

When it comes to franchisee recruitment in 2025, franchisors shift the focus away from quantity and toward quality.

Budget-conscious marketing professionals look for ways to maximize ROI when delivering their brand's message.

Franchise Customer Experience Conference  
**FCXC25**  
FRANCHISE UPDATE MEDIA • INTERNATIONAL FRANCHISE ASSOCIATION  
June 24-26, 2025



# FRANCHISEUpdate

ISSUE 1, 2025

## ANNUAL WOMEN'S ISSUE



FEMALE FOUNDERS LET  
THEIR ENTREPRENEURIAL  
SPIRITS SOAR





# Best Franchise Consultancy



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# Female Founders Share Their Inspiring Stories

Written by **KERRY PIPES**

There's no question that women make great business leaders. It turns out that they're also pretty good at founding companies, especially franchises. We thought it was time to seek out some of these successful women and highlight them in the first Franchise Update magazine of 2025.

The appeal of franchising is undeniable when you factor in proven systems, consistent quality, and economies of scale as well as the supportive community of franchise professionals who share a passion for the business. As we discovered, franchising is the perfect model for female business founders looking to take their entrepreneurial dreams to the next level.

Among the women on our list, you may spot some familiar names and some that aren't as well known. We found that they all share a determination to build businesses around a product or service they believe in. They also share a drive to scale their businesses across the country and, in some cases, around the world. These women are incredibly proud of what they've created—as they should be—and unanimously agree that starting a business is one of the best things they ever did.

Business success is often measured by sales and the number of units or territories, but numbers don't tell the full story. The people behind the numbers provide a far more complete picture than statistics alone allow. It takes a strong

woman to build a business from the ground up. Combine that with a smart management team and loyal franchisees delivering products and services to passionate customers and you have a formula for success.

We wanted to dig deeper into the personal stories of these amazing women: What were the early days like? How did they transition from founders to leaders? What's next for them?

Ultimately, 17 female founders and co-founders of franchise brands shared their journeys with us. Their stories are filled with power, passion, and heart. As you read the profiles, you'll discover how these women have overcome obstacles and seized opportunities to build thriving businesses. You'll see how smart, savvy, and determined they are.

By showcasing these remarkable women, we hope to inspire and empower others in franchising and, perhaps, motivate some of the next generation of female entrepreneurs to begin their entrepreneurial journeys.



**KERRY PIPES**  
Executive Editor



# PROTECT BRAND STANDARDS

## Finding the right supply chain balance

Written by **ANDREW SEID**

In the complex world of franchising, few operational elements generate as much tension between franchisors and franchisees as supply chain management. While franchisors need to maintain brand consistency and quality standards across their networks, franchisees face increasing pressure to protect their profit margins in an inflationary environment. This fundamental tension has led innovative franchise systems to develop approaches that balance both parties' interests.

Franchise agreements traditionally have given franchisors significant control over supply chains, often requiring franchisees to purchase everything from raw materials to equipment from approved suppliers or directly from the franchisor. In many instances, the ability of the franchisor to ensure that their entire franchise system will be purchasing from a specific supplier enables them to negotiate better pricing across the board, but that is not the only goal.

There are times when a franchisee could source products or equipment for a low price outside of the specific approved suppliers, yet maintaining supply chain limitations will be crucial to the success of brands and franchisees. Having access to approved suppliers that have been tested and have long-standing relationships with the brand is a main benefit of joining a franchise brand. Those suppliers help ensure consistency of quality, availability, and deliverability even in critical situations where supply might otherwise be affected. When Covid-19 hit, franchisors often leveraged their relationships with suppliers to help overcome supply chain problems that all businesses faced.

It is important for franchisors to understand how the limitations of the supply chain might impact the economics of individual franchisees. In quick-service restaurants, food costs typically represent 28 to 32% of sales. When franchisees pay premium prices for proprietary items or use expensive approved suppliers, the cost of goods sold can climb several percentage points higher than independent operators in the same category.

This cost differential becomes problematic during periods of high inflation or supply chain disruption. While independent operators can quickly switch suppliers or substitute ingredients to manage costs, franchisees often lack this flexibility. Franchisors should be sensitive

to these realities and work with franchisees when issues arise. Franchisors should focus on creating strict supply chain requirements in only those areas crucial to maintaining brand standards and adjusting those restrictions in extenuating or changing circumstances.

Forward-thinking franchise systems have begun implementing flexible approaches to supply chain management that protect brand standards while giving franchisees increased control over costs. These solutions include key elements that other franchisors might consider adopting.

### Flexible options

Performance-based specifications represent one promising approach. Instead of mandating specific suppliers, franchisors establish detailed quality standards and testing protocols. Franchisees can then source from any supplier that meets these standards, creating competition among vendors while maintaining quality control. This approach proves effective for non-proprietary items, like cleaning supplies or basic ingredients. In some systems, this ability to go outside the specific supply chain limitations can be earned over time based on performance metrics or completed training.

Some franchise systems use blockchain and IoT sensors to monitor their supply chains, allowing franchisees sourcing flexibility while maintaining transparency and quality control. These systems can track temperature, handling time, and other factors regardless of the supplier.

Tiered supplier programs offer another approach. Franchisors maintain a network of approved suppliers at different price points, allowing franchisees to choose based on local market conditions and cost structure. This creates competition among suppliers while maintaining baseline quality standards.

Some franchise systems have established purchasing cooperatives owned and operated by franchisees. These cooperatives leverage the system's collective buying power while giving franchisees control over supplier selection and pricing negotiations. The cooperative structure ensures that any volume discounts or rebates go to the franchisees rather than to the brand as a whole.

Purchasing cooperatives can help small franchise systems improve pricing by combining

their volume with other brands. These multi-brand cooperatives maintain separate specifications for each system while creating large purchase volumes to reduce costs.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning enable sophisticated approaches to quality control and supplier management. These technologies can predict quality issues before they occur and identify optimal sourcing strategies based on multiple variables.

Sustainable sourcing has become increasingly important to consumers, creating new challenges in supply chain management. Franchise systems must balance environmental and social responsibility with cost control.

The emergence of ghost kitchens and virtual brands has created new opportunities for supply chain innovation. These concepts often operate with flexible ingredients and specifications, allowing creative sourcing solutions that maintain quality while reducing costs.

The most successful franchise systems recognize that supply chain management must balance the needs of consistently meeting brand standards with the economic realities facing franchisees. Good franchisors constantly evaluate their supply chain restrictions and evolve them as circumstances require. This evolution requires trust, transparency, and willingness to embrace new solutions.

Franchisors should regularly review their supply chain requirements and seek franchisee input. They should also stay informed about new technologies and methods that might enable flexible approaches. Meanwhile, franchisees should actively participate in system-wide initiatives to optimize supply chain efficiency and share successful local sourcing strategies with peers where allowed.

By approaching supply chain management as a collaborative challenge rather than a control issue, franchise systems can develop solutions that protect their brands while enabling franchisee success. This balanced approach strengthens the entire system and positions it for sustainable growth in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

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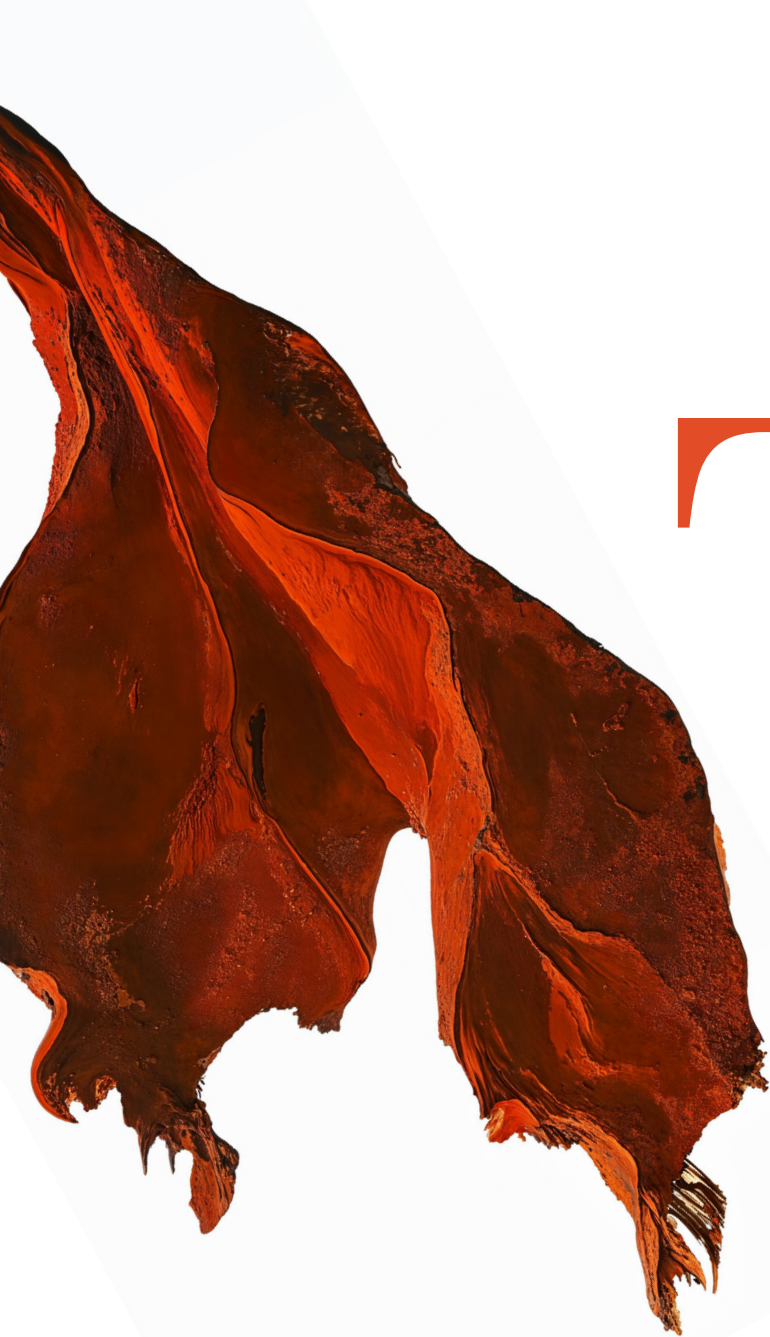




# FEMALE FOUNDERS EMBRACE THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Written by M. SCOTT MORRIS





T

he entrepreneurial spirit will find a way. It'll jump through hoops, go to work early, and stay late. It'll see the dream through despite the many obstacles.

"In the late 1980s, I went to apply for a business loan in New York only for management to inform me that I must return with my husband and allow him to co-sign the loan," says Sharon Arthofer, founder and CEO of Sip Fresh. "While this was a barrier I didn't originally anticipate, I didn't let that deter me from pursuing a career in entrepreneurship."

Arthofer is one of 17 female founders featured in this edition of Franchise Update. In addition to growing their brands from initial ideas to thriving businesses, these leaders developed their team members and served their communities. They also chose franchising as the perfect way to bring their visions to life.

"I mean, what could be better than creating a system where people who are just as passionate as I am can join and grow something amazing in their communities?" says Amy Neary, founder and CEO of Prime IV Hydration & Wellness, which has more than 155 open spas and more on the way. "Franchising lets us spread wellness far and wide, and it's a win-win: Franchisees get a proven model, and together, we get to make a bigger impact than I could ever do alone."

When Andrea Levey and her husband wanted to bring the taste of Philadelphia to their California neighbors, they insisted that their Philly's Best sandwich restaurant would use only the best ingredients. Before franchising, they worked hard to streamline processes so that customers could get the same flavorful experience at every location. She's been excited to see franchisees join the team and grow their businesses.

"On the flip side, managing the complexities of scaling while ensuring consistency across all locations has proven to be more challenging than I imagined," the co-founder says. "As we grow, it takes constant communication, training, and support to ensure every location upholds the same high standards."

Denise Fenton and her husband, Rusty, worked together to open their first Rusty Taco in 2010. It had been his dream, but she came to love it as they created a welcoming space that felt like part of the community. Years after he passed away, she's keeping the dream alive as brand director.

"The transition from founding to leading the brand came down to building strong teams and surrounding ourselves with people who shared our vision," she says. "By focusing on the long-term future of Rusty Taco, we were able to step into leadership roles that allowed the brand to grow and evolve."

Founding a business and growing its footprint go beyond dollars and cents. Passion is at the heart of achievement, and the drive for freedom is an essential element of the entrepreneurial spirit. Whatever barriers they faced, the women featured in the following pages persevered and excelled.

Being a woman "was a disadvantage in that I was often underestimated or talked down to in various settings, especially on construction sites," says Denise Tran, founder and CEO of Bun Mee Vietnamese Sandwich Eatery. "However, I also liked being underestimated because I saw this as an opportunity to bring my A game when others least expected it."





## SHARON ARTHOFER

**Founder & CEO**  
**Sip Fresh**

**System-wide revenue:**  
\$2.8 million

**No. of units:**  
4 locations open, 10 franchise units sold, 5 to open by Q2

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
Sip Fresh will open two new locations in Temecula, California, and Orlando, Florida, in early 2025 and a Denver location later in the year. We are focused on expanding in existing markets: Southern California, Florida, and Arizona. The brand plans to move into Texas and Nevada

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2017

**Year started franchising:**  
2023

**Your years in franchising:**  
25+ (2 as a franchisor)

**S**haron Arthofer is an esteemed retail executive and seasoned entrepreneur with a passion for franchising and business development in the food and beverage space. She brings more than 25 years of multi-unit experience as a franchisee for respected national brands, such as Wetzel's Pretzels. With her experience growing start-ups and proven success in bolstering brands across the nation, she created Sip Fresh, a specialty beverage concept serving fresh fruit-based juices, smoothies, and teas in a fun and engaging way.

As the well-regarded CEO and founder of Sip Fresh, she brings a wealth of knowledge and a unique owner-operator perspective to the brand. Her commitment to empowering franchisees and fostering a thriving franchise community has been instrumental in driving the concept's growth. She has established Sip Fresh as a prominent player in the beverage industry, touting streamlined operations and a low-labor model focused on driving high ROI and strong margins for franchisees. Sharon's dedication, expertise, and innovative approach inspires and drives the brand's future endeavors.

### Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?** The inspiration to become a franchisor derived from my experience as a multi-unit franchisee and a strong interest in providing passionate entrepreneurs with a pathway to business ownership. I was always engrossed in growing a brand from the ground up, and I knew what success looked like in the mall franchis-

ing space. I knew my firsthand experience would carry over into Sip Fresh, which is why I'm heavily involved in all aspects of the business today. My goal was to create a business model that supports today's modern-day operator, so I worked hard to remove the pain points I had experienced in my ownership journey. We prioritize streamlined operations, small footprints in high-traffic areas, and a low-labor model to help franchisees maximize profitability.

For Sip Fresh, the fresh, fruit-based juice concept came to life after a night out with my husband. A mixologist at a local bar created hand-crafted, eye-catching drinks. Everyone there was enthralled with this experience, which is when a light bulb went off in my head. I wanted to build a brand that combined this mixology experience with alcohol-free beverages that the entire family could enjoy while out and about. Sip Fresh is designed to be a fun, immersive experience for consumers without any behind-the-scenes complexities.

**What is your background?** My professional experience began in New York and in the marketing sector for multiple international brands, such as Nestle and Reynolds. I gained a strong background and understanding of business management and success. I realized that I wanted to pursue an entrepreneurial route, which led me to create a chain of retail stores within the New York market. After more than 10 years, I sold this business and moved across the country to Southern California, where I now reside. I then served as a franchisee for both Wetzel's Pretzels and Cold Stone Creamery,



**THE BEST ADVICE I RECEIVED WHEN STARTING WAS TO NOT FEAR FAILURE. WHILE THINGS MIGHT NOT WORK OUT THE WAY YOU INTENDED, IT IS IMPORTANT TO VIEW IT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN FROM THAT EXPERIENCE AND TRY AGAIN.”**

iconic brands within their respective industries. With my entrepreneurial mindset, I created Sip Fresh, a breakthrough specialty beverage concept offering uniquely flavored juices, smoothies, and teas.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** My professional experiences prior to creating Sip Fresh allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the entrepreneurial process as well as successful business management procedures. While serving as a franchisee for multiple brands, I learned more about what it takes to create a successful franchising system that meets the needs and wishes of potential franchisees.

**What’s the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice I received when starting was to not fear failure. While things might not work out the way you intended, it is important to view it as an opportunity to learn from that experience and try again. The worst advice I ever received was from individuals in the past who told me not to go on this franchising journey with Sip Fresh, and I’m fortunate that I didn’t listen.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** I have served as a franchisee for both an emerging and start-up brand, gaining valuable insight and experience at different growth levels within the franchising industry.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** I have always loved helping other entrepreneurs start their businesses, and I enjoy encouraging them and guiding their journeys. I have all of this industry knowledge, and it is important to use this insight to help others. I am passionate about paying attention to fine details when training teams, which is imperative for consistency in the franchise space.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** No.

**How important was that in building your company?** There were times when I wished I had a partner to bounce ideas off of when building Sip Fresh, but it also taught me how to adapt to any challenges I faced.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** In the beginning, Sip Fresh was self-funded, which highlights how much I believed in this brand. I used those funds to establish the first corporate-owned store to show proof of concept. This flagship store was a massive success, so we decided to begin the franchising process and provide opportunities for other entrepreneurs.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** In the beginning, the key was having enough confidence in myself and the Sip Fresh brand to self-fund the concept. Now, highlighting the success of our locations and our supportive and innovative franchising model has been key to funding the brand.

### **The Business**

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** One of the best things about being an entrepreneur is building a brand from the ground up and seeing your hard work transform into a successful business. I loved having control over the outcome of the brand, such as the creative aspects and building the franchising system. It is truly gratifying and rewarding to see your vision come to life and share that with other passionate entrepreneurs.

The most difficult aspect of being an entrepreneur is constantly making significant decisions that can carry the weight of your brand’s success. Decision-making falls solely on your shoulders when you don’t have a partner or co-founder. Due to this, you must find ways to mitigate burnout, which can be tough at times. However, I have always believed that the rewards far outweigh the challenges.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** The transition from being a franchisee to a franchisor has been a significant difference. As a franchisee, collaborating with other franchisees felt more like a peer-to-peer partnership. As a franchisor, I approach those relationships with a leadership-heavy focus. While this can be a complex approach, it has been rewarding to support and guide franchisees.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** Sip Fresh’s growth journey began with a corporate-owned location, which served as our proof of concept and the foundation for expanding the brand. We built a system of operations with expansion and franchising in mind, ensuring that the brand was well positioned to grow. The increasing popularity of the beverage industry coincided with the creation of Sip Fresh, allowing us to enter and grow in the market at a key point in time. As it grew, we started receiving

inquiries regarding franchising opportunities, so we began running our franchising system. We never changed our commitment to providing innovative, trending beverage options while using fresh, fruit-based ingredients.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** I sought out and brought on a talented leadership team that understood my vision. Our established operations, marketing, finance, and franchise development teams are the foundation of franchisee success. Providing significant support and guidance to our franchisees has remained a priority for our franchising system. It is crucial to surround yourself with a supportive, driven, and growth-focused team when founding your brand and leading it.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** My leadership style focuses on promoting the highest level of engagement and creativity from those on our leadership team and our franchisees. I have always prioritized encouraging continuous



**MY LEADERSHIP STYLE FOCUSES ON PROMOTING THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT AND CREATIVITY FROM THOSE ON OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM AND OUR FRANCHISEES. I HAVE ALWAYS PRIORITIZED ENCOURAGING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND GROWTH FROM THOSE I LEAD AND MYSELF.”**

improvement and growth from those I lead and myself. Empowering others has been foundational throughout my career and has carried into my current leadership style.



**What is the key to your company's success?**

Early on, we established a strong vision for the brand and a detailed growth strategy. We continue to reference these pillars, which is why we have had such consistent success. We use fresh ingredients while keeping up with trending flavors in the beverage industry. Offerings include our Cucumber Mint Lime Sip and our variety of Cha Cha Chamoyos. While we continue to evolve, we remain true to our core values and systems.

Regarding our franchising success, our operations system was built to meet the needs of franchisees, which references my previous experience as a franchisee for multiple brands. We have developed a system that uses a low-labor model, emphasizes streamlined operations, and maximizes profitability, leading to strong growth for the brand. We also seek out leadership at every level of the organization, providing additional support to all franchisees and their teams.

**Female Founder****Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company? How?**

At the start of my career, being a woman presented some challenges, particularly when financing my business. In the late 1980s, I went to apply for a business loan in New York only for management to inform me that I must return with my husband and allow him to co-sign the loan. While this was a barrier I didn't originally anticipate, I didn't let that deter me from pursuing a career in entrepreneurship.

That being said, being a woman has also offered multiple advantages when building my company. I built a career that provided flexibility, which is not often the case for other careers. Additionally, building Sip Fresh provided me with valuable knowledge, which I routinely reference when mentoring other women looking to pursue entrepreneurship. Looking back, the challenges I faced were opportunities to become adaptable and resilient, which have become some of my greatest strengths.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

Reflecting on my career, being a woman business owner has created unique challenges and advantages. Society's expectations of gender roles are a hurdle that women face throughout their careers, including careers in entrepreneurship. However, I have always made it a priority to focus my energy and attention on the advantages that this career has brought. To a degree, I have been in control of my work-life balance while ensuring that the Sip Fresh team and I do not face the pay-gap issues that affect many women.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** The biggest challenge I have faced as a woman entrepreneur has been the expectation of gender roles that are still somewhat intertwined in the mindset of our society. The expectations often encourage the limitation of women in leadership roles, especially in male-dominated

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**BREAKING PAST THESE EXPECTATIONS HAS REQUIRED RESILIENCY AND STRENGTH, BUT IT HAS TAUGHT ME VALUABLE LESSONS ABOUT DETERMINATION AND NOT CONFORMING TO SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS.**”

industries. Breaking past these expectations has required resiliency and strength, but it has taught me valuable lessons about determination and not conforming to societal expectations.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** After speaking with young women in male-dominated industries, the accessibility and affordability of childcare are prevalent topics and career roadblocks for women. Childcare has often been the responsibility of women, which can be a heavy and significant task to face and one that remains incredibly expensive.

There is a bias toward funding a woman-led start-up, which I experienced several years ago when simply trying to secure a business loan. This bias may look different and be less apparent than years ago, but it is still present in the business landscape.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Childcare accessibility and affordability remain among the biggest issues women face in the workplace. This accessibility issue often disproportionately affects women and can be reflected in women's representation in leadership roles. Whether conscious or subconscious, many women put the weight of childcare arrangements on their shoulders, which can deter them from pursuing leadership roles because it reduces flexibility in balancing personal and career responsibilities.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** Looking back at the beginning of my franchising career, very few women were in the industry. While we were the minority within the franchise sector, we remained incredibly successful through our attention to detail and ability to create consensus and juggle multiple responsibilities, which women have always been

known for. Now, it has been great to see the growing number of women entering the franchising sector with motivation and determination for greatness. While we may be growing in numbers, the incredible contributions of women in franchising have remained consistent.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?**

So many female leaders have left a lasting impact on me and have inspired me. I admire Cheryl Bachelder, who was the CEO of AFC Enterprises, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen's parent company. She successfully spearheaded the substantial growth and revitalization of Popeyes and pushed through obstacles that arose throughout the process.

I also admire the late Sandra Day O'Connor for her ability to create consensus on the U.S. Supreme Court. Her elevation to the court signified a major milestone for women in government and leadership.

On a personal note, I deeply admire my daughter, who was recently named a partner in a male-dominated field. I'm incredibly proud of her and the determination she has fostered throughout her career in the consulting industry.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** When I was beginning my career in a male-dominated environment, I did not receive a great deal of personal mentorship. However, that didn't stop me from conducting research and continuously asking questions to learn as much as possible. I now prioritize using my platform to mentor other women in the industry.

**Looking Ahead**

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** In the next five years, I would love for us to hit our targets in Sip Fresh's growth plan and continue to build upon our successful franchise system with passionate, driven franchisees. Having the ability to provide strong franchising opportunities for those interested in entrepreneurship will always be a passion of mine as we continue to grow.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?**

I am looking forward to Sip Fresh's growth in 2025. Our upcoming Orlando, Florida, and Temecula, California, locations are slated to open in early 2025, allowing our brand to grow in a new market and an existing one. Additionally, we are in the development phase of our Denver location, which will mark our brand's first entrance into Colorado. Sip Fresh will be taking strong strides in our growth. We are thrilled about the enthusiasm we see in the areas where we are growing. ■



## LAUREN COULTER

*Chief Biscuit Eater, Integrator  
Biscuit Belly*

### **System-wide revenue:**

\$23 million

### **No. of units:**

14

### **International units:**

0

### **Public or private:**

Private

### **Year company founded:**

2019

### **Year started franchising:**

2021

### **Your years in franchising:**

4

**L**auren Coulter grew up in Georgia and then moved to Kentucky for school to become a pharmacist. After meeting her future husband, Chad, in college, the pair knew they were passionate about serving their community but decided to pivot from pharmacy and turn toward careers in the restaurant space.

Based in Louisville, Kentucky, Lauren and her husband's first venture was a successful wine and tapas concept. The husband-and-wife duo later decided to turn their attention toward one of their favorite pastimes: brunch. With Lauren and Chad's Southern roots, the pair wanted to bring a delicious take on Southern classics to the Louisville community. Known for its chef-inspired offerings revolving around a scratch-made biscuit, innovative boozy beverages, and a bright, modern environment, Biscuit Belly has been an instant favorite among brunch enthusiasts.

Building off their local success, Lauren and Chad decided to bring their "damn good biscuits" to more communities throughout the U.S. through franchising. They've grown the business to 14 locations

in the past four years since they announced their franchise opportunity, and their tremendous success has landed the brand on Fast Casual's Top 100 Movers & Shakers List for 2024.

## **Starting Out**

### **What inspired you to start your business?**

I wanted to create a welcoming space for people to enjoy a good, hearty breakfast. When I think of breakfast, I think of time with family and friends, close conversation, joy, and anticipation for the day. But I'll be honest, I had to get talked into this. My husband is the visionary here, and he kept suggesting we open a biscuit place. We are from Georgia but live in Kentucky, and I thought these posh Kentucky folks wouldn't like our Southern biscuits. Boy, was I wrong!

### **What is your background? How did that prepare you for starting your business?**

Ha! I'm technically a pharmacist, but I would argue my many years of dealing with guests at the pharmacy counter and team members behind the counter helped me with the people and hospitality side of



this. Good food is super important, but we want our team and our guests to feel loved on and have an incredible experience. We can hire great people to supplement the areas we lack, and we have done just that. I try to stay out of their way and let them shine!

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** I don't know about it being official advice, but I underestimated the sales cycle of a Biscuit Belly franchise partner. We are asking a lot of them, but we are also looking for this unicorn of a person: someone with craft food restaurant experience and a great team. That combination can be difficult to find.

The best advice has been to be picky on the franchise partner front. This is a marriage, and we want this thing to last and grow from the inside. The best way to do that is to be specific about our needs and expectations from the get-go.

**Was this your first time in franchising? Why did you choose to franchise?** Yes, Biscuit Belly is my first franchise endeavor. Initially, we wanted to grow faster than we could ourselves and focus on having that local touch. We knew that we would struggle opening stores from afar.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started? How important was that in building your company?** Yes, my husband, Chad, and I have had a partner in Chuck Schnatter. He was in the franchising space in a past life and has provided so much guidance from the start. He kept us from making some basic mistakes.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Initially, we used the capital generated at the store level to grow. Now, we use a variety of levers to be as fiscally responsible as possible while straddling the line to grow efficiently. We have used joint ventures to raise capital without giving away the corporate pie. I love that mechanism, especially since we get to manage them!

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** Investors are drawn to our strong unit economics and our unique brand. People locally have loved watching us grow. Louisville has hallmark companies right in our backyard, like Texas Roadhouse, so seeing us trying to mimic their uniqueness and high levels of service has attracted people.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** It is amazing to have people from all over write me after having a Biscuit Belly biscuit in a state so far away from us. To think we initially were testing recipes in my little kitchen is so special. The other best thing is the people I've met and worked alongside. We have a fantastic team.

The most difficult thing is probably the mental load that it brings. Every time we sign a lease, I get so nervous. The risk is so great!

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** The biggest surprise has been balancing the autonomy of franchise partners with maintaining brand consistency. I thought franchise partners would love the cookie-cutter approach, but we have had to change a lot for them. Most of the time, it's good and needed. I like being challenged, and our tiny team is usually quite accommodating.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** Initially, we focused on perfecting the concept and creating buzz locally. We thought we could just rinse and repeat and people would come to us, but we have learned that it takes much more than we thought. Building brand awareness is key. It's a challenge as we enter new markets. The biggest way we have changed is in who we have brought on board to help us lead. We have ponied up to prioritize having a great leadership team with the best backgrounds. We want to do this thing right. We've had to be intentional about bringing on people who have built things in their lives, not just maintained big systems.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** Oh, Lord, I'm still learning how to do this. Ultimately, I am learning it is about building trust not just with me, but with everyone on our leadership team. I love how close we are to our local stores, and I don't ever want that to go away.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** Collaborative and empowering. I believe in building a team of experts and trusting them to excel in their roles while keeping an open-door policy for feedback and innovation. I want to play cheerleader and "issue clearer," and I think our team appreciates that.

**What is the key to your company's success?** A focus on guest experience. A strong brand identity and a commitment to quality are important, but I think people care most about how you make them feel. If we make them feel welcome, the rest will work itself out.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company? How?** It's been both. Being a woman brings a unique perspective and helps build a culture of empathy and collaboration. However, navigating a predominantly male-dominated industry comes with challenges, especially when securing funding. Franchising is dominated by men. We've done shows where attendees just want to talk to my husband. It can be frustrating, but I think it's important to recognize. He is good about turning people over to me when it's needed, and it allows us to have specific lanes we live in.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?** An advantage is the ability to connect on a personal

level and create inclusive work environments. We have team members who feel like they can talk to me in a much more direct way than they could my husband. A disadvantage is the lingering biases in some aspects of the business world, such as negotiations or networking.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** Overcoming unconscious bias and proving myself in rooms where I was often underestimated.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** It often comes down to access, whether it's funding, mentorship, or representation. Systemic barriers and societal expectations play a role as well.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** An unintentional bias happens if a woman wants to start a family. An assumption is usually made that they need to step back, and they certainly may need to now and again. Variations in the traditional workday have become the norm, which helps with this. Opportunities for advancement are so important.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** There's been a push for inclusivity and support networks for women in franchising, but there's still room to grow.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** Broadly, I admire women, like Sara Blakely (founder of Spanx), for their tenacity and innovative spirits. But in the desk next to me is Lisa Dwelly, who worked for Texas Roadhouse's third store and helped grow that thing for 15 years. Her tenacity and willingness to bring that mindset to my little business have been game changers. I will appreciate her forever.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Absolutely. Having mentors to offer guidance and perspective has been invaluable. I also prioritize mentoring others and connecting people to others who can help them shine. It's rewarding to give back.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** I'd love to see Biscuit Belly expand into new markets while staying true to its roots. We want national biscuit domination!

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** Our first location in South Carolina is on the horizon. My husband has also been busting it to find new opportunities for us in 2025. More to come on that front! ■



**NORA  
DUNNAN**  
*Co-Founder & CDO*  
**Five Iron Golf**

**No. of units:**  
34

**International units:**  
5

**Growth plans:**  
60+ units by the end of 2025

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2017

**Year started franchising:**  
2023

**Your years in franchising:**  
2

**N**ora Dunnan is chief development officer and co-founder of Five Iron Golf. She leads the company's expansion and growth initiatives, transforming the brand into a modern and inclusive alternative to traditional golf environments. With degrees from Davidson College and Duke University, Nora began her career as a research analyst before co-founding Five Iron Golf. She has been instrumental in overseeing development projects, operational strategy, and community-driven initiatives, such as programs designed to make golf accessible for all.

Beyond her professional achievements, Nora is a proud mother of three children: Shafer, 6, Lane, 4, and Cal, 1. She lives in New Jersey with her husband, Morgan. Balancing her dynamic career with family life, Nora remains passionate about redefining golf as a sport that welcomes everyone.

**Beginnings**

**What inspired you to start your business?**  
Five Iron Golf emerged from a shared vision and

unique collaboration between Jared Solomon, CEO, and Mike Doyle, chief golf officer. They initially bonded over golf lessons and recognized a gap in the market for a space where people could work on their game in a fun, inclusive, and approachable environment. They envisioned a venue that catered to serious golfers and welcomed beginners and groups looking to have a good time.

When I joined, my colleague Katherine Solomon and I brought complementary skills. I focused on building out the physical space and designing the experience at our first location while Katherine's legal expertise ensured everything ran smoothly. I wanted to be part of a movement that made golf inclusive and less intimidating, something I didn't always feel growing up. We created not just a golf venue, but a destination that integrates technology, hospitality, and community. From day one, we wanted to create an all-encompassing experience with exceptional food and drinks and an inviting atmosphere.





**THERE'S NOTHING LIKE WATCHING CUSTOMERS ENJOY OUR CONCEPT AND BECOME REPEAT GUESTS. THOSE TANGIBLE RESULTS MAKE ALL THE CHALLENGES WORTHWHILE AND FUEL THE EXCITEMENT TO KEEP GROWING."**

**What is your background?** I graduated from Duke University with a master's in management studies and developed a passion for creative problem-solving and interdisciplinary thinking. Post-graduation, I spent a year in consulting, working with businesses to refine their operations and navigate challenges. That experience was instrumental in giving me a foundational understanding of how to run a successful business. When the opportunity with Five Iron Golf presented itself, I knew it was a chance to combine my professional skills with a unique and exciting vision.

During my consulting days, I worked with companies to streamline their operations. When designing our first location, I applied these skills to optimize our space layout and integrate technology that made booking and using the golf simulators seamless. That mindset helped us stay agile as we expanded and scaled our operations.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** Attending a liberal arts college taught me to think critically, adapt quickly, and approach problems from multiple perspectives. Those skills have been invaluable in an entrepreneurial setting where no two days are the same. I also learned the importance of collaboration.

When starting Five Iron Golf, I relied on these experiences to help shape the brand's identity and create a business model that could scale. Whether designing our first location, developing our website, crafting an inclusive customer experience, or helping develop our early marketing strategy, my background gave me the confidence to dive in head-first and tackle the challenges of entrepreneurship.

It reinforced the importance of collaboration and flexibility, which have been key to our growth as a brand.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice I received was to recognize that success wouldn't come easily and to embrace the lessons learned along the way. Building something from the ground up is inherently challenging, but keeping a long-term, big-picture mindset has been critical. In the early stages, there were so many tasks to juggle, and one piece of advice that stuck with me was, "Don't wait for someone else to do the work—just get it done yourself." That mentality of rolling up your sleeves and staying proactive has shaped my approach to leadership and ensured that we've stayed on track during busy times.

In the early days, I was deeply involved in every aspect of the business, from overseeing construction to personally managing our opening day. Over time, I realized that while being hands-on was critical in the early days, true leadership is about empowering others to take ownership. I learned to trust my team to handle key areas, which allowed me to focus on growth.

On the other hand, the worst advice I received was to avoid growing too fast. While caution is important, and we've been thoughtful about our expansion, this advice didn't align with our vision for Five Iron Golf. From the beginning, we knew that the demand was there and that our concept resonated with a wide audience. By being strategic and intentional, we've expanded into new markets successfully without compromising the quality of the experience. Growth has been a key part of our story, and I'm glad we trusted our instincts instead of playing it too safe.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** Franchising was a natural step in our growth journey because it aligned with our vision of bringing Five Iron Golf to as many cities as possible. While we were passionate about expanding the brand ourselves, we recognized that there were limits to how quickly we could build and operate locations on our own. The demand was there—people were reaching out with interest in bringing Five Iron Golf to their communities—so franchising became a way to accelerate growth while maintaining brand integrity.

Franchising allows us to partner with driven individuals who share our enthusiasm for creating exceptional experiences. These franchisees provide local expertise and personal investments in their markets, helping ensure that every Five Iron Golf location is connected to its community. By combining our operational and brand expertise with the entrepreneurial spirit of our franchise partners, we've been able to grow in a way that's both sustainable and impactful. It's been a learning experience as we've worked closely with our franchisees, refining systems to ensure a smooth and successful partnership.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Five Iron Golf was a collaborative effort

from the beginning. Jared Solomon, our CEO, and Mike Doyle, our chief golf officer, were instrumental in developing the concept. Jared used to take golf lessons from Mike, and through those sessions, they recognized the potential for a new kind of golf experience that blended technology, entertainment, and community.

As the concept began to take shape, I joined to help bring the vision to life. Jared and Mike's expertise in golf and strategy set the foundation while my focus on building out the locations and early operational systems rounded out the team. It's been a true partnership from the start with each of us contributing our unique strengths to create a brand we're all proud of.

**How important was that in building your company?** A strong team of co-founders was essential to building Five Iron Golf. Each of us brought different skills and perspectives, which allowed us to approach challenges creatively and make well-rounded decisions.

Our complementary skill sets and shared vision were key to creating a company culture that values teamwork, innovation, and adaptability.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** In the beginning, the funding for Five Iron Golf came from a combination of personal investment and the support of close connections. Jared initially contributed his own money to get the concept off the ground, showing his deep commitment to the vision. From there, we turned to family and friends to raise additional capital, which helped us build out our first location and prove the business model's viability.

Those early days were challenging. We didn't have the resources that big companies have, so we had to be creative when allocating funds. We used every dollar efficiently, reinvesting profits into the business to fund future locations. This approach helped us build credibility and maintain control over the brand while scaling.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The hardest part of being an entrepreneur has been learning to let go of control. In the early days, I was deeply involved in every detail, and while that hands-on approach was necessary, it's not sustainable as the business grows. It's not easy to step back and delegate, but I've learned that empowering others allows the business to thrive and helps build a strong, capable team.

On the other hand, the best part of being an entrepreneur is seeing the results of our hard work come to life. Watching a Five Iron Golf location go from concept to reality—seeing people enjoy the space, the technology, and experience we've created—is incredibly rewarding. There's nothing like watching customers enjoy our concept and become repeat guests. Those tangible results make all the challenges worthwhile and fuel the excitement to keep growing.

### How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?

One of the biggest surprises has been the complexity of the construction and site-selection process. While I knew those aspects would be important, I didn't anticipate how much time and coordination would be required to get locations up and running. For our company-owned stores, we were heavily involved in every step, but with franchisees, we've had to find the right balance, offering the guidance and resources they need while giving them enough autonomy to move efficiently.

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**I'VE DONE MANY OF THE ROLES THAT I NOW OVERSEE, SO I'M NOT AFRAID TO ROLL UP MY SLEEVES AND STEP IN WHEN NEEDED EVEN IF IT'S SOMETHING REPETITIVE OR UNGLAMOROUS.”**

What surprised me most was how different the process felt when balancing franchisee autonomy with our brand standards. At first, we were heavily involved in the build-out, but over time, we realized that franchisees needed more flexibility in some areas. We've worked hard to refine our systems and smooth our process, which has been critical for building lasting partnerships with franchisees.

Another key learning has been determining the appropriate level of requirements for franchisees. When we started franchising, we leaned heavily on our experiences from building our own locations. However, as our first two franchisees opened, we quickly realized there were lessons to be learned, particularly around making the process more efficient for future builds. Each new location has provided valuable insights, and we're continually refining our systems and processes to ensure our franchisees have the tools and support they need to succeed without unnecessary obstacles.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** In the beginning, our growth was organic, driven largely by word of mouth. In New York City, there was a clear need for a place where people could play golf, especially given

the lack of accessible spaces for the sport. Golfers have a way of finding golf, so once we opened our first location, the community quickly spread the word, and the demand grew naturally.

When we opened our second location, we were still riding that momentum, and it felt like the model was continuing to speak for itself. However, as we expanded into new cities outside of New York, we realized we needed to take a more intentional approach to growth. The brand recognition that had come so easily in NYC didn't necessarily translate to markets where people weren't yet familiar with Five Iron Golf. That's when we recognized the importance of implementing sophisticated marketing strategies. As we've grown, we've become more strategic about how we introduce the brand to new markets, ensuring that every location starts strong and resonates with the local community.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** The transition was gradual. In the early days, I was involved in nearly every aspect of the business: building out our first location, overseeing operations, and handling countless other details myself. As the company started to grow, I realized that I couldn't do everything on my own to truly scale Five Iron Golf.

The turning point came when we began onboarding talented people to work alongside us. Team members could take ownership of specific areas of the business. Having people who are not just working under me, but actively working with me has been transformative. For example, we now have someone who leads design, and we've found experts in other critical areas, like construction, marketing, and operations. This allowed me to focus on big-picture strategy and created opportunities to learn from these specialists.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** My leadership style focuses on leading by example. Having been deeply involved in every part of the business early on, I understand firsthand what it takes to get the job done. I've done many of the roles that I now oversee, so I'm not afraid to roll up my sleeves and step in when needed even if it's something repetitive or unglamorous.

At the same time, I encourage ownership and accountability, empowering team members to take charge of their roles and grow. I try to foster an environment where people feel supported, valued, and confident to step up. By blending hands-on involvement with trust and mentorship, I've found that we can build a strong team and brand.

**What is the key to your company's success?** The key to Five Iron Golf's success lies in our ability to cater to the serious golfer and those looking for a casual social experience. What makes us special is the balance we strike between skill development and having a good time.

Ultimately, it's this mix of innovation, accessibility, and fun that has driven our success. We've

redefined what a golf venue can be, creating spaces for those who are as serious about the sport and those looking to have fun.

### Female Founder

#### Which female leaders do you admire? Why?

One of the female leaders I admire most is my mom. She's an ophthalmologist who started her own practice, and I've always been inspired by her dedication, work ethic, and commitment to her patients. She saw patients and performed surgeries, balancing the technical demands of her profession with the personal care that her patients needed.

Her determination and resilience have shaped the way I approach challenges in my career. She taught me the importance of perseverance and the value of truly caring about the people you serve. Those are qualities I try to bring into my leadership style.

#### Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?

Mentorship has played a significant role in my professional and personal growth though it often comes from the people I've worked with rather than formal mentors. Throughout my journey, I've had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with individuals from different backgrounds, and those experiences have been invaluable.

### Looking Ahead

#### What would you like to achieve in the next five years?

From a Five Iron perspective, my main goal is to continue refining our operations and making the business more efficient. This includes streamlining our build-outs and site-selection process to scale fast and effectively. I want Five Iron to be successful and a model of efficiency and excellence in the golf and entertainment industry.

In five years, I want to ensure that I still love what I'm doing as much as I do now. I want to feel that same passion, excitement, and fulfillment from my work and the team we've built while seeing the brand thrive.

#### What's coming up that you're excited about?

I'm excited about the new locations opening in 2025 in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. These are major milestones for us as we expand and bring the Five Iron experience to new and existing markets. We've been carefully planning these openings, and I can't wait to see them come to life.

I'm also excited about our pipeline cities. We have promising locations in the works. It's all about building momentum and bringing our unique concept to more people. I'm thrilled to see how these next few years unfold. ■





## DENISE FENTON

*Co-Founder & Brand Director  
Rusty Taco*

### No. of units:

35

### International units:

0

### Growth plans:

To grow multiple locations each year and firmly establish Rusty Taco as one of the top Mexican fast-casual restaurants in the country

### Public or private:

Private

### Year company founded:

2010

### Year started franchising:

2011

### Your years in franchising:

13

As brand director and co-founder of Rusty Taco, Denise Fenton plays a pivotal role in preserving and expanding the legacy she and her late husband, Rusty Fenton, started. Denise is deeply committed to maintaining the authenticity and community-focused spirit that Rusty envisioned when the pair opened their first taco stand in 2010.

Her passion lies in sharing the brand's rich history with potential franchisees, helping them understand and appreciate the vision behind Rusty Taco. Denise collaborates closely with the development team to drive brand growth and recognition while ensuring that Rusty Taco remains true to its roots.

Denise's dedication to the brand is reflected in her efforts to support franchise sales and development processes. She actively engages with current and prospective franchisees, offering guidance and inspiration to those interested in joining the Rusty Taco family. By sharing the brand's story—where it started, where it stands today, and where it's headed—Denise continues to fulfill her dream of seeing Rusty Taco flourish nationwide.

## Beginnings

### What inspired you to start your business?

Rusty had always dreamed of owning his own taco restaurant, a place where we could serve our family, friends, and neighbors our favorite food, tacos. It was important for us to create a welcoming space that felt like part of the community. In 2010, we opened our first location and brought that dream to life.

**What is your background?** I built hands-on experience in the restaurant industry through my early 20s before transitioning to wine sales, gaining insight into the broader food and beverage business. I met Rusty in 1994 when he opened a Mexican restaurant, and the rest is history.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** Both Rusty and I had deep connections to the food and restaurant industry. Rusty had extensive experience, having been one of the founders of Uncle Julio's, and he later worked as a consultant and entrepreneur in various start-ups. Together, we shared a passion for food and hospitality. Our favorite pastimes were watching cook-

ing shows and daydreaming about one day owning a restaurant of our own. Those experiences and shared interests prepared us to build something meaningful together.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice we received was to focus on finding the right location because a good location can make or break a business. The worst advice we received was to try to offer everything to everyone, which ultimately makes it difficult to build a strong, focused brand.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** Our first location was very successful, and we received interest from others who wanted to bring Rusty Taco to their communities. Franchising seemed like a natural next step to help us grow the business quickly, so we decided to pursue it.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Yes, we had a business partner at the time who was instrumental in helping us get off the ground.

**How important was that in building your company?** Having a partner with strong connections to potential investors was incredibly important and was necessary for our growth. He provided us with access to the funding we needed to get started and played a key role in organizing the business structures that supported our early growth.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** In the beginning, we funded the company through investors. As we grew, those relationships continued to be critical to sustaining and scaling the business. In 2014, we sold a majority interest in our brand to Buffalo Wild Wings, which then led to becoming part of Inspire Brands in 2018. Both companies were instrumental in growing the brand through both corporate and franchise growth.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** The keys to funding our brand were building strong relationships with investors and having a clear financial strategy to guide our growth.

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best part of being an entrepreneur is having the freedom to work for yourself and create something meaningful that you truly believe in. The hardest part is taking risks and not always knowing if those risks will pay off.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** Running a franchise business has exceeded my expectations. It has been incredibly rewarding to see so many franchisees believe in what we started and work so hard to grow the brand in their own communities.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** We started by

focusing on making our first location as successful as possible. Once that was established, we began dreaming bigger and looking for opportunities to expand through franchising. As we grew, we learned to adapt our operations and processes to support a system of franchisees while staying true to our original vision.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** The transition from founding to leading the brand came down to building strong teams and surrounding ourselves with people who shared our vision. By focusing on the long-term future of Rusty Taco, we were able to step into leadership roles that allowed the brand to grow and evolve.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** I would describe my leadership style as collaborative. I believe in building strong relationships and providing support to my team and our franchisees so that we can all succeed together.

**What is the key to your company's success?** The key to our success is a combination of great-tasting tacos, simple and efficient operations, innovation to stay on top of trends, and an outstanding guest experience every time.

### Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** Being a woman in a male-dominated industry has challenges, but it can also be an advantage. Often, being the only woman in the room allows you to stand out, which can draw positive attention to the brand. I've also found that my strength in building relationships has been incredibly valuable in fostering connections within the industry.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

One advantage is that it can help you stand out in a male-dominated industry, creating unique opportunities to build relationships and bring a different perspective to the table. At the same time, a disadvantage can be having to work harder to earn recognition and prove yourself as a capable leader, especially in industries where women are underrepresented. However, I've found that staying focused, confident, and committed to my goals has helped me overcome any challenges along the way.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** One of the biggest challenges has been earning recognition as a leader in an industry where leadership roles are often dominated by men. It takes consistent effort to prove yourself and show that you deserve a seat at the table.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** I believe one of the main reasons is that women often face greater challenges than men when it comes to accessing critical resources, such as funding and mentorship opportunities.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Balancing profession-

al responsibilities with personal and family life continues to be one of the most significant challenges for women in the workplace.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** Over the years, I've seen more opportunities for women in franchising than in the past. There are now stronger networks, more resources, and more women in executive leadership roles than when we started.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I greatly admire Sally Smith, the former CEO of Buffalo Wild Wings. When BW W acquired a majority interest in Rusty Taco in 2014, I was inspired by Sally's leadership and her commitment to building a team that included so many talented women. I also admire Kate Japson, the CFO of Inspire Brands. She is approachable, clear, and highly respected in the industry.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Yes, mentorship has played a significant role in my career. I have had the opportunity to work with incredible leaders who believed in me and the vision for Rusty Taco. Many professional relationships have turned into lifelong friendships, which has been personally rewarding.

### Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** I want to see Rusty Taco continue to grow and strengthen its position as a leader in the taco category.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** I'm excited about exploring innovative new taco flavors that will keep our menu fresh and exciting for guests. I'm also looking forward to continuing to support our franchisees and helping them grow their businesses. ■





**ROSALIE  
GUILLEM**  
*Co-Founder & CEO*  
**Le Macaron  
French Pastries**

**No. of units:**  
More than 65

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
To have a location in every state

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2009

**Year started franchising:**  
2012

**Your years in franchising:**  
13

**R**osalie Guillem is the co-founder of Le Macaron French Pastries, the leading French pastries and macaron franchise in the U.S. After spending years perfecting her traditional French macaron pastries with her daughter Audrey, Rosalie decided in 2009 to share her delectable macarons with the American consumer market and opened her first Le Macaron French Pastries boutique in Sarasota, Florida.

She has 15 years of operations experience and more than two decades of experience in the baking, pastry, and franchise industry under her belt, and the business has more than 65 locations. Rosalie has proven herself to be a driven and innovative businesswoman.

### **Beginnings**

**What inspired you to start your business?** My daughter Audrey and I had a dream to share authentic French macarons with the world. When we moved to the U.S. from France, we realized the American's take on macarons was often not true to the French tradition. This drove us to create the

real, authentic French macaron experience. After months of perfecting our recipes with a French-trained pastry chef, we opened our first location in Sarasota, Florida, in 2009.

**What is your background?** I'm originally from the south of France, and I moved to the U.S. with my daughter Audrey. Prior to starting Le Macaron, I had more than 20 years of experience in business management. I always had an entrepreneurial spirit, which eventually led me to the world of French pastries. I also had a career in corporate management before making the leap to pursue my passion full-time.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** Early on with my first job, I had to meet and travel with a lot of people. I was able to learn important skills and learn how to grow the business. We learned the importance of sales and the power of dedication.

Coming to the U.S. taught me how to be adaptable and, early on, showed my dedication to the brand. In addition to being dedicated to the brand, I



## A LEADER SHOULD STAY POSITIVE AND PASSIONATE ABOUT THEIR WORK, INSPIRING OTHERS THROUGH THEIR RESILIENCE AND DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF EVERY ASPECT OF THE BUSINESS.”

put in months learning the language and rebuilding my life in the U.S.

**What’s the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** Never give up! And you can do it. Be able to ask questions so that you can find answers and get motivated.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes, this is my first time franchising.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** I chose to franchise because it allowed others to follow their passions. So many people have dreams of opening a bakery, and our model allows them to do that without the heavy lifting and risk. It allowed me to scale my business quickly while leveraging local knowledge. While there’s a risk of losing some control over the brand, I worked hard to develop a model that ensures consistency and quality across all locations.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Yes, my daughter Audrey and I co-founded the business together.

**How important was that in building your company?** My family has always been my greatest support. They believed in me more than I believed in myself, and their encouragement inspires me daily. They constantly remind me to trust myself, stay confident, and not to worry.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Personal funds.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** The key to funding the brand was knowing that the money was going to something that I believed in. Le Macaron was and is the first and original macaron franchise. Our product is only 80 calories, gluten free, and kosher. I am hands-on and passionate and knew the time and effort would be worth it!

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** In 2009, at the height of the recession, I co-founded Le Macaron French Pastries with my daughter Audrey. Moving to a new country felt like starting over, and I had to rebuild my life from the ground up. I embraced resilience and kept pushing forward. That mindset continues to drive me today.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** Early on, it was frustrating to see that not everyone was willing to work as hard as we did to run the business. It is not enough to just be there a few hours each day. You have to be motivated to have success in your store even if the business model is perfect.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** I was selling the concept, but now, as a grandmother, I am having the next generation, like my son Gregory, help with franchising. I motivated and showed my family how to work, and it’s rewarding to leave this legacy to them.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** Now, I offer more guidance than day-to-day work. I help my franchisees to grow and succeed. As I mentioned above, I have found trustworthy people to continue to grow the brand.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** A leader should stay positive and passionate about their work, inspiring others through their resilience and deep understanding of every aspect of the business. A true leader shares their experiences and knowledge with those eager to learn, helping others grow personally and professionally. It’s important to remember that being a leader doesn’t mean having all the answers. Never hesitate to ask questions and keep learning.

**What is the key to your company’s success?** Everyone loves macarons: children, teenagers, adults, families, and business people. We encourage our franchise owners to cater special events, like birthday parties, weddings, showers, anniversary parties, and local society functions. We are in our own category and offer the best product. We make more than 30,000 macarons a day plus pastries and gelato, and we are excited for more people to try it nationwide. I was willing to work hard, and I was supported by people who shared my passion and dedication.

### Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** Neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. When you know your goals and what you want, you work to achieve them!

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

No, I do not consider that being a woman is less or more advantageous in the business world.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** Running so much at the beginning was hard because there was less time for me to be a mother. Now, as a leader of the company, I have put myself in a position to be around the things I love and enjoy them.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** It takes a lot of confidence to be a founder. Alongside my daughter, I worked to push us as founders. Through my family, books I read, and listening to people, I have gained more confidence and ability to make good decisions.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** It’s important to me to uplift other women and advocate for equal opportunities. We are proud to be a woman-founded company and still led by my daughter and me.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** The franchising industry has continued to grow and become more inclusive. However, women still make up a minority of franchise owners and founders. I have seen a variety of women leaders speak on the grit and hard work it takes to be a woman founder.

It is nice to see women willing to become business owners and be supported by their families to develop a return of the family business model.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I admire Simone Veil and Marie Curie. Both of whom were strong, resilient French women!

### Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** We would like to continue to grow the brand and expand to all 50 states. We want to make sure people across the states know we make our own high-quality macarons, classic pastries, creamy gelato, and handmade candies. Consumers should know us for our high-quality products that remain consistent across the board at every franchise location. Entering a Le Macaron location will get you great food and an amazing experience.

We want to help our franchisees be successful, become multi-unit owners, and spread passion for our product.

**What’s coming up that you’re excited about?** We love giving Americans the chance to discover and taste authentic French macarons and pastries, so we’re excited for our continued growth across the states. We have new locations coming this year in Nevada, Illinois, California, and Georgia. We’re thrilled to have people try our menu offerings. We also just announced an amazing partnership with Leonidas Chocolate and will have exciting new menu developments later this year. ■





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CONGRATULATIONS to the initial recipients of the 2025 Franchise Customer Experience Certification, validating practices that drive franchisee profitability through outstanding franchisee and consumer experience.







## DR. VANESSA HELFRICH

**Co-Founder & CFO**  
**100% Chiropractic**

**System-wide revenue:**  
\$65 million

**No. of units:**  
118

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
500 in 5 years

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2004

**Year started franchising:**  
2015

**Your years in franchising:**  
10

**D**r. Vanessa Helfrich is a dynamic entrepreneur and the co-founder and CFO of 100% Chiropractic, a rapidly growing chiropractic franchise with nearly 120 locations across 25 states. Alongside her husband, Dr. Jason Helfrich, Vanessa has built a thriving business revolutionizing the chiropractic industry.

In addition to her work with 100% Chiropractic, Vanessa is a founder and partner in several successful ventures, including Chiro HD, a software company (Series A), Elevate Marketing, a full-service marketing agency, 100% Nutrition, a leading nutritional supplement brand, and Epic Chiropractic Billing, a top billing company. Vanessa has successfully navigated Series A recaps for her franchise (Red Iron Group) and software company (Ridgepeak).

A dedicated mother of three boys, she is passionate about balancing family life with her commitment to business innovation and growth.

### Beginnings

#### What inspired you to start your business?

Both of my parents, my grandfather, and my aunt are chiropractors. I have a deep passion for the profession, and it's my mission to do my part in elevating chiropractic as the primary healthcare model worldwide.

**What is your background?** I have had an entrepreneurial spirit from the beginning. After graduating from the University of Denver with a degree in hotel/restaurant/tourism, I opened my first business (a restaurant) at the age of 22. However, I soon realized that the restaurant industry didn't align

with my goals or the legacy I wanted to create. At 25, my husband and I packed up our baby and headed to Davenport, Iowa, to go to chiropractic college. Four years and two more babies later, I graduated, and we returned to our roots in Colorado Springs, Colorado, to open our first practice. With no money to our name, we started in the same building where my mother practiced, sharing resources, like the x-ray unit and massage room, but maintaining our own systems and business operations. In the manual, we wrote down every system that worked. By 2006, we purchased my mother's practice and expanded into the neighboring space. In 2008, we opened a second location with Dr. Brandon Livin-good and his wife, Rebecca, who are still part of the company today. Our business continued to grow, and by 2015, when we had 26 locations, we officially transitioned to a franchise model.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** The restaurant venture prepared us for success in chiropractic. It taught us about real-world business, including staffing, marketing, managing vendors, creating a positive customer experience, and handling the highs and lows. While I had a great degree from a prestigious institution, what you learn in school differs greatly from real-world experience. I learned more in that year of owning the restaurant than in four years of school.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** I remember my senior year of college when the professors were completely against entrepreneurship. Maybe things have changed since then, but at the time, the message was all about working for large franchises and climbing the corporate ladder. I'm glad I didn't listen to that advice. I'm an entrepreneur at heart, and not taking the risk of opening my businesses would have crushed my spirit.

**Was this your first time in franchising? Why did you choose to franchise?** Franchising was never our initial vision when we started out. It evolved after 11 years of practice and opening locations in partnership with doctors. We only pursued franchising after our attorneys recommended it.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Yes! My ride-or-die hubby, Jason. We've been partners in everything we've done since we met when I was 16!

**How important was that in building your company?** I can't even begin to express how important this was. During this adventure, we had three boys and couldn't even imagine affording a full-time nanny, so we had to split our workdays to ensure one of us was always holding down the fort at home. This essentially meant we were relying on a single income, which was often scary, but it let us spend quality time with our boys and be fully present for everything we wanted to be part of in their lives. I feel so blessed to have had that balance!

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**WHILE I HAD A GREAT DEGREE FROM A PRESTIGIOUS INSTITUTION, WHAT YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL DIFFERS GREATLY FROM REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE. I LEARNED MORE IN THAT YEAR OF OWNING THE RESTAURANT THAN IN FOUR YEARS OF SCHOOL.”**

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** We had no extra money for any investments—we were so scrappy. The financial incentives we gave the first few investors were crazy. Our initial growth happened during an economic downturn, which worked in our favor. Landlords offered substantial tenant improvement allowances, and we negotiated some incredible lease deals. At the time, we could open a practice for around \$60,000. We always paid our investors, and they consistently reinvested with us. We got creative, kept our promises, and built a strong foundation for future investments with this core group of individuals.

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best and hardest thing has been the relationships. Relationships that start out as professional can feel incredibly deep one day and like betrayal the next. My heart is genuine, and I never want my business relationships to remain strictly professional. As a mother, I naturally tend to create families around me from all different aspects of my life. I often feel like a mother or older sister to my franchisees, team, partners, and others. It's the most rewarding and challenging part of what I do. Despite the hurt it has sometimes brought, I have no plans to change this.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** I'm not sure I had any specific

expectations. Over the past 20 years, it's evolved into what it is today. One thing that surprised me was my long-held belief that systems run the practice, and people run the systems. It may seem simplistic to think that systems alone create success. I've come to realize that the people part of the equation can be an even bigger key to success than the systems.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** At first, our growth was entirely organic. We grew slowly, and then around 2018, things began to ramp up. In 2020, we opened our company to nonowner-operated clinics, many of which came through franchise brokers and outside sources. While we had built our company on opening nonowner-operated clinics (prefranchise) and had several company-owned clinics ourselves, the challenges of having owners unfamiliar with the chiropractic philosophy turned out to be larger than we had anticipated.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** I'm not sure there's a difference there. Jason and I have always led our business even when it was just our chiropractic clinic in Colorado Springs. We've led the brand from day 1!

**How would you describe your leadership style?** Our franchisees and staff are partners in our vision. I don't believe in simply telling or demanding. Everyone moves in the same direction when they understand the "why." It's the same approach I take with parenting. Jason and I certainly lead and make decisions we feel are best, but we always explain the reasoning behind them, keeping in mind the company's interests and the well-being of the individuals who run it. Whether franchisees or staff agree with us or not, I truly believe that, deep down, they know our intentions are always what's best for them and, ultimately, the company.

**What is the key to your company's success?** The key to our success is culture and connection. Since we opened our second location 16 years ago, we held quarterly in-person doctor and franchisee meetings called Tribes. These Tribes were essential in connecting everyone within the company. In 2023, we reduced these meetings to twice a year with optional spring and fall training sessions. Since making this change, I feel the culture has taken somewhat of a hit. Chiropractors are inherently "people" people, and we often feel isolated when we're not connected. We have a unique perspective on health. I realized that even those who aren't chiropractors need this connection too. When we come together, it truly fills our cups.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** It's mostly an advantage. The balance of energy that Jason and I bring to the leadership has been really important. As I mentioned earlier, Jason and I tend to create a family dynamic in whatever we're involved in, whether it's 100%, the youth sports organizations we started, or our real family!

The disadvantages are a bit more classic. Many still default to Jason as the driver of the company and assume I'm the sidekick—more than I'd like to admit. While it bothers me at times, I've gained more confidence as I've gotten older and realized that's on them, not me.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

I've found that it depends on the personality of the person I'm communicating with. Some trust me right off the bat because I'm a woman, and many patients were this way. However, others preferred Jason just because he's a man. I've learned to embrace the good and bad of being a female entrepreneur. The bias can be crazy. It used to bother me, but now we just laugh it off. Generally, it takes time for some people to realize that Jason and I share a 50/50 leadership. We just have different approaches and communication styles.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** Truthfully, I don't feel there has been any related to my being a woman.

**Why do you think there are fewer startups with female founders than male ones?**

Work-life balance is more important to women. I've communicated with numerous women in our company, so this isn't just a vibe. Balancing family and work is a challenge, and I understand how starting a business from scratch on your own can be scary and daunting.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?**

One of the biggest challenges I've faced, along with countless other women in our company, is managing both our work baby and our real babies simultaneously. I've seen many women start their businesses, achieve great success, start their families, and then struggle with the balance. I mean, truly struggle. When a business depends so much on the personality and passion of its owner, shifting focus to starting a family can be a huge shock. When the new mother shifts her attention back to the work baby, feelings of guilt often arise about not being fully present for her children at home. Many tears have been shed at Tribes by our female franchisees and clinic directors.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?**

In our 100% system, I've noticed that few women chiropractors are interested in starting their own clinics and are leaning toward becoming clinic directors or associates (employees). I'm not sure if it's a generational shift, but I hope to encourage women to continue pursuing entrepreneurship. The joy of owning your own business, whether you're male or female, is so rewarding.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?**

My mother was the owner of her own chiropractic office for more than 40 years. I've looked up to her since I was a little girl. She modeled success as a female entrepreneur and had the work-life balance down. Her patients loved her, and she created an amazing life for herself, my sister, and me. She made

it look easy though I know it wasn't. She devoted her life to making the community healthier and better by transforming lives through chiropractic care.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Absolutely, 100%. When Jason and I graduated, we didn't have a dollar to our name, and I'm not kidding. As I mentioned, my mother owned her building for her chiropractic clinic. She allowed us to move into Suite A and share her x-ray unit and massage room. She lent us money to live on and gave us the opportunity to become entrepreneurs from day one. This, along with her professional and personal mentorship, inspired Jason and me to do the same for other chiropractors who couldn't afford to start their own businesses right out of school. This is how we structured our first 26 clinics. We were the investors, funding their startup investments, providing the structure, and creating a path to owning a successful practice by sharing profits with them. We still have a similar model today, now called the Hub. We, or one of our consultants, will financially back and help guarantee leases, providing financial support to these doctors with a small deposit from them (it used to be no money down). All that's required is their sweat equity.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?**

In the next five years, we aim to at least double the company. Through our partnership with Red Iron Group, we plan to continue our vision of spreading quality chiropractic care across the nation and, eventually, the world. We also look forward to the rest of our sons joining the company (one is already working with us in our 100% Nutrition branch) and carrying forward our vision of passing the legacy torch to them in whatever capacity they choose. Our oldest just graduated from chiropractic college and will open his first 100% clinic alongside his fiancée, Juliana, later this month!

**What's coming up that you're excited about?**

We're working on our new regional development program, which we'll be rolling out later this month! Along with that, we initiated a full marketing revamp for our clinics in Q4 of 2024, and I truly believe this will help launch our franchised clinics to even greater success! ■





**HEATHER HUDSON**  
**COO & Co-Founder**  
**Striking Brands**  
**(9Round Kickboxing Fitness/  
 I Love Kickboxing)**

**No. of units:**  
 330

**International units:**  
 130 (out of the 330)

**Growth plans:**  
 To double down on international growth, to expand the use of new patent-pending technology for workouts that allows studios to be open 24/7, 365 days a year, and to spread the word about our recently acquired franchise, I Love Kickboxing

**Public or private:**  
 Private

**Year company founded:**  
 2008

**Year started franchising:**  
 2009

**Your years in franchising:**  
 15

Heather “The Hero” Hudson is the COO of Striking Brands, which houses the popular fitness franchises 9Round Kickboxing Fitness and I Love Kickboxing. She is committed to helping franchise partners achieve their financial goals through effective communication, streamlined operations, and scalable business systems. She is dedicated to helping others realize that their fitness and professional goals are achievable.

Growing up with a passion for fitness and wellness, Heather sought effective results from her exercise program after having two children. She discovered kickboxing fitness and fell in love with it, earning black belts in two martial arts styles. This passion led her to co-found 9Round with her husband, creating the world’s largest kickboxing fitness franchise.

Her favorite aspect of working with fitness programs is the ability to assist both beginners and advanced members. Her commitment to helping others extends beyond the studio, and she shares her story during speaking engagements.

Today, she draws strength from her humble beginnings and present-day life, which she shares with her husband of 17 years and two amazing children.

**Beginnings**

**What inspired you to start your business?** My husband! My husband, Shannon, is a pro fighter in

kickboxing and boxing and has a savvy business mind. He passionately wanted to create a workout that was true to his roots and engineer it to be franchised, so we started with that end in mind. I have always loved fitness as I’m extremely active, so when he proposed for this to be our livelihood, I was all in.

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**MY BACKGROUND WAS NOTHING BUT BEING SCRAPPY AND RESOURCEFUL, AND I BELIEVE ALL THE TOUGH TIMES PREPARED ME TO HANDLE WHAT WE HAD TO DO TO MAKE THIS WORK.”**

**What is your background?** I did not have the privilege to even consider college and always knew it was not an option, so I am self-taught. I grew up on welfare, living in Section 8 housing and using food stamps as a child, so I have never been handed anything. My success has all been created by my blood, sweat, and tears.

When my husband and I threw ourselves into the franchising world, we became students of that world. We became obsessed with studying other franchises, other leaders, and other brands (successful and not), and we did a lot of building the plane as we were flying it. It was crazy, but here we are.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** My background was nothing but being scrappy and resourceful, and I believe all the tough times prepared me to handle what we had to do to make this work.

We weren't ready for what it meant to be a franchisor in 2009, but there was no other way for us to do it. We were in a recession and on a shoestring budget, but we knew we had a winner. We didn't have a plan B, but we had grit, so that's what kept us going.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** Oh, boy, I don't remember being aware enough to ask anyone for advice before we did this. We were such a good team; we knew we could count on ourselves, and we didn't run the idea past anyone else. Ha, maybe that was a good thing. They might have tried to talk us out of it.

The worst advice I ever got when we first began was that franchise agreements should be customized for each location—kind of a “beggars can't be choosers” mentality and absolutely wrong. Franchising is all about duplication and consistency: copy, paste, copy, paste. The customer wants all the locations to be the same so that they know what they're getting from the brand. Likewise, the franchisor needs all of their franchisees to operate the same so that they can focus on support and growth. Changing up the franchise agreement for each owner created a ton of unnecessary work. New franchisors: Don't do that!

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Oh, yes!

**Why did you choose to franchise?** Franchising was the only way to grow as fast as we did without owning all of the locations. If we had tried to

expand by owning them all, we might have 10 or 20—tops. But with other people investing their funds and faith in our brand, we were able to scale quickly. We would not be in 17 countries without going the franchise route.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** No, just the two of us!

**How important was that in building your company?** It gave us a chance to learn how we each work in a business sense and find our strengths and weaknesses early on. It also gave us total control over what we were creating. There was no board to answer to, just ourselves and our franchisees.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Yes, as we grew. We opened our first gym with about \$15,000. It was sparse to say the least! When we made a little profit, we bought a channel sign and put it on the building. When we made a little more money, we bought a better front desk. Finally, we used profit to begin the franchising process.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** Again, totally self-funded except for a small loan from a friend, which we paid back before we started taking profit home. From there, we took every bit of profit and put it into growing. Eventually, we spent around \$10,000 on our franchise documents and started awarding territories. To this day, we have no debt on the company.

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** Hardest: Since my entrepreneurial experience has only been as a franchisor, the difficult part was not having people to talk to about how to do it right. There aren't many franchisors who are successful and have time to tell you what to do when you're starting or how to pivot when you're starting to mature, etc. So, it has been very lonely at times.

Best: I wouldn't trade everything I've learned about business and myself through this crazy ride for almost anything. I didn't need a college degree; I earned my master's degree by living this life. I can take what I've learned and apply it to almost anything or any business and do great things. It has been phenomenal for me.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** The most important thing I've learned is that to be a great franchisor, you need to be great at understanding and communicating with people. Collaborating with humans is hard. It's an art. You need to bend and be flexible even though the goal is all about scaling brand standards exactly as the franchisor says. That's not real life. In real life, you have to get buy-in. You have to communicate well with empathy and thoroughness so that your franchise partners understand why you're asking them to pivot and do this new thing. You have to anticipate their fears and proactively soothe them.

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**I WOULDN'T TRADE EVERYTHING I'VE LEARNED ABOUT BUSINESS AND MYSELF THROUGH THIS CRAZY RIDE FOR ALMOST ANYTHING. I DIDN'T NEED A COLLEGE DEGREE; I EARNED MY MASTER'S DEGREE BY LIVING THIS LIFE.”**

You hope they will want to follow and not have to be pushed.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** Our growth was organic. We had members of 9Round asking us if they could own one too. So, the vibe of 9Round sold itself. There was no social media yet and definitely no Google ads. It was old-fashioned word of mouth and face-to-face selling. It also felt very “mom and pop” in the beginning. Once, we used my kitchen chairs in a business meeting—for crying out loud—when we were selling to potential franchisees because we didn't have office furniture. I think our down-to-earth nature and the fun energy in our gym made up for what we lacked in polish. As we grew, got an official HQ office, and brought more third-party services in-house, it was more fun, more organized, and definitely a little easier to run than during the early days. But growth brought more challenges. The more locations you have, the more things are happening: some good, some not. So, you're pulled in more directions than ever. I never knew how much workload I could handle and what pace I could operate at until I became a franchisor. It was a lot more than I ever thought possible.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** It wasn't overnight. For the first few years, my husband and I worked as fitness trainers six days a week and cleaned it on Sunday. Simultaneously, we worked as franchisors (two very different parts of the brain). I remember

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**WE DIDN'T HAVE A PLAN B, BUT WE HAD GRIT, SO THAT'S WHAT KEPT US GOING.”**



when we got our first Saturday off. It was so luxurious. One day, I looked up and realized that I was not in the trenches working in the business, but I was working on the business. Slowly, I delegated more and took on new and necessary things. I know about every aspect of the business firsthand even though I no longer have to implement all of those aspects. That's a good thing because it means I can always know whether or not the business is healthy even when I'm not there.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** I'm very detail oriented and process driven. I use laughter to mitigate stress, so I'm always joking with our team. I am down-to-earth because I came from such a frugal background, but I'm strong-willed because I know what hard work is: If we want to succeed, it won't fall in our laps. Anyone can be successful. Anyone. There is nothing special about me except that my work ethic massively improved as I realized what it took to be on top.

**What is the key to your company's success?** My husband and I. As founders, we have a steely determination to keep the purity of our brand preserved while learning when to bend. But that wouldn't be enough if we didn't have franchise partners who also reflect that in their ownership. They put it all on the line, just like my husband and I did before we even had a website. We don't take that for granted. We appreciate our franchisees more than ever. Gratitude for them can never be something you forget.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** A huge advantage. Being a woman is amazing! Our company has a very balanced office culture of genders because my husband and I have an even percentage of ownership, and that mentality spread into our team, which I love. It also spread into our franchisee ownership group. We have a lot of life partners doing the franchise thing together.

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**WE APPRECIATE OUR FRANCHISEES MORE THAN EVER. GRATITUDE FOR THEM CAN NEVER BE SOMETHING YOU FORGET.”**

It's great to see. We have as many women as men on our leadership team. Lastly, while we have coed fitness brands, most of our clients are women, and I can tap into their minds because I see myself in them and vice versa.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?** I can bring some much-needed levelheadedness and words of wisdom to a “ready, aim, fire” situation because that's the nature of the female mind. Disadvantages can be there for sure. I've been overlooked probably because I was always in high heels with blonde hair and possibly not taken seriously. I was told once that I wasn't the kickboxer in our business, so my signature wasn't needed on a collateral document. My husband thought this was ludicrous, of course.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** The same as a man's. It's just plain hard but rewarding.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** I know exactly why. I work with a local nonprofit that supports entrepreneur start-ups and have been surprised by all I have learned during my first few months with them. In the U.S., women have only been allowed to own businesses without a male co-signer since 1988. I didn't believe this when I heard it, so I looked it up, and it's true. That was when the Women's Business Ownership Act (WBOA) was signed by President Ronald Reagan. So, women's opportunity to solely start businesses has only been an option for fewer than 40 years. This is why you don't see as many female founders; we have a lot of catching up to do.

Also, most investors are men and tend to invest more in male entrepreneurs and their ideas. We need more females in private equity and investing because they'll better understand the ideas women bring to the market and likely find it easier to support them. This is a big ship to turn.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Having different labels than men for certain behaviors: “bossy” versus “being a leader” or “emotional” versus “passionate.”

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** Mel Robbins is relatable as hell and always manages to nail it with her advice. I love her and got to meet her when she was our keynote speaker at our world convention in 2018! Another woman I admire for being so strong is Oprah Winfrey.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** It's always good to learn from those who've already gone where you're headed. I've had different types of mentors throughout my career and highly recommend them. They're not always easy to find, so reading and learning from videos and podcasts is like having a mentor. I will always continue learning via those methods. I am also passionate about the importance of personal therapy. Whatever issues

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**I AM ALSO PASSIONATE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL THERAPY. WHATEVER ISSUES YOU DON'T RESOLVE IN YOUR OWN HEAD, YOU BRING TO THE BOARDROOM, SO I BELIEVE MENTAL HEALTHCARE IS CRITICAL FOR EVERYONE, INCLUDING LEADERS.”**

you don't resolve in your own head, you bring to the boardroom, so I believe mental healthcare is critical for everyone, including leaders.

## Looking Ahead

**What's coming up that you're excited about?**

I'm finishing up the details of the design for my first book! Of all things, it's not a business book; it's a novel. The theme is domestic noir/psychological thriller, and it advocates mental health awareness via literary fiction based on true events. I will release it this year, and I couldn't be more excited. I never planned on writing anything but a self-help or business book, yet this story chose me to tell it, so here we are.

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** I want to be a known author for sure, and I wouldn't mind being on both Oprah and Mel Robbins' podcasts! ■



## RACHEL KATZMAN

Founder  
Pvolve

**No. of units:**  
19

**International units:**  
2 in Canada

**Growth plans:**  
We have more than 55 franchise commitments across North America and are actively advancing our growth strategy to scale operations. By prioritizing real-life experiences, we are deepening community engagement and solidifying Pvolve's presence as a leader in the fitness industry

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2017

**Year started franchising:**  
2019

**Your years in franchising:**  
2

After countless fitness classes to get in shape during college, Rachel Katzman wasn't seeing the results she wanted and felt exhausted. It was during this time that Rachel found out she had scoliosis, which was being exacerbated by intense fitness classes.

Everything changed when Rachel found functional fitness. This type of fitness method uses movements that work with the body's natural function, not against it. This epiphany gave Rachel a bright idea. She wanted to harness the power of functional fitness to create a method that could help people better understand their bodies and achieve incredible results. And so, Pvolve was born.

Rachel grew up around entrepreneurs and embraced the business world. She recognized that franchising allowed her company to scale quickly while maintaining quality. Over the past two years, Pvolve has expanded in the U.S. and Canada with more studios in the development pipeline.

### Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?**  
After being diagnosed with scoliosis, I discovered the transformative power of functional movement, which left me feeling and looking better than ever. Seeing people of all ages experience similar benefits inspired me to create a method that could help so many others. From there, I developed a product and

business model that allows people to experience the Pvolve method in person at studios and from the comfort of their own homes.

**What is your background?** I grew up in Michigan surrounded by entrepreneurs who inspired my passion for building and innovating. That environment sparked my drive to create something meaningful, blending creativity with problem-solving to bring new ideas to life.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** It taught me the value of resilience, creativity, and hard work. It instilled a mindset of seeing challenges as opportunities, and it inspired my passion for innovation, which became the foundation for building a business that breaks the mold and solves real problems.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** Best advice: "Fail fast." It's okay to make mistakes. That's how we learn and grow as long as you're willing to pivot and move on quickly.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes, and I'm incredibly glad we chose this route with Pvolve. Franchising has allowed us to connect with new and existing franchisees passionate about bringing the Pvolve method to their local markets. It's also given them the opportunity to take ownership in the business, which has been a powerful motivator.



**Why did you choose to franchise?** The decision to franchise was driven by our desire to offer franchisees opportunities to own the business. People who are passionate about the Pvolve method can bring it to life in their communities in unique ways and maintain the integrity of our brand. Additionally, we recognized that franchising was the best path to rapidly scale while maintaining the high quality we're known for. Our goal is for Pvolve to be experienced globally in whatever way people prefer, whether in person at a studio or through other offerings.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Since the early days, Julie Cartwright, Pvolve president, has been alongside me.

**How important was that in building your company?** Julie has been crucial in building Pvolve from the ground up. With her extensive career and fitness experience, she brought invaluable leadership skills that helped shape our vision and strategy. Her passion for the brand is unmatched, and her work ethic is relentless: She never quits. The solid foundation we've built together has gotten us to where we are today and will continue to propel us forward as we grow.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** We started nimble and scrappy to prove our concept. Once we started to gain traction with our online platform, our studio, and the press, we reinvested in the business. We are fortunate to have investment from Camelot Venture Group, which has been with us since the beginning and supported our mission as we've grown.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** Having a product that is unlike anything else out there and fills a real need in the market was just the beginning. I knew we had something special when we started seeing proof points, like members sharing how transformational the method has been for their lives and how it has opened up new ways for them to move their bodies. Women in their 50s started telling us they've never felt better. I knew we had something special. We haven't stopped growing since.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** It's rewarding to see your baby come to life: taking an idea and watching it become real. As the company grows, so does the pressure and accountability you place on yourself and the team members you're responsible for.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** I am obsessed with this side of the business. Meeting and working with people who are as passionate as I am has been a dream come true.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** In the beginning, we focused on building a strong foundation by creating a quality product that resonated. We leveraged social media, word of mouth, and a growing press presence to spread the word. It was about start-

ing small but in a meaningful way. Once we saw success in various areas, we leaned into them with investments in influencer marketing and events. As we grew, we adapted our strategies to further scale while staying true to what made Pvolve special.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** As the company grew, I needed to learn to get out of the weeds and let people do their jobs without micromanaging. In the beginning, you wear all the hats, but as you scale, you hire for those hats, and you need to believe and trust in your team. It's hard to let go, but it's necessary for growth.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** Passionate, collaborative, inspirational.

**What is the key to your company's success?** Our team's relentless work ethic, passion, and dedication drive us forward, and we are fortunate to have the support of a growing community that has experienced transformational results from this method. We will continue to innovate and stay true to our core values while being adaptable to our members' needs.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** It has been both an advantage and a challenge in different ways. On one hand, being a woman has allowed me to connect with other women entrepreneurs and customers, creating a sense of community and shared experience. On the other hand, navigating a space historically dominated by men sometimes presents unique challenges. Ultimately, it's about the work ethic, vision, and passion you bring to the table that I choose to focus on.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?** A key advantage is that it allows me to relate to, inspire, and be inspired by other female entrepreneurs, including our Pvolve owners. These women are a constant source of inspiration for me.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** I think one key theme is not feeling like you're ready or "qualified enough." There's this pressure to have everything figured out before taking that leap, but the truth is, you're never fully ready or perfectly qualified. Taking that first step is often the hardest part, and once you do it, everything else starts to fall into place. It's about overcoming self-doubt and trusting that the process will teach you what you need to know along the way. That doesn't mean you won't stumble or fall down, but it's about building that confidence and knowledge that you will get up stronger than before.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Echoing from above, confidence is key. It's also important to stop comparing yourself and focus on your journey. Believe in your abilities and recognize your unique value.

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**WE WILL CONTINUE TO INNOVATE AND STAY TRUE TO OUR CORE VALUES WHILE BEING ADAPTABLE TO OUR MEMBERS' NEEDS.”**

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** Growth! I am so lucky to be surrounded by a growing female community of business owners.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Having mentors to lean on has been a guiding force in my personal and professional success. I am so thankful for them. That support system is critical.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** In the next five years, I would love to see Pvolve become a household name with studios opening domestically and internationally. I'm excited about the potential for impactful results from our clinical research, and I look forward to transforming lives through our method. Our mission is to make Pvolve accessible to as many people as possible, and I'm eager to see how we continue to grow and inspire positive change worldwide.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** I'm excited about so many things coming up! First, we're launching new products and programs that align with our mission to future-proof our members' bodies and lives. We're also incredibly bullish on supporting women at every stage of life, and we plan to continue innovating in this space while increasing our focus on clinical research and expertise in the industry. Additionally, we have many new studio locations opening up, allowing us to expand our reach and bring Pvolve to more communities. The future is bright, and we're eager to see how these initiatives will impact our members. ■



**ALLISON  
LANGENDERFER**  
*Co-Founder  
Spavia Day Spa*

**System-wide revenue:**  
\$2.9 million

**No. of units:**  
61

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
Expanding through franchising with new locations and partnerships

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2005

**Year started franchising:**  
2007

**Your years in franchising:**  
8

Allison Langenderfer is president and co-founder of Spavia Day Spa. Allison is the passionate leader of Spavia, focusing on design, creative, and spa retail. Allison is a graduate of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, with an emphasis in marketing. She has a lifelong belief in a learning-by-doing attitude that has fueled personal growth throughout her career. Before founding Spavia, Allison was a professional buyer and regional manager for Macy's, followed by a successful 12-year career in pharmaceutical sales.

Allison drives the passion of Spavia and inspires the community of franchise partners and team members around the nation. She has a personal passion for developing Spavia's curated retail experience by building an amazing network of partners with world-class products. Allison's market-driven approach includes skin-care solutions along with relaxation products and great gifts to make Spavia a go-to retail option in the community.

She also believes in helping communities with the Spavia Cares program. Allison's greatest personal success can be found at home with her three children, who are now starting to forge careers of their own.

**Beginnings**

**What inspired you to start your business?** Our mission was clear: We wanted to provide a space where people could relax comfortably and affordably. We also wanted to give back to the community. Initiatives like Spavia Cares were integral from the start. Our very first location was planned

to host a relaxation day for 10 women whose children were battling cancer, and we knew from that moment that we wanted to incorporate some sort of giving back to our community. Staying true to these core values has shaped our journey, allowing us to offer affordable luxury without compromising on quality.

**What is your background?** I graduated from California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, with a business degree with an emphasis in marketing. My professional journey began in retail, and I worked as a manager, regional manager, and buyer for major brands, including Macy's. Transitioning to pharmaceutical sales was pivotal. It taught me how to connect with people and solve problems effectively. Those experiences helped me understand the importance of aligning products and services with customer needs, which became crucial when creating Spavia. All my career has revolved around being results driven and enhancing the guest experience.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** My background gave me a strong foundation in understanding consumer behavior and operational efficiency. I combined my expertise with Marty Langenderfer, my husband, co-founder, and CEO of Spavia, by focusing on marketing, guest experience, culture, and design while Marty brought the financial, operations, and strategic lens. Together, we took the time to research other concepts in the industry and understand what guests truly wanted. This thorough preparation was a part of our success.



**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** Worst: "You can't franchise because you're not from the spa industry." It didn't make sense, but I found that statement motivating.

Best: While I didn't receive one stand-out piece of advice, the best support came from surrounding myself with trustworthy people who believed in our vision. Building a solid network of collaboration and support was invaluable.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes, we knew from the start that franchising was the best way to scale to our communities while maintaining our core values.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** From day one, our goal was to build a system that could reach people in a resort-inspired atmosphere without compromising on quality. Franchising allowed us to empower like-minded business owners to bring Spavia to their communities while staying true to our mission and vision.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started? How important was that in building your company?** Yes, Marty has been my partner and co-founder since the beginning. Having a partner who shares your vision and complements your strengths is essential. Our ability to stay in our respective lanes has been one of the main keys to Spavia's success. We know our strengths and weaknesses in the business. After 20 years, the strengths have grown, and the weaknesses have lessened.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** We were self-funded. Marty's career provided the financial backbone to get us off the ground. This allowed us to focus on long-term growth rather than chasing quick wins.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best part is the ability to make a meaningful difference, whether it's creating a welcoming environment for guests or building a community among our franchisees. Seeing the positive impact on people's lives is incredibly rewarding. The hardest part is the weight of responsibility. As a business owner, everything ultimately falls on you. Covid, for instance, tested our resilience, but it also strengthened our franchise community. A sense of responsibility continues to drive both Marty and me.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** It takes hard work. No one will ever share your exact level of passion or drive for your brand. I've learned to lead with that passion even when it's challenging and to trust in our team to carry out our mission.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** We grew organically, focusing on finding the right franchisees who aligned with our vision and core values. In the early days, we personally managed the process. Over time, we built a system and brought on incredible

team members: Chief Marketing Officer Dana Benfield, Chief Operating Officer Courtney Allison, and Director of Franchise Development Karyn White help us get better as a company and define and expand our approach, reinforcing our strong systems to run a Spavia franchise successfully.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** After 17 years as an owner, I transitioned fully to leadership when we sold our Park Meadows, Colorado, location in 2019. This allowed me to focus on supporting franchisees and guiding the brand's growth. I make it a priority to attend every grand opening. It's essential to be present, teach our franchisees the culture and the guest experience, and show them that we're here to support them. I love being in the day-to-day of the business.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** Hands-on and people focused.

**What is the key to your company's success?** The right franchisees, a strong sense of purpose, and resilience. Our success stems from staying true to our values even during challenging times. We prioritize relationships with our guests, franchisees, and communities.

## Female Founder

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?** Being a woman in business has come with both challenges and advantages. In the spa industry, which is largely female driven and nurturing by nature, being a woman allowed me to connect authentically, foster an environment of care, and build a brand that reflects empathy. Listening, preparing, and confidently sharing my vision have helped turn challenges into opportunities and made achievements meaningful.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** Being underestimated. At times, I felt people assumed I didn't know what I was talking about. I've learned to listen carefully and speak decisively when the time is right, and what I say sometimes surprises people.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** Systemic barriers and a lack of representation in leadership roles can discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurial paths. However, I'm seeing that change considerably in a positive way!

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Achieving equal recognition and opportunities in leadership positions. We have made a lot of progress and continue to see women of leadership in the spa industry, driving positive change.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** When we started Spavia, there were far fewer women in leadership roles, but today, women are stepping into franchise ownership and executive positions, bringing diverse per-

spectives and strengths. The industry has support systems, mentorship opportunities, and recognition for women's contributions.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I admire Mel Robbins for her authenticity and practical approach to life and business. I'm also inspired by female founders we partner with in our industry, like the women behind FarmHouse Fresh, who have built meaningful brands while staying true to their values. They also have a big philanthropic segment to their business through their animal sanctuary.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Mentorship, both receiving and giving, provides purpose to do more, be better, and leave a strong legacy. Mentorship has significantly shaped my growth by providing guidance, perspective, and encouragement, helping me navigate challenges and achieve goals both professionally and personally.

**Are you involved in any female entrepreneur organizations?** While I'm not part of a specific organization, I'm deeply committed to supporting women-led nonprofits and businesses through Spavia Cares. From partnering with organizations, like Zuma's Rescue Ranch and Hope House, to featuring female-founded brands, such as Essence One, Pure Fiji, The Beauty of Hope, Love You More Jewelry, and FarmHouse Fresh, I'm proud to champion businesses that have philanthropy at their core. Women can move mountains, and as I always say, "Power to the She." Supporting female entrepreneurs is one of the most fulfilling ways to create meaningful impact.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** In five years, I envision Spavia having grown its footprint with more franchisees who align with our mission and having new offerings to elevate our guest experience.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** Sway by Spavia, the full-service, revolutionary new spa concept created to redefine the spa experience for young generations, is by far the most exciting development on the horizon. Opening its flagship location this February in Denver, the concept will offer the best in skin-care technology, massage and Aescape (robot massage), and remedy technology with a membership model focused on affordability to meet health and wellness needs tailored to Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha in urban cities. I'm also thrilled about the ongoing expansion of Spavia and the incredible opportunities it brings for all surrounding communities. ■



## ANDREA LEVEY

**Co-Founder  
Philly's Best**

**No. of units:**  
20

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
Sign 5 new franchisees in 2025

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
1992

**Year started franchising:**  
2002

**Your years in franchising:**  
23

Andrea Levey is the co-founder of Philly's Best, a renowned chain known for bringing authentic Philly cheesesteaks to Southern California. A native of Philadelphia, Andrea combined her deep love for her hometown's flavors with her passion for delivering an exceptional dining experience, driving her to build a brand that celebrates both her roots and her adopted West Coast home.

Alongside her husband, Bob, Andrea took a bold leap in 1992 by opening the first Philly's Best location in Fountain Valley, California. She was determined to bring an authentic cheesesteak to a region where it was lacking. Although Andrea didn't have restaurant experience, her background in customer service taught her the importance of relationships and organization as well as maintaining a customer-focused mindset. Those skills were invaluable in the early stages of Philly's Best.

Andrea's hands-on approach and commitment to quality have helped the business grow into a beloved brand with 20 locations across Southern California.

### Beginnings

#### **What inspired you to start your business?**

The inspiration for Philly's Best came from our deep love for our hometown of Philadelphia and its iconic food culture. After moving to Southern California, my husband and I realized we couldn't find an authentic Philly cheesesteak that tasted like home. Missing the flavors and connection to our roots, we decided to recreate it ourselves. We tracked down authentic ingredients, perfected our recipes, and committed to staying true to the traditions that make a Philly cheesesteak so special when we opened our first location in Fountain Valley, California.

**What is your background?** Before starting Philly's Best, I worked in the automotive industry, and my husband was in the Navy. While neither of us had a background in restaurants or in franchising, we both had a strong entrepreneurial spirit and a commitment to excellence that became the foundation of our success.



**How did your background prepare you for starting your business?** Although I didn't have restaurant experience, my background in customer service gave me skills, like building relationships, staying organized, and maintaining a customer-first mindset. Those principles became the foundation for Philly's Best when we were starting out. My husband and I learned the restaurant business as we went, tackling challenges with determination and resourcefulness. We leaned on each other's strengths and adapted quickly while staying focused on our vision of bringing authentic Philly flavors to the West Coast.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice we ever received was to stay true to our roots, and it's something we've held onto from the very beginning. Authenticity has always been at the heart of Philly's Best, and it's what has kept our guests loyal for more than 30 years. Staying true to our vision means using real ingredients that reflect the flavors of Philadelphia, from Amoroso rolls to thinly sliced ribeye.

On the flip side, the worst advice we got was to cut costs by using cheap ingredients. While it might have saved money in the short term, we knew it would come at the expense of quality, which was something we were never willing to compromise. We're glad we stuck to our guns because it allowed us to deliver the same authentic flavors that our customers know and love.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** Franchising was a natural fit because it allowed us to share our passion for authentic Philly cheesesteaks with communities far beyond our original location while partnering with people who truly believed in our mission. It was important to us that every franchisee shared our commitment to quality and authenticity, ensuring that every Philly's Best location stayed true to the flavors and experience that define our brand.

**How important was your partner/co-founder in building your company?** Incredibly important. My husband and I built this business together from the ground up, and it wouldn't have been possible without his support and hard work. We each brought different strengths to the table, and together, we created a business that reflects our shared values and vision.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** When we first started, we used personal savings and were very hands-on to keep costs low. As we grew, we reinvested profits back into the business and worked with partners who shared our vision for expansion. This approach allowed us to scale sustainably.

## The Business

**What has been the best and hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best thing about owning a business is the freedom to build something you truly believe in and watch it grow and succeed. There's a unique sense of fulfillment in

knowing that what you're creating is not just a product or service, but a reflection of your vision and values. However, the hardest part is that the work never stops. It takes constant effort, dedication, and adaptability to navigate challenges and keep the business thriving. While the long hours and hard work can be exhausting, the rewards—both personal and professional—make it all worthwhile. Seeing the positive effect you have on customers and the community makes the journey so rewarding.

**How has the experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** I didn't anticipate how rewarding it would be to see others succeed through our brand. Watching our franchisees grow their own successful businesses has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of this journey as it's a direct reflection of the trust and partnership we've built together. On the flip side, managing the complexities of scaling while ensuring consistency across all locations has proven more challenging than I imagined. As we grow, it takes constant communication, training, and support to ensure every location upholds the same high standards.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** In the beginning, word of mouth was everything. Our first franchisees were actually customers who loved our cheesesteaks so much that they wanted to bring Philly's Best to their own communities. As we expanded, we knew it was time to take a strategic approach, so we partnered with franchise sales teams to help guide our growth. At the same time, we focused on streamlining our operations, ensuring that every new location could replicate the quality and experience of the original. We also invested in marketing to share our story with a wider audience, building brand recognition and attracting passionate franchisees.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** It's definitely been a learning process. As a founder, you're deeply involved in every detail of the business, but as the company grows, you have to step back and trust your team to handle the day-to-day. Shifting from being hands-on in every aspect to focusing on the bigger picture was a challenge, but it was necessary for the business to thrive. Surrounding myself with talented, dedicated people who share our vision has been crucial to that transition. Being open to adapting and letting go of some control has allowed me to focus on long-term goals while empowering the team to drive success.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** My leadership style is collaborative and supportive, focusing on empowering my team and creating a culture where everyone feels valued. At the same time, I stay hands-on to ensure that the quality and integrity of our brand are always maintained.

**What is the key to your company's success?** Our success comes from a relentless focus on quality and delivering an experience that truly reflects the heart of Philadelphia. Guests can tell when a brand

is authentic, and that's been the foundation of our success. We've also prioritized building strong relationships with franchisees, suppliers, and customers, and that has been crucial to our growth.

## Female Founder

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I admire women like Sara Blakely and Tory Burch, who've built brands with strong senses of identity and purpose. They've shown that it's possible to balance ambition with authenticity, and they've paved the way for other female entrepreneurs.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Absolutely. I've been fortunate to have mentors who've shared their wisdom and encouraged me to take risks, especially during moments when I was unsure of myself. Their guidance has been invaluable in helping me navigate the challenges of building a business, and it's given me the confidence to make bold decisions. Mentorship has helped me grow professionally, and it's been personally fulfilling, showing me the importance of giving back. I've been inspired to mentor others, offering the same support and advice I received.

**Are you involved in any female entrepreneur organizations?** Not formally, but I've always believed in fostering connections and supporting other women in business, whether it's through mentorship, networking, or sharing my story. While I haven't joined specific organizations, I'm passionate about being a resource and advocate for women who are navigating the challenges of entrepreneurship. I've found that some of the most impactful support comes from informal, organic connections, and I'm always looking for opportunities to lift others up.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** I'd love to see Philly's Best continue to grow while staying true to the qualities that make us unique: our commitment to authenticity, quality, and community. As we expand, it's important to maintain the values that have helped us build such a loyal following. Personally, I hope to mentor more women in franchising, sharing the knowledge and experiences I've gained along the way.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** We're expanding into new markets, and I'm incredibly excited about the opportunity to introduce Philly's Best to communities across the country. It's a chance to bring our authentic Philly cheesesteaks and hoagies to people who may not have experienced them yet. We've also got some exciting menu updates in the works, and we're focusing on new initiatives that will help us connect with our customers in fresh and meaningful ways, ensuring they feel engaged and valued. ■





## KAMILLE MCCOLLUM

**President, Chief Brand Officer, & Co-Founder Bodybar Pilates Franchising LLC**

**System-wide revenue:**  
\$26 million

**No. of units:**  
100+

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
Planning on expansion to every state across the country

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2012

**Year started franchising:**  
2019

**Your years in franchising:**  
9

*Editor's note: Laurie Gatlin is the founder of the original Bodybar Pilates concept. Kamille McCollum is co-founder of Bodybar Pilates Franchising LLC. She took Laurie's vision and expanded it into a successful franchise.*

**K**amille McCollum is an accomplished businesswoman who serves as Bodybar Pilates Franchising LLC president and chief brand officer. She has been applying her exceptional leadership skills and expertise to the organization since June 1, 2019.

In addition to her role with Bodybar, Kamille has owned Speak Light since August 2016. Through Speak Light, she operates Bodybar franchises in Fort Worth and Plano, Texas. As the owner, she has been actively involved in running all aspects of Bodybar Pilates studios, ensuring its success and growth.

Kamille has also excelled as an instructor, sharing her knowledge and passion for Pilates. Her experience in teaching has provided her with a deep understanding of the industry, allowing her to effectively lead and guide her team.

With her extensive background in business management and the fitness industry, Kamille is dedicated to driving the brand forward and ensuring the highest standards of excellence in all aspects of operations.

## Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?** I was inspired to start Bodybar Pilates Franchising LLC with my husband, Matt, when we saw the potential that the brand had within the boutique fitness industry after being introduced to the original owner and founder, Laurie Gatlin. From there, we opened our first studio in Fort Worth, Texas, in 2016, and after seeing it thrive, we opened a second location. Laurie was encouraged by the success and excited to see Bodybar Pilates expand nationwide.

When we were presented with the opportunity to spearhead the development of Bodybar's franchise strategy, Matt and I were excited to get to work. We were motivated to learn about the franchising industry and design a scalable business model and immediately began attending conferences, networking with franchise vendors, and building a purpose-driven studio that could expand. We wanted to ensure we covered all the bases for designing a studio. We didn't want to miss a single detail. For example, all of our lobbies have closing doors so that each class is in a separate space, and we can then use the lobby to make sales calls, promote our retail line, and host fun events for members.

**What is your background?** I earned a master's degree in social work and served as a special education teacher for middle school children. I then wanted to try something new and sold insurance. I knew I wanted the chance to work in the health and wellness space because I've always been into fitness. When presented with the opportunity to open a Bodybar location, I was eager to take on the challenge. As someone who had a passion for working out and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, I knew that it was important to create an inclusive environment and help others feel welcome and successful on their fitness and wellness journeys.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** My passion for the industry and wanting to bring wellness to other communities helped me at the start of my journey with Bodybar Pilates. I felt inspired by the fitness and franchising communities overall. I was eager to learn about other fitness brands—what worked for them and what didn't—so that we could continue raising the bar and take things to the next level for our members. I've been so lucky to have amazing individuals on our team, and they have been crucial to helping us elevate the customer experience that has made us a successful brand.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice I received when starting out was to always remember my "why"—why I began this journey and why it continues to fuel my passion. I want to give others the opportunity to feel the joy I felt when becoming a Pilates studio owner. It changed my life, and I know Bodybar can do this for others. It fuels my passion because I want to see Bodybar grow so that people in all cities, big or small, feel welcomed and inspired by the fitness journey offered by our brand.

The most negative commentary I received was someone saying, "Franchising is the worst." This couldn't be further from the truth. Franchises, like other businesses, are made up of systems, processes, and teams that are constantly moving in the right direction to drive success. All businesses face highs and lows; that's part of what connects us as an industry. Recognizing this, it's important to understand the challenges my franchisees face and actively listen to my team as we work to overcome those challenges. At Bodybar, we've created a strong sense of trust and collaboration within our franchise network, and we've seen firsthand how dedicated our owners are to our brand. We couldn't be where we are today without them.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** Matt and I chose to franchise because we were experiencing incredible success and personal fulfillment as studio owners. Our passion for Bodybar and its mission to serve real people in real communities inspired us. We wanted everyone to have access to a fitness studio where they felt supported, empowered, and welcome. We also wanted other entrepreneurs to have the opportunity to own a Bodybar.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** My husband, Matt, and I took on the business together and worked with Laurie Gatlin, the original Bodybar founder, who was and continues to be a helpful partner due to her vision and love for the brand.

**How important was having a partner/co-founder in building your company?** It was essential. Having support from Matt and Laurie helped the vision of Bodybar come to life. Matt provided insights into the financial, legal, and growth sectors while I focused on the people and operations side of the business, including running the studios we already owned and getting my Bodybar Pilates instructor certificate so that I could lead workouts. Laurie is still a partner, and with her vision, energy, and love for the brand, we are an unstoppable team.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Bodybar Franchising was privately funded by Matt, our partners, and me. As it grew and expanded, we depended on our other partners in the business to contribute. They have played vital roles in supporting our journey and providing the resources needed to fuel our continued success.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** The key to successfully funding our own brand was to be strategic and disciplined with our spending. It wasn't easy, but having additional revenue streams was essential to keeping our business afloat. The revenue from our studio locations supported us in the beginning, and we took pay cuts to reinvest into the business. By paying ourselves reduced salaries, we allocated resources toward building our team, a crucial factor in our early success.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best part of being an entrepreneur is having the power to shape my own destiny and watching my passion evolve into a thriving business. Seeing Bodybar grow to 17 states and witnessing the impact it has on the lives of our customers and franchisees is truly rewarding. There's nothing like seeing the success of our franchisees and the joy of our customers.

The most challenging aspect of entrepreneurship is learning to use the off switch and not let work consume every moment. With Matt as both my husband and business partner, it can be tough to separate work from home life. Even during personal time, we find ourselves discussing business, answering emails, and taking calls. It's hard to turn it off, especially because we love what we do!

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** It's been interesting to realize how many types of individuals we work with. Each brings their own learning styles. For example, if someone learns best visually, reading franchisee training materials will help them absorb information. Others may learn more effectively through hands-on experiences, actively performing tasks to fully understand any concepts. Bodybar offers support tailored to different learning preferences. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, so we do what we can to ensure that every franchisee feels confident, supported, and well equipped.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** Initially, we planned to sell a ton of franchises and branch into as many markets as possible. When we started the franchise process in 2019, we partnered with a franchise sales organization that was confident they could help us sell quickly and efficiently. When 2020 and Covid-19 hit, we had to adapt and change our approach.

Since then, we've updated our approach. We move slower but smarter than when we started, allowing us to perfect our training resources, expand our support plans, and find passionate individuals eager to become franchisees.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** The people I surrounded myself with helped with my transition from co-founder to leader. I didn't want to let go of some responsibilities but knew I had to. I took a strategic approach to bring on the best leaders in the industry to help us grow. This summer, we brought on Michael Piermarini as our chief operations officer, a title I previously held. Bringing on new leaders adds to our business and our team by increasing our strength and individual ability.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** My leadership style is positive, encouraging, and uplifting. I see myself as a doer, leading by example and staying proactive. I prioritize compas-

sion and inspire and empower my team rather than impose my ideas on them. I want to foster collaboration and mutual respect.

**What is the key to your company's success?** The key to Bodybar's success is the people. We believe in a culture-first hiring method and know that good customer service starts at the top. Our headquarters team and franchisee system work in the same fashion. Everyone is willing to step up when needed and work together.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** Being a female business owner has come with challenges and advantages. I've faced stereotypes, such as people assuming I couldn't be the owner or president of my company because I'm a woman. On the other hand, working in Pilates, a female-dominated fitness regimen, has allowed me to connect deeply with many of my franchisees, who are also women. My experiences as a woman in a male-dominated industry enabled me to relate to them, fostering strong, supportive relationships.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

As a female business owner and co-founder, I've experienced the stereotypes we consistently hear about. I've had people enter my studio and ask to speak to the owner, assuming that as a woman, it couldn't be me. In reality, I'm the president of the entire brand. People may always assume women can't do the things that we do, which has lit a fire in me that drives me to continue proving myself. While Pilates may be female dominated, franchising overall is not. When I attend industry conferences and see mostly male leaders, it doesn't discourage me. It motivates me to work hard and develop as a leader.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** My biggest challenges have been overcoming stereotypes, feeling comfortable with myself, and remaining confident in my abilities. I constantly remind myself that I am a capable and intelligent woman who knows her worth and expertise. I've successfully run my own studios and have ambitious plans for the brand's future. Being a woman doesn't diminish my value as a business owner or leader. It only strengthens my determination to thrive and break barriers.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** Women are underrepresented in the industry. The lack of visibility of successful female founders has made it hard for women to recognize their potential and capability in this field. However, I am optimistic that there will be more female founders as women continue to grow professionally and create their own opportunities.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** We've come a long

way in reducing the issues we face as women in the workplace, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** From my perspective, though still male dominated, there has been an increase in female leadership within the franchising world since I started in 2019. Of course, there is room for improvement. To that end, I've also seen more cultural diversity among franchising owners, which is pivotal for the industry as it brings on new perspectives and outlooks that will help propel us forward.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I admire every woman who works on my team, from corporate headquarters to our franchisees and instructors. They are passionate and devoted to the brand, themselves, and their communities.

I greatly admire and would like to acknowledge Kathleen Ferguson, founder and CEO of Coach360, and Laurie Gatlin, the founder of Bodybar Pilates. Kathleen has been an inspiration to me through our connection in the fitness franchising world. She is a powerhouse in recruitment and has successfully built multiple businesses. Laurie continues to be an unwavering source of support and inspiration. Her steadfast loyalty and readiness to step up whenever needed mean the world to me, and I'm deeply grateful to have her in my life.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Yes, mentorship has provided me with valuable new perspectives. Conversations with my mentors allow me to tap into their wealth of experience and knowledge. Whether it's calling them for advice on specific challenges or seeking insights into how they've navigated similar situations, their guidance has been crucial in helping me make informed decisions.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** In the next five years, I envision Bodybar having studios across the nation in major cities and smaller communities so that people everywhere can experience and enjoy our brand. I'm also focused on learning new ways to innovate the brand to stay on top of trends, help my franchisees become more successful, and eventually expand internationally.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** I am excited about continuing to hire key executive leaders to support franchisees and elevate the Bodybar brand. We want to bring on franchise business consultants and business coaches to assist our franchisees. These experts will provide valuable guidance and advice, helping our franchisees have the tools to achieve long-term success. ■





**AMY  
NEARY**  
*Founder & CEO*  
**Prime IV Hydration  
& Wellness**

**System-wide revenue:**  
\$72 million

**No. of units:**  
155

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
225 open spas and 350 sold spas  
by the end of 2025 (300 sold as of  
1/1/2025)

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2017

**Year started franchising:**  
2020

**Your years in franchising:**  
16

Amy Neary is a trailblazer in the wellness industry and the driving force behind Prime IV Hydration & Wellness, a brand that has redefined IV therapy for modern health seekers. Since founding Prime IV in 2017, Amy has transformed her vision into a national success story, growing the franchise to 155 locations and setting a new standard for personalized wellness.

Fueled by determination and a self-funded start, Amy turned to the franchise model to build a business that empowers entrepreneurs and transforms lives. Her commitment to innovation and care has made Prime IV a leader in cutting-edge health solutions, making her an inspiring figure for women in business.

### Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?** Ultimately, it was a desire to help people take control of their health. When I was running a healthcare franchise, clients would come in feeling drained and walk out feeling like a new person after something as simple as a B12 shot. I saw firsthand how small, proactive health interventions could make a huge difference in people's lives. Clients would come in for B12 shots and walk out feeling transformed. That sparked a question: What if we could create an entire experience expanding on the power of nutrient therapy? Prime IV Hydration & Wellness was born from a desire to empower people to take charge of their health, blending science, luxury, and accessibility.

**What is your background?** I actually started on a completely different path. I was premed and always had an affinity for health and wellness. Helping people live healthier lives has always been a passion of

mine. But over time, I realized that business and entrepreneurship were my true callings. That realization led me to franchise ownership in the healthcare industry where I could blend my love for health with my growing interest in business operations.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** Owning a healthcare-focused franchise was pivotal. It gave me firsthand experience in franchising, operations, and customer experience. I learned what works—and what doesn't—when you're building a scalable, consistent, and trustworthy brand. That foundation was essential when I started Prime IV. It taught me to balance my passion for health and wellness with the discipline and principles I needed to grow a successful business.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice? "Trust your instincts and keep learning." I remember thinking, I don't have all the answers, but I can figure it out. That mindset gave me the courage to take one step at a time even when things felt overwhelming. The worst advice? "Keep it small and simple." I don't do small and simple. Prime IV was meant to change lives on a big scale. Listening to that advice would have kept me playing it safe, and honestly, playing it safe wouldn't have been nearly as fun.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** As a franchisor, yes, but I'd been on the other side as a franchisee. That experience gave me a unique perspective on what franchisees need to succeed. I believe that if you can understand their challenges and goals, you can build a franchise system that's truly supportive and effective.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** Franchising felt like the perfect way to share this vision while

empowering other entrepreneurs. I mean, what could be better than creating a system where people who are just as passionate as I am can join and grow something amazing in their communities? Franchising lets us spread wellness far and wide, and it's a win-win: Franchisees get a proven model, and together, we get to make a bigger impact than I could ever do alone.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** No, I didn't have a partner, but I had an incredible team of people who believed in the vision from day one.

**How important was that in building your company?** They're my family. Their support and dedication made all the difference in building Prime IV into what it is today.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** It's been self-funded. As the brand grew, I leaned heavily on the strength of our franchise system. Franchisees' investments allowed us to scale quickly and reinvest in innovation, training, and marketing to support the entire network.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** The major keys to keeping Prime IV funded were to focus on scalability and commit to reinvesting in the business. From the beginning, I believed in the strength of the franchise model, which helped us quickly grow our presence across the U.S. with the help of ambitious entrepreneurs and without external funding.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best thing? Seeing a concept that you've worked on and refined over time become something real that changes people's lives. It's like seeing magic happen right in front of you. The hardest thing? Juggling it all. Some days you feel like Superwoman, and other days, you're Googling how to clone yourself because there just aren't enough hours.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** I knew it would be rewarding, but I didn't realize how much I'd learn from our franchisees. They bring their own ideas and perspectives that have helped shape Prime IV into something better than I could have imagined. The flip side? The unexpected challenges, like supply chain issues or adapting to new regulations, have taught me to stay flexible and resilient.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** In the beginning, it was all about grassroots connections and referrals. People saw that we had built a thoughtful business that truly focused on health and wellness, and they wanted to be part of it. Clients loved the services and kept coming back, and word of mouth naturally brought in more people. As we grew, the focus shifted to building systems that could support a national

brand while still keeping that personal touch. It's been a learning curve, and I'm grateful for every challenge because it's shaped who we are today.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** That's been a journey in itself. When you're starting out, you're doing everything: building, fixing, dreaming—you name it. But as the brand grew, I had to step back and think, "How can I lead others to do this even better than I can?" It's humbling to realize that you don't have all the answers and that success depends on the team around you. Transitioning to a leadership role has been about trusting others, empowering them, and focusing on the bigger picture.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** It's vision driven. I believe in painting the big picture and getting people excited about the "why," but I also know that a good laugh can go a long way. My goal is to make sure everyone feels empowered and valued because when people feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves, they show up differently. They care, and that's when magic happens.

**What is the key to your company's success?** It's the people—hands down. From our incredible team members to our franchisees to the clients who trust us with their health, it's the connections we've built that make Prime IV what it is. I'd also say it's about staying true to our purpose of helping people feel their best and changing lives. When you're rooted in a mission that matters, everything else falls into place.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company? How?** Being female has given me a unique perspective, and I've found that leaning into that perspective has been a strength. While there have been moments when I felt underestimated, I've learned to use those situations as opportunities to surprise and exceed expectations. The challenges, when they've come, have shaped my determination and creativity in ways I'm grateful for.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** At times, it's been finding the right opportunities to make my voice heard. It's not always easy, but I've learned that persistence and building strong relationships are key. Once you're at the table, the focus shifts to making meaningful contributions that leave a lasting impression.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** I think it's partly about visibility and opportunity. For a long time, women didn't see many examples of themselves as founders, which can make stepping into that role seem less attainable. But things are changing. With an increase in women in leadership and entrepreneurship, the landscape is a bit more inclusive now than in the past, and I'm thrilled to be part of that shift.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** It's the lingering expectation to excel in every role they take on, whether personal or professional. Women bring so much to the table in terms of leadership, collaboration, and innovation, but I think there's an added pressure to constantly prove that value. Creating workplaces that emphasize merit and opportunity for everyone will go a long way in shifting those dynamics.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** I've seen a growing number of women stepping into franchising as business owners and influential voices in the industry. There's an emphasis on collaboration and community, and it's encouraging to see women paving the way for future leaders. The industry is becoming more dynamic, and it's exciting to be part of that evolution.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I admire women who have built something meaningful while staying authentic. People like Sara Blakely show that you can be wildly successful and still have a sense of humor about it all. That combination of grit, humility, and heart inspires me.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Absolutely. Mentorship has been one of the most impactful parts of my journey. I've been fortunate to have incredible people step in at key moments, offering guidance and perspectives I didn't even know I needed. Their advice has shaped my decisions and given me the confidence to take risks. It's not just about professional growth; it's about seeing what's possible through the eyes of those who have walked the path before me. I'm truly grateful for the mentors who've helped me get to where I am today and will continue to be there for me tomorrow!

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** In the next five years, I'd love to see Prime IV in every major city in the U.S. and maybe go international. I want us to lead the way in wellness innovation, offering personalized health solutions that make people feel incredible. And beyond the business, I hope to create opportunities for franchisees and employees to grow and thrive. It's about building something meaningful, not just successful.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** We have so much in the works right now! The roll-out of our next service offering is something I'm passionate about because it has the potential to change lives in a profound way. I'm also excited about the possibilities in technology to streamline operations for our franchisees and enhance the customer experience. But honestly, what excites me most is seeing how our franchisees continue to innovate and make Prime IV their own. Watching them succeed is the ultimate reward. ■





**DENISE  
RICHARDS**  
*Co-Founder & COO*  
**Dill Dinkers Pickleball**

**No. of units:**  
11

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
By the end of 2025, Dill Dinkers expects to have 11 open locations with more than 425 in the development pipeline

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2022

**Year started franchising:**  
2023

**Your years in franchising:**  
1

**D**enise Richards has more than eight years of experience as a regional manager in the restaurant and weight-loss industries, about nine years of experience as a regional trainer, and more than 20 years of experience as a top-selling sales rep. She has a strong work ethic that she applies to operations. Her strengths include training and developing people and building meaningful relationships with staff and customers.

Denise had the honor of opening and operating the first Dill Dinkers facility. She hired and trained the front-desk staff, set up the Court Reserve reservation platform, put all standards and procedures in place, and drove membership and business advertising sales. Denise has also hired and trained the management personnel for new Dill Dinkers locations. She has a bachelor of science degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

### Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?** I started playing pickleball in 2021, and I quickly fell in love with the game. But finding indoor courts, especially during bad weather, was nearly impossible. That challenge sparked the idea for Dill Dinkers,

and we've been building spaces for people to enjoy the sport ever since.

**What is your background?** How did that prepare you for starting your business? I have more than 20 years of experience in sales, nine years in training, and eight years in multi-unit management. This combination has been instrumental in growing Dill Dinkers. I know what it takes to open and operate each club, and my background allows me to help franchisees and regional developers succeed by equipping them with the tools they need.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice I received was to create social spaces where players could connect and feel part of a community and to establish strong programming to bring people through the doors. As for bad advice, I haven't encountered much. Pickleball is such a new industry that we've had to carve our own path and figure out solutions as we go.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes, this is my first venture into franchising. After opening our first club, we realized we had something truly special. The model worked, and franchising felt like the best way to share our passion for pickle-

ball on a larger scale. It also gave us a way to expand strategically while staying ahead of the competition.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Yes, William Richards co-founded Dill Dinkers with me. It's been a great partnership: Will brings a visionary mindset and franchise expertise while I focus on operations, sales, and management. Together, we balance each other out: He lays the groundwork, and I make sure everything runs smoothly.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Our first investors were our very own pickleball friends. As we grew, more people approached us, wanting to invest. Eventually, the profits from our clubs and franchise royalties became important to our funding. It's been amazing to see the support for what we're creating.

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best thing has been sharing the concept and the joy of owning a pickleball club with others. Seeing people of all ages come together to play and contribute to the growth of the sport is incredibly rewarding. The hardest part has been building systems and processes from scratch. Coming from a corporate background, I took those frameworks for granted, but starting in such a new industry meant we had to develop everything from the ground up.

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**THE DIVERSITY OF PERSONALITIES AND APPROACHES AMONG FRANCHISEES WAS SURPRISING. EACH PERSON BRINGS THEIR OWN PERSPECTIVE ON BUSINESS OWNERSHIP, WHICH MAKES SELECTING THE RIGHT PARTNERS SO IMPORTANT.**”

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** The diversity of personalities and approaches among franchisees was surprising. Each person brings their own perspective on business ownership, which makes selecting the right partners so important. I also didn't anticipate how much demand there would be because people were eager to jump into the pickleball business, and it wasn't a hard sell.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** When we first started, it was just Will and me. Once our first club was announced, interest flooded in. We built a social media presence, launched a website, and started advertising. As we expanded, we brought on a PR agency, a marketing team, and a digital marketing company. With more people supporting us, we refined our branding and took a strategic approach to growth.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** I spent 14 months running our first club, learning what worked and what didn't. As we opened more corporate clubs, I stepped into the COO role. From there, that hands-on experience prepared us to lead the growth phase through franchising.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** I'd say I'm methodical, detail oriented, and relationship driven. I lead from the middle rather than the top, fostering open communication and collaboration.

**What is the key to your company's success?** It's a combination: being an indoor pickleball club that welcomes players of all skill levels, creating a franchise and regional developer model that supports scalability, and assembling a talented executive team.

### Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?** **How?** I don't think too much about gender in business, but I'd say it's been an advantage. My strengths in communication, creativity, and relationship building have served me well as an entrepreneur.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** The biggest challenge can often be dealing with egos and needing to work harder to prove ourselves, but I've been fortunate not to encounter much of that at Dill Dinkers.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** There really haven't been any challenges.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** Perhaps women may not be as willing to take risks, which could play a role.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** It's been great to see female

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**I DON'T THINK TOO MUCH ABOUT GENDER IN BUSINESS, BUT I'D SAY IT'S BEEN AN ADVANTAGE. MY STRENGTHS IN COMMUNICATION, CREATIVITY, AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING HAVE SERVED ME WELL AS AN ENTREPRENEUR.**”

regional developers joining Dill Dinkers. It's almost a 50/50 split now.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** I learned a lot from a mentor at a previous company. I was inspired by his management style and how he put himself on an equal level with everyone. I always felt comfortable opening up to him, and I try to emulate that as we continue to grow Dill Dinkers.

### Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** I envision Dill Dinkers growing to more than 200 open locations fully equipped with the tools and resources to run independently.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** Helping new clubs open is always rewarding. There's nothing like working with people passionate about running their clubs and seeing the excitement pickleball brings to their communities. ■





## NICOLE TANNER

Founder  
Swig

**No. of units:**  
100

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
Open 1,000 locations across the U.S. Swig has signed approximately 400 franchise locations across the country, securing its place as the national leader in refreshing beverages

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2010

**Year started franchising:**  
2022

**Your years in franchising:**  
2

**N**icole Tanner is the fifth of eight children and grew up on a farm in beautiful Teton Valley, Idaho. On the farm, she learned the value of not quitting until the job is done, and when you work together, you get the job done a lot faster. She has five children and seven grandchildren with another on the way.

She started Swig in April 2010 because of her love of Diet Coke and a need for human connection in a drive-thru. She enjoys spending time with her family, taking hikes, and being in nature. She has hiked the Grand Canyon from rim to rim twice. Her motto: "Life is a gift. Make sure you make it a good one by loving those around you and doing all you dream of."

### Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?** Swig was founded on the idea that getting a drink should be a better experience than being a number in line at a drive-thru. We wanted top-notch customer service where each person who comes to Swig knows they're appreciated, and we wanted to serve them an elevated product.

We want to show our customers that we care and deliver a great experience to them. That is an important part of our culture, and I think it's how

we differentiate and how we'll continue to succeed in the marketplace.

**What is your background?** I have an associate's degree in administrative assistance. I also have restaurant and customer service experience as a server at McDonald's and Sizzler. I built a team of seven as a Mary Kay consultant. But the main experience is what I experienced as a customer throughout the years and what I saw was lacking in experience and customer service.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** I knew what I wanted to feel as a customer in a drive-thru and wanted to solve that missing connection for other people. Building my team as a Mary Kay consultant helped me understand the power of a team and how to help them achieve their goals and fulfill their dreams.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice is to care for your customers and your team as though they are family. The worst advice is that you need the best, latest, and greatest equipment to start.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** We want people around the world to have a Swig near them so that they can have that same connected experience

in a drive-thru getting their favorite drink. Our customers feel a part of something special when they come to Swig. They are part of the family. We want the world to be a part of that as well. Franchising helps us accomplish that in a streamlined and fast way.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** The company was funded out of personal savings in the beginning. I did not take out a business loan. I paid myself when I could and didn't take dividends for years. Everything was going back into the business for growth. Three years later, I brought on our first partners to provide financial backing for growth. Again, I did not pay myself dividends. Everything went back into the brand. Four years later, we brought on additional partners who knew the restaurant industry and could provide the needed expertise to scale the business. Our funding for growth was equity based then, which provided the funding needed.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** Selecting the right partners to add value to the brand and accelerate growth. Early on, I partnered with Dylan Roeder and Chase Wardrop from the Soda Shop. Savory Fund's partnership in 2017 was crucial to funding the brand for growth and equity-driven funding. The Larry H. Miller Company's majority acquisition of Swig in 2022 brought the power and funding to help us scale nationwide.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best thing about being an entrepreneur is seeing your idea grow into something far beyond what you hoped and dreamed it would be. Building a team that shares the same care and passion for the brand and is working hard to share that with others makes it far more than a business and gives it purpose.

The hardest thing is figuring out what your business is. If it's a new concept and you are the first pioneer in the space, you don't know what you don't know. There are learning opportunities all along the way that can be scary and intimidating.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** Helping our franchise partners know all they need to know to succeed is harder than expected. Many of our partners have experience scaling a business but may need more support as they learn the food and beverage industry.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** I had one location for three years. I needed to see if others would latch onto this concept like I thought they would. I also had to figure out what the food and beverage industry was all about. I had experience in it as a server 20 years prior but not as an owner. So, there was a lot of learning and growth in the first three years of figuring out what Swig was. As we expanded, we developed systems and processes for efficiency. We also developed a leadership program to help us find the leaders and managers necessary for Swig to scale nationwide. We can't grow effectively and keep the

same culture while scaling without our leaders and people. I often say that Swig is a leadership company that sells amazing drinks and treats!

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** It is difficult to transition from leading a brand and doing it all to letting go of some of the control and letting your leaders take on the things you did to get the business up and running. Stepping into the founder role, letting go of that control, and trusting in your new partners and leaders can be hard because you don't want to lose the momentum you have worked so hard to build and create. I have learned as a business owner that you can't do it all if you want to scale. Trust in your team. We all go through the finish line together.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** We are team driven and dedicated to lifting each other up and learning alongside each other. We provide leadership training opportunities and room for growth at the company.

**What is the key to your company's success?** Swig is focused on the experience we deliver when a customer visits us. Our employees and team members love what they do, and customers feel that when going through a line at Swig. That is one of the ways we differentiate ourselves, and it adds to our success. We like to say Swig is "happiness in a cup." We're all about focusing on providing premium, customized, refreshing beverages and doing that in a value-focused way.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** Being female was an advantage in building Swig. I'd say 80% of our customers are female, so they could relate to me as a female founder regarding how hard it is sometimes to build and create something as a working mom.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

There are very few women-owned businesses, so it plays to our advantage at Swig by showing that women can build strong teams around them that help build their businesses. As women, we love to grow and nurture. Building a business is no different than building and nurturing your family, your children, and your community.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** The balancing act of work and family. Many of us are moms running households with children with many needs: activities, homework, dinnertime, and bedtime. Finding the balance is so hard, but it is possible when you can prioritize and leave the mom guilt at the door.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** Women already have so many responsibilities with their families to balance. Starting your own business is a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. Many hours are spent getting the business off the ground. That can be

intimidating and overwhelming to a woman with so much on her plate.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Having confidence in their skills and abilities to run million-dollar businesses can be a big challenge for women. But I want to change that. Our leaders are young and between the ages of 18 and 24. Instilling in these young adults the confidence that they can achieve anything they set their minds to is the game changer.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** The world is realizing that women know how to lead a team and run highly profitable businesses. Several of our franchise partners are female, and others are choosing female managers to lead their regions to success.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** Gail Miller, co-founder of the Larry H. Miller Company, is a true inspiration and a great example of focusing on her leaders and community. She models humility, grace, and love to all who know her while building and leading a company.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Watching how other leaders grow and lead teams has made a big difference in how I lead. I love learning from others how to mentor and grow a team.

**Are you involved in any female entrepreneur organizations?** I am not involved in any female entrepreneur organizations yet. My current focus is on building our own female leadership team. Our field leadership team is 90% female. They are the driving force behind the business. They are the people behind the scenes making the magic happen. My goal is to build the strongest leadership team in the nation that will be a force to be reckoned with and be where other organizations want to come and learn from us to see how we have done it.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** Our goal is to have 1,000 locations nationwide. Every community deserves a Swig to enjoy their happiness in a cup!

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** Swig is the tenant of a new building owned by the Larry H. Miller Company and Vesta Realty Partners, which will aid us in expanding Swig's operations and bakery. But what I am most excited about is growing the brand with our leaders and franchise partners. Seeing a franchise partner's eyes light up when they open the doors to their first location is magical and surreal for me. It takes me back to when it all started as I hoped and prayed that just one location would work. Now, I'm seeing it grow into what it is today with more than 100 locations. ■





**DENISE  
TRAN**  
*Founder & CEO*  
**Bun Mee Vietnamese  
Sandwich Eatery**

**No. of units:**  
5 (corporate stores)

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
To bring authentic Vietnamese cuisine to Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2011

**Year started franchising:**  
2024

**Your years in franchising:**  
1

**D**enise Tran, a former attorney, is the founder and CEO of Bun Mee Vietnamese Sandwich Eatery, a gourmet fast-casual restaurant concept with five locations in San Francisco—Pacific Heights, Financial District, SFO Terminals 1 & 3, and the Marina District—and a plan to franchise nationwide.

Bun Mee has been nationally recognized as a pioneer in the Asian sandwich niche for making delicious banh mi sandwiches with wide crossover appeal. Launched in 2011, Bun Mee blends the street food concepts of Vietnam with Denise's flavorful modern interpretations with fresh, local ingredients. Within months of opening, Bun Mee was critically reviewed with many menu items landing on San Francisco's best lists. In 2013, Bun Mee appeared on Fast Casual Magazine's Top 100 Movers & Shakers in the country at No. 28 between Panera Bread and Five Guys.

Denise has been recognized by Quick Service Magazine as one of the country's top Wonder Women founders changing the game in the fast-casual industry. In 2020, the San Francisco chapter of the Entrepreneur's Organization recognized her with the Entrepreneur of the Year Award. Bun Mee has been featured on the Travel Channel's "Food Paradise" and received countless mentions in local, national, and international press.

### Beginnings

**What inspired you to start your business?** I have always been entrepreneurial but followed a safe corporate law path. It was my father's early and unexpected passing that caused me to rethink and seek to curate my life deliberately. My passion for Vietnamese cuisine came from my solo travels

to Vietnam as part of my father's wish to take his ashes to his homeland. While there, I ate at street markets and met with street vendors who shared their passions with me. I was inspired to recreate these food memories in a modernized way.

**What is your background?** I am Vietnamese. I was born in Saigon and raised in New Orleans. Most recently, I've lived in New York and San Francisco. I graduated with a JD/MBA and practiced corporate law for nearly five years in Seattle.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** Having a JD/MBA degree provided the necessary business and legal foundation and framework for me to start my business. I understood contracts and had strong research, writing, communication, and analytical skills. Further, my MBA degree prepared me for the business world.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** I had a lot of people tell me to avoid the restaurant business. It had a high failure rate and low margins. People said I would just be buying myself a job. Once, I was told I needed experience to be successful—because I came from the corporate world, I didn't have the requisite experience.

**Best advice?** Location. Pay for location.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** I wanted to leverage local know-how and grow my company quickly while mitigating expansion risks. I understand there is a risk in a loss of control of the brand when you decide to franchise. However, we've worked hard to figure out our scaling model to ensure our brand stays consistent and authentic.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** I am so glad you asked this question! I am self-funded and self-founded. I am the majority owner of my business along with a few minority investors. It is no secret that franchising is very male dominated, and many financial barriers can prevent people from getting their businesses off the ground. It isn't uncommon for people to assume I opened the business with a spouse (specifically, a husband) and that he is the "true" owner while I just help out.

**How important was that in building your company?** This was everything. It provided the freedom to run my business as I wish without getting bogged down. It is also a point of pride as an Asian woman founder.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** I funded my business and brought on an equity partner early on who did consulting work in exchange for equity. I also brought on a friend who invested in the business.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** My passion and persuasiveness inspired others to believe in my vision and agree to fund our company when it was still just an idea. I also had a strong network of individuals who knew me well and understood my strengths and weaknesses. People invest in those they believe in.

## The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best thing (so far) about my entrepreneurial journey is seeing my father's legacy live on through Bun Mee. Finding success as a business owner is impressive and highly coveted on its own. However, being successful with something so integral to my identity and heritage and something so close to my heart has made it all the more worthwhile.

The hardest thing was the initial learning curve of the restaurant industry, franchising, and owning a business. It is widely assumed that one needs prior experience in a certain field to find success, but I dove headfirst, literally, and learned as I went along. I am still learning, especially the ins and outs of franchising. All of my prior experience and education was in law, but my passion and devotion to Bun Mee allowed me to keep moving forward.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** Since we launched our franchising opportunity in Q4 of 2024, it is too early to tell. Check back in with me in a few months though!

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** Our first five stores are corporate owned and operated in San Francisco. We recently started franchising near the end of 2024, so this will be our first foray into strategic, consistent growth in other markets.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** I'm still navigating this transition as we look to scale and grow. In the past few years, I've started to shift my focus from

taking a hands-on role in product development and operations to a broader strategic focus. This required me to establish a strong leadership team, delegate operational tasks, find ways to communicate, and develop a clear vision for growth. Additionally, implementing systems for feedback and innovation ensures that the brand continues to evolve while maintaining its core values. This transition also requires adapting to a more formal structure.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** My style is both visionary and collaborative. I communicate and set a vision for our company that is large and audacious, such as "We want to be the Shake Shack of Vietnamese sandwiches." I work collaboratively with our team to invite input when making decisions, but ultimately, I make the final decision on strategic matters. I also lead by running the company as if I were an employee. I believe in real-time recognition and making sure my staff feels heard. Maintaining authenticity and abiding by the business' core values can be challenging when you grow. Many restaurants face a loss of identity or inconsistencies in day-to-day operations while expanding into new territories, so it is important for me that each banh mi sandwich in any location you visit will taste just as good as from any other location.

**What is the key to your company's success?** The keys to our success are the following:

- Treat our employees with respect and integrity.
- Focus on always making great food with the best ingredients possible.
- Serve it with a smile.
- Keep it simple.
- Great design goes a long way.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** It was both. It was a disadvantage in that I was often underestimated or talked down to in various settings, especially on construction sites. However, I also liked being underestimated because I saw this as an opportunity to bring my A game when others least expected it. It also allows me to catch people who are being dishonest or looking to take advantage of me.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?** I can quickly weed out dishonorable people. Furthermore, I have different skills that I believe shine as a CEO. I'm detail oriented, and I have an intuitive sense for what works for my guests that perhaps a male counterpart may overlook. As a manager of people, having empathy for my staff helps me connect with them in meaningful ways.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** There are a few. I'm a single mom who wants to be as hands-on as possible in parenting my son, so balancing being a mom and running my business is a huge challenge. My biggest

challenge is the glass ceiling, which exists in any industry. There are business opportunities that will be hard for me to obtain because they typically are available to male-dominated networks. There are still talented men who do not work well when following a woman leader.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** When women are not made to feel welcome in a space or career path, they will inevitably receive fewer opportunities or feel that because they do not see role models that look like them already, those role models or women do not exist in the world. It is hard to raise financial capital or get investors when female founders are not taken as seriously as male counterparts with the same or similar business concept. It's been proven that investors are more likely to invest in male-owned start-ups. This systemic denial/lack of access to funding is what continues to perpetuate the disparity between female and male entrepreneurs. Women cannot rise to the occasion when they are not given access or the tools to succeed.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** Unconscious and conscious bias, misogyny, and racism, which are often all packaged into one. The very act of financing and funding your own business is gendered and full of bias. The age-old stereotype of women having limited capabilities in the workplace (or not belonging there at all) extends to top investors and incubators.

**From your perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand?** Too new for me to say.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** Sara Blakely of Spanx, Peggy Cherno of Panda Express, and Rosalind Brewer of Walgreens as well as Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** I've benefited from some amazing mentorship relationships. They aren't always formal as many of mine are informal, but having a network of informal advisors whom I trust and respect to turn to was pivotal to my success.

**Are you involved in any female entrepreneur organizations?** I'm a member of the Entrepreneur's Organization in San Francisco. It is a global network of founders, and there are women founders and subgroups in our organization.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** I'd like to see at least 30 Bun Mee stores across the country and in several domestic and international airports.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** Franchising Bun Mee throughout the rest of California as well as introducing it to communities in the Western U.S. ■





## JESSICA VOGEL

**Co-Founder  
& Chief Brand Officer  
Scenthound**

**System-wide revenue:**  
\$42 million

**No. of units:**  
122

**International units:**  
0

**Growth plans:**  
Market penetration and dominance

**Public or private:**  
Private

**Year company founded:**  
2015

**Year started franchising:**  
2019

**Your years in franchising:**  
5

Jessica Vogel is the co-founder and chief brand officer for Scenthound, where she leads brand strategy, design, and messaging. With more than 20 years of experience in the creative industry, she has a strong background in brand identity, design, and advertising. Jessica's creative vision and attention to detail have been instrumental in shaping Scenthound's powerful brand presence.

Jessica and her husband, Tim, spent years developing their approach to dog care before taking on franchisees to scale the business. While Tim looks ahead, spots opportunities, and dreams big, Jessica is detail focused, ensuring quality, consistency, and integrity. Her long-term goal is to change how pet parents treat their dogs by helping them understand the need for high-quality preventive care.

### Beginnings

#### What inspired you to start your business?

Shortly after welcoming our first child, my husband and I decided it was time for a big change. In 2005, with a 1-year-old son and a 2-year-old labradoodle in tow, we relocated from the Washington, D.C., area to Florida in search of a better quality of life, shorter commutes, and a warmer climate. This move marked the beginning of our entrepreneurial

journey. As dedicated pet parents, we saw a unique opportunity in the rapidly growing pet industry, which inspired us to launch a mobile grooming business—our first step into the world of pet care.

As our mobile grooming venture flourished, we took the next step by expanding into brick-and-mortar locations. Through nearly a decade of experience in the traditional grooming industry, we realized that many dogs were not receiving the proactive hygiene care necessary to keep them clean, comfortable, and healthy. Motivated by a passion for improving the well-being of dogs and reshaping how people approach pet care, we envisioned a concept that went beyond standard grooming services. Our mission was to make routine hygiene accessible to all dogs while educating pet parents about the importance of preventive care in promoting their dogs' overall health and helping them live longer, happier lives.

**What is your background?** After earning my undergraduate degree in design from the University of Michigan and completing graduate studies at the Portfolio Center in Miami (now Miami Ad School), I built a rewarding career in the creative industry that spanned more than two decades. Specializing in design and brand development, I honed



## THE HARDEST PART, HOWEVER, IS NAVIGATING THE INEVITABLE UPS AND DOWNS. THE JOURNEY IS NEVER A STRAIGHT LINE, AND OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES IN BUSINESS, WE'VE EXPERIENCED OUR FAIR SHARE OF CHALLENGES."

my skills while working with boutique agencies and as an independent professional, crafting impactful strategies and solutions for a diverse range of clients. Alongside this fulfilling career, I was also deeply involved in the entrepreneurial journey with my husband—a path that ultimately brought me to where I am today.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?** Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to help countless businesses define and communicate their unique brand stories through impactful design and compelling messaging. This invaluable experience has greatly influenced my approach as chief brand officer of Scenthound.

With extensive expertise in brand development, I am dedicated to elevating Scenthound into an extraordinary brand that deeply resonates with both franchisees and customers. For franchisees, a strong and clearly defined brand provides a significant competitive edge, acting as a guiding framework for their success. For customers, it builds credibility, trust, and a sense of alignment with their values.

By crafting an authentic and engaging brand narrative, we cultivate a strong and dedicated franchise system and build a loyal customer base.

**What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice I received when starting out was to truly get to know myself: my strengths, my weaknesses, and what I bring to the table. Equally important was understanding and appreciating the strengths and skills of those around me, especially Tim Vogel, my partner and spouse. Building a business together has required deep trust, clear communication, and recognizing

how our complementary abilities can work in harmony. This self-awareness and mutual understanding have been invaluable as we've grown our team and built a thriving franchise network. It's allowed me to focus on what I do best while empowering others to contribute their expertise, creating a collaborative and well-rounded organization.

The worst advice I got was to "fake it till you make it." While confidence is important, pretending to know it all can backfire. Instead, I've found that being honest about what I don't know and seeking guidance or help has been far more effective. It's through learning and collaboration that real growth happens.

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes, this was our first introduction to the franchising world. We had a lot to learn, but it's been a rewarding journey of growth.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** My husband, Tim, is my co-founder and CEO.

**How important was that in building your company?** Tim is the quintessential entrepreneur and business visionary, always looking ahead, spotting opportunities, and dreaming big. His ability to see the broader picture, take risks, and push boundaries drives the business forward. On the other hand, I bring a different but equally vital perspective to the table. As a standards-driven person and the creative force behind the brand, I focus on the finer details, ensuring the quality, consistency, and integrity of everything we create. My role is to shape and maintain the brand's identity, ensuring it resonates with our audience while staying true to our values.

Our skill sets are complementary and essential to the balance and success of our business. While Tim thrives on innovation and bold moves, I ground those ideas by adding structure, strategy, and a creative lens that refines them into actionable plans. This dynamic allows us to approach challenges and opportunities from multiple angles, bringing together big-picture thinking and meticulous execution. This synergy keeps us moving forward, ensuring that the business is innovative, sustainable, and true to its vision.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Our journey began with a personal investment, using the equity from the sale of our first home to provide the initial capital needed to launch our business. During this early phase, I continued working full-time in the creative industry to ensure financial stability while Tim focused entirely on building and growing the company.

As the business gained momentum, we sought additional funding to support its growth. We started by reaching out to friends and family who believed in our vision and were eager to invest. Later, we secured a Series A funding round, which provided the resources necessary to fuel further expansion and take our business to the next level.

### What were the keys to funding your brand?

We spent a decade immersed in the industry and working diligently on our business before deciding to raise capital. This time allowed us to refine our approach, develop a well-tested model, and build a strong foundation for sustainable growth. Our deep experience demonstrated our commitment and gave us invaluable insights into the market and what it takes to succeed.

One of our greatest strengths is our mission and vision, which resonate deeply with people. We are passionate about what we do, which shines through in our story. Telling our story in an authentic, compelling way, while clearly defining the opportunity and demonstrating the impact of our work, was instrumental in securing funding. It helped potential investors see the value in what we've built and share in our excitement for the future.

By aligning a proven business model with a purpose-driven mission, we were able to inspire confidence and attract the support needed to take our business to the next level.

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The most rewarding part of building a business is the creation process: imagining a vision and then watching it come to life. There's nothing quite like seeing an idea take shape and grow into something tangible and impactful.

The hardest part, however, is navigating the inevitable ups and downs. The journey is never a straight line, and over the past two decades in business, we've experienced our fair share of challenges. Early on, setbacks often felt like the end of the world. But with time and experience, I've gained perspective and resilience. What once seemed insurmountable, I now see as simply obstacles to overcome, stepping stones that have shaped my growth and strengthened the foundation of our business.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** One of the most eye-opening aspects of my franchising journey has been discovering the diverse range of skills and experiences among our franchise partners. What comes naturally to some can pose significant challenges for others.

For instance, while some business owners excel in leadership and have an innate ability to build high-performing teams, others may require additional guidance and support in these areas. This underscores the importance of recognizing individual strengths and weaknesses and tailoring support to meet the unique needs of each franchisee. By doing so, we can empower every franchisee to succeed and thrive within the system.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** Initially, we leveraged our deep industry expertise to grow the brand, focusing on our core strengths and knowledge of



the pet care market. As we expanded, a significant shift occurred. By building a strong network of franchise operators, we gained invaluable insights and a wealth of collective knowledge. This collaborative approach allowed us to identify key needs and develop essential tools and resources to empower our franchisees to execute the business model effectively.

**How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand?** Transitioning from founding to leading a brand required a fundamental shift in focus. Founding was centered on creative vision and proving the concept whereas leading is about empowering others to bring that vision to life.

Scaling our business meant moving away from individual contributions and prioritizing the development of a robust support system. We created comprehensive training programs, provided ongoing support, and streamlined resources to ensure our franchisees operate efficiently and successfully.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** My leadership style strikes a balance between visionary and collaborative. I am driven by a clear and ambitious vision for the brand, constantly striving to position us as the leader in our market. At the same time, I am deeply committed to creating a strong, inclusive team environment where every voice is heard and valued.

When we entered franchising—a completely new territory for us—we recognized the importance of addressing gaps in our knowledge. To ensure success, we brought in experienced industry professionals to join our team. This collaborative approach not only strengthened our leadership team, but equipped us with the expertise needed to drive the brand forward and achieve our goals.

**What is the key to your company's success?** Our keys to success lie in being a purpose-driven organization and seizing the right timing in a shifting market. Our franchisees and corporate team are deeply passionate about what we do and fully aligned with our core values, creating a unified and mission-driven culture. Additionally, the market and industry are ripe for a transformation in how people approach caring for their dogs. We are at the forefront of this evolution, modernizing an outdated industry and meeting the demand for change.

## Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** With the majority of our customer base being female, my perspective as a woman has been an undeniable advantage. My experiences allow me to understand their needs, challenges, and aspirations, enabling us to create a brand that truly resonates.

By aligning with the values of our target audience, we've built trust and meaningful relationships. This connection has been instrumental in cultivating customer loyalty, a vital component of our success.

**Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner?**

One advantage has been the diversity in perspectives that my male co-founder and I bring to the table. Our complementary viewpoints result in balanced decision-making and well-rounded strategies.

However, navigating a male-dominated industry has come with challenges. Advocating for my ideas and building a strong support network have been critical in overcoming biases and barriers.

**What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur?** One of my greatest challenges has been establishing credibility and earning respect in a male-dominated industry. At times, this has required me to work extra hard to prove my expertise and leadership capabilities.

Despite these challenges, I've remained focused on demonstrating the success of our business and my leadership. I'm proud to contribute to breaking down barriers for the next generation of female entrepreneurs.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** The lack of female representation in entrepreneurship doesn't reflect capability or ambition. It's the result of systemic barriers that have historically limited opportunities for women.

Fortunately, we're seeing initiatives and programs to support women in business. These efforts are critical in leveling the playing field and providing women with the resources and mentorship needed to succeed.

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** One of the biggest challenges women face in the workplace is balancing professional and personal responsibilities. The "motherhood penalty" is a common issue, where societal expectations place great demands on women to prioritize family over career.

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**ONE OF MY GREATEST CHALLENGES HAS BEEN ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY AND EARNING RESPECT IN A MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY.”**

Additionally, limited advancement opportunities often hinder women's progress. By fostering inclusive environments, we can empower women to thrive in their personal and professional lives.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?**

As someone in franchising, I deeply admire Ellen Latham, the founder of Orangetheory Fitness. Her visionary leadership not only revolutionized the fitness industry, but established one of the fastest-growing franchise brands—a truly incredible achievement.

Ellen's journey serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of perseverance, innovation, and staying true to your mission. Her ability to blend a clear vision with a commitment to excellence is a model for success in any industry.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** The coaching and mentorship I've received over the years have been instrumental in shaping me into the leader I am today. Every challenge we faced in business presented a growth opportunity, and seeking guidance has always been our way of getting unstuck and moving forward.

Mentorship hasn't just made me a better leader; it's made me a better wife and mother. When you are business partners with your spouse, that balance is critical, and the lessons I've learned have helped strengthen our professional and personal partnership.

## Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** My vision is to make routine hygiene and wellness the norm for all dogs everywhere. The goal is for Scenthound to become a household name and the undisputed leader in the dog wellness space, continually innovating and expanding our reach to improve the lives of dogs and their people.

**What's coming up that you're excited about?** I'm thrilled about the continued growth of our brand and our mission to revolutionize how people care for their dogs. We're not just providing services; we're transforming preventive care into a priority for pet parents. By empowering dog owners with education, resources, and tools, we're creating a lasting impact on canine health and wellness.

What excites me most is the opportunity to scale our reach and make proactive care the norm for dogs everywhere. As we expand, we're solidifying our position as the leader in dog wellness and building strong, healthy relationships between dogs and their parents. Seeing this transformation take shape is incredibly rewarding, and I'm eager for what's ahead. ■



**VANESSA  
MELMAN  
YAKOBSON**  
*CEO of Blo Blow Dry Bar &  
CEO & Founder of LashKind  
Blo Blow Dry Bar and  
LashKind*

**No. of units:**

Blo Blow Dry Bar, 160 (open or in development), and LashKind, 3

**International units:**

0

**Public or private:**

Private

**Year company founded:**

Blo, 2007, and LashKind, 2023

**Year started franchising:**

Blo, 2009, and LashKind, 2023

**Your years in franchising:**

10

**V**anessa Melman Yakobson is CEO of Blo Blow Dry Bar and has led the company since April 2016. In addition, Vanessa and her team bought a lash company and franchise it under the name Lash Kind. As a leader, Vanessa embraces a collaborative approach and is committed to continual improvement. She says that franchising has provided a way to affect others' lives in meaningful and positive ways. With help from her team, Blo Blow Dry Bar has grown to 160 units open or in development, and LashKind, which started franchising in 2023, has three.

**Beginnings**

**What is your background?** In 2001, my husband and I, along with our business partner, opened a children's hair salon after having a poor experience with getting our kids' hair cut. We then decided to acquire Blo Blow Dry Bar in 2007. I was working with the Pediatric Oncology Group of Ontario (POGO) at the time. The work was close to my heart because I had battled pediatric cancer myself.

After learning how to build infrastructure and develop partnerships for 11 years at POGO, I was eager to jump full-time into Blo and take the role

of CEO in 2015. With the help of my team, we have grown the brand to 160 locations open and in various stages of development across 30 states. Fast forward to 2022, and Blo acquired a Canadian lash concept called MYNC. In 2023, we launched the franchise opportunity in the U.S. under the name LashKind. In September 2024, we acquired a California-based lash concept named LashBar.

**How did that prepare you for starting your business?**

POGO was a well-established nonprofit entity in the medical realm. It had no consumer awareness. Working at POGO required me to build a consumer-facing brand from scratch, create a corporate infrastructure to support fundraising and communications, establish community relationships and partnerships, and learn to become a professional fundraiser. When I decided to leave POGO and return to the corporate world, I was concerned that I had failed to become a functional specialist and worried that would limit my opportunities. However, I realized that I had developed a general management skill set in leadership, team management, marketing/communications, and finance/budgeting. I had learned how to build a business from scratch.





## THE BEST: THE REWARD THAT COMES FROM KNOWING YOU ARE IMPACTING THE LIVES OF OTHERS IN SUCH A MEANINGFUL AND POSITIVE WAY.”

**What’s the best and worst advice you got when starting out?** The best advice came when I left POGO and wasn’t sure where to go next. A friend and respected businessperson in Toronto told me that I was a business builder. That resonated with me and made sense given what I had achieved at POGO. I knew then that I needed to go and build a business.

**Worst advice:** As a bold 20-something, I was never afraid to ask questions or share ideas. But I was once told by a CEO’s assistant that the CEO, an old-fashioned businessperson, did not like young people who thought they knew how the world worked. In other words, I was told to keep my opinions to myself. Needless to say, that did not deter me!

**Was this your first time in franchising?** Yes.

**Why did you choose to franchise?** I fell into it because I was a shareholder in the company.

**Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started?** Yes, my husband, Ari Yakobson, our business partner, Paul Spindler, and a small group of friends and family investors.

**How important was that in building your company?** It was important because it meant I was surrounded by trusted partners with as much stake in the business as I had.

**How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew?** Friends and family investors. Much later, when Covid-19 happened, we brought on a private equity investor to ensure we came out of the pandemic at full strength.

**What were the keys to funding your brand?** We needed to be sure we had a viable business model first. We were fortunate to acquire three units of a two-year-old concept that, while new, had proven early success. Next, we expanded within Canada to further prove out the concept before moving into the U.S. By growing slowly and deliberately, my partners and I felt comfortable and excited to fund the business.

### The Business

**What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur?** The best: The reward that comes from knowing you are impacting the lives of others in such a meaningful and positive way. The hardest was learning to deal with the setbacks that inevitably come with building your own business. After dealing with setbacks or negative situations, I am grateful that today I have the confidence in knowing that “this too shall pass” and that my team and I are on the right track.

**How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected?** I did not anticipate how challenging it can be to deal with franchisees. As a franchisor, we are in the customer service business, and our franchisees are our customers. We recognize that they have a lot at stake. They’ve made significant investments and life decisions that have a meaningful effect on their families, so they can have high expectations for the support they require from the franchisor. It’s also a challenge for my team and me to learn not to take things personally when a franchisee is upset. Instead, we learn what our franchisees are facing and find ways to provide resources and support.

**How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded?** I was always committed to responsible growth and determined not to oversell the brand so that we could always support new units. I ensured that as we sold units, we built our corporate infrastructure to have the right people in the right roles to support our franchisees. Our basic approach to building the brand has not changed, but we have evolved and expanded our efforts. Today, I am enormously proud of the system we have built.

**How would you describe your leadership style?** I consider myself a collaborative leader. I know that great ideas can come from anywhere. I’m also an idea generator, and I create space so that people feel comfortable and confident to come forward and speak their minds.

**What is the key to your company’s success?** Our