hay barn, with easy access to several western saddles. However, this fall, Brighton is moving to a new facility that will have a specific saddle-fitting area that includes a canopy for shade and non-skid flooring for the horses' safety. Allgeier offers more than 20 different custom saddles to his customers – both western and English models.

Correct saddle fitting requires

assimilating numerous details. "We determine the breed of the horse we're fitting and the rider's discipline," Allgeier says. "Then we ask the customer's price range. A \$4,000 custom saddle definitely fits better than a \$400 off-the-rack saddle, because it's fitted to the horse. We also ask the horse's age and condition. The customer sits in several saddles to determine seat size and style preference. With all that information, we narrow our choices to four or five saddles that might work.

"If we know the customer and are sure the saddle will come back in new condition, we send it out on trial," he continues. "The customer must buy the saddle, take three good rides in it, and if it doesn't work, bring it back in essentially new condition. The money already paid to us is applied toward another saddle purchase. If the customer insists on a refund, we keep 5 percent. We're strict about that policy."

Many a saddle that's initially fitted correctly is undone by unnecessary padding. A specialized pad can work effectively, but often proves only a Band-Aid® fix that causes extra expense. Trying on the saddle first, without a pad, reveals how the saddle sits on the horse's back, and whether it has a chance of working.

"We try to fit the saddle without corrective padding," Allgeier confirms. "We don't want to hide symptoms; we want to solve saddle-fit problems. If there's only one saddle in our store with everything the customer wants, and he can't wait to order something like it that will solve the last 5 percent fit problem, we'll adjust the fit with a pad."

"The two fitting extremes are the very high-withered horse and the mutton-withered horse, or the horse with a flat back and high croup," Carlier says. "It's important to know that our manufacturers stand behind their products, and will work with owners who have hard-to-fit horses." →

Retailer Resources

A Handy Guide to Article Sources and Advertisers

Equimeasure Kit

Cheyenne, Wyo.

877-813-7545

www.equimeasure.com

Hadlock & Fox Manufacturing Co.

New Braunfels, Texas

830-625-6017

www.hadlockfox.com

Master Saddlers Association

Woodbine, Md.

301-570-3100

www.mastersaddlers.com

Video and Saddle-Fitting Guides

Performance Saddlery

Groton, N.Y.

800-258-0006.

www.performancesaddlery.com

Wither-Tracing Kits

Dressage Extensions

Tehachapi, Calif.

800-303-7849

www.dressage-ext.com



Brian Deter fits a saddle at Brighton Feed & Saddlery.

Western Saddle Fit

The primary goal of any saddle fitting is to distribute the rider's weight over a large area of the horse's back, resting on the muscles on either side of the spine to eliminate unnecessary pressure points. Here are four key areas to address when fitting a western saddle.

1 Tree rock. "This is one of the most important areas to fit correctly," Allgeier says. "The tree should 'rock' down to fit the shape of the back. If you have to err one way or another – too much rock or too much bridging – err slightly toward too much rock. That way, you mini-

mize fitting problems." Bridging occurs when there's a gap between the saddle and the horse's back, causing painful pressure points.

2 Withers clearance. "This area is often misunderstood," Allgeier says. "Some riders believe you must have two inches of clearance between the bottom of the gullet and the top of the horse's withers to prevent pinching, but in reality, the main criteria is to clear that area at all times."

3 Bar angle. "The angle of the front of the bar or 'bar pad' should follow the angle of the shoulder," Allgeier says. This allows the horse to move his shoulders freely. The bars are the parts of the western saddle tree that run along either side of the horse's spine.

4 Cantle point. From the point at which the cantle touches the bar to the rear of the bar needs to rise slightly until it's approximately a half-inch off the horse's loins to prevent back-soring pressure points.

Meet the Mark

If you're ready to expand your saddle department and offer saddle-fit services, here are some must-know tips.

1 Become educated. Share your saddle-fitting knowledge with your customers, especially newcomers to the sport. According to Noelle Carlier, owner of Tack Et Cetera in Cave Creek, Arizona, you'll learn much of what you need to know through hands-on experience, and by reading and studying online articles.

2 Don't be shy. Solicit advice from saddle manufacturers, local trainers and riders. If you have your own horses, practice proper saddle fit on them. Spread your new service through word-of-mouth and by advertising in local newspapers.

3 Sell wither-tracing kits. Before a customer buys a saddle, encourage him or her to assess the saddle fit using

your services or an at-home wither-tracing kit. If the customer prefers the latter, be prepared to explain how to perform wither tracings at home. Plus, know which local stores sell flexible curves, soft solder wire and tracing paper, if you don't carry such supplies.

4 Establish policies. Customers prefer ample test-ride time on saddles they want to buy. Have your saddle sales, return and exchange policies in writing, and make sure your customers are aware of them before they test or buy saddles, so there are no discrepancies.

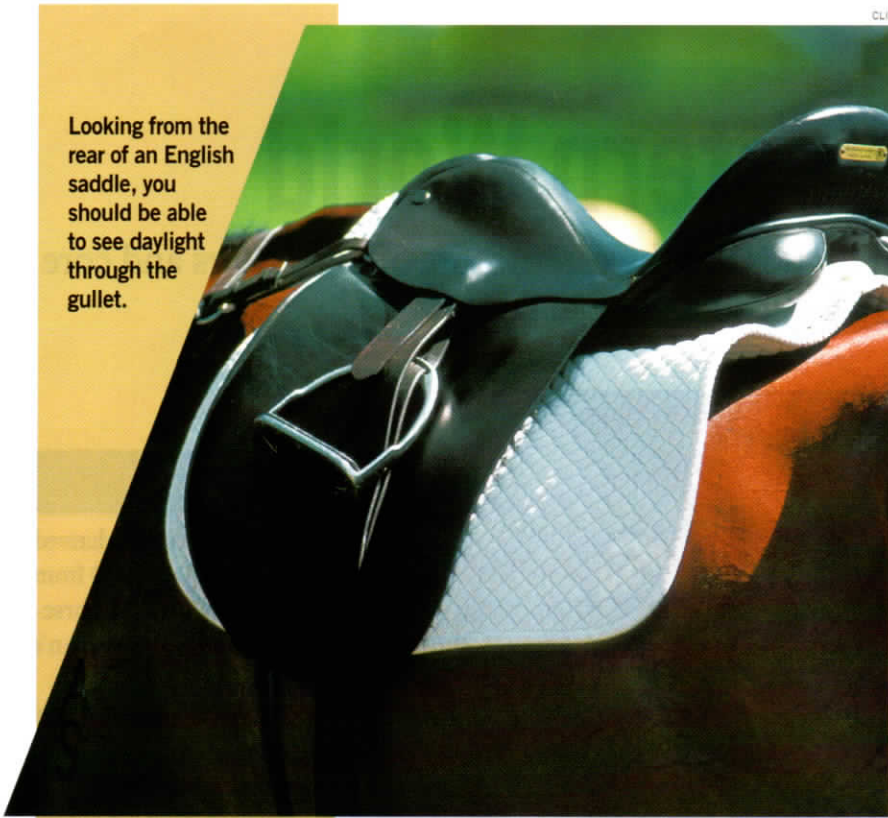
5 Offer loaner saddles. Custom-made saddles from Europe can take up to three months for delivery, so allow

your customers to borrow comparable saddles.

6 Update measurements. A one-time fit is never the end of the story for a diligent horse owner. Explain to your customers that as a horse ages, his back changes. A horse in heavy training develops muscle, which also alters his back contour, as does a long-term layup. All situations point to the need for refitting and saddle adjustment.

7 Communicate with manufacturers. Not all saddle manufacturers measure for saddle fit the same way. Knowing each company's specific requirements and guidelines is key to achieving proper fit. For instance, if a wither tracing is made just a little too far back or too far forward, the data will be incorrect.

Looking from the rear of an English saddle, you should be able to see daylight through the gullet.



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English Saddle Fit

Saddle fit is just as important to English riders and it is to western ones. Use these basic tips to ensure proper English saddle fit.

- 1 Balance.** Ensure the lowest point of the saddle is the seat. This indicates the saddle is balanced.
- 2 Withers clearance.** Make certain the withers have plenty of clearance in the gullet to prevent pinching.
- 3 Point angle.** Check that the angle of the *points* (akin to a western saddle's bars) matches the horse's shoulder angle, giving him freedom of movement.

Happy Horse, Happy Customer

In any retail environment, service is the name of the game. Customers crave knowledge about the products they buy for their equine partners, and anytime their shopping experience is positive, and their buying choices are correct, you

4 Panel Fit. Slide your hand flat under the flap and feel how the panels fit. You want to feel a smooth contour along the horse's side with no obvious bridging. Panels can be refllocked to improve fit.

5 Point width. Check the point width. In general, a too-narrow saddle will inch low on the withers and rock the saddle backward; one that's too wide will drop down on the withers, propping up in the rear.

6 Gullet Clearance. Look from behind the saddle. You should be able to see daylight through the gullet if the saddle fits properly.

become the hero. Offer accurate saddle-fit advice, and your customers will ride properly fitted saddles on happy horses. ■

An amateur dressage competitor from Austin, Texas, Bonnie Jeter relies on good saddle fit to keep her horse performing to the best of his ability.

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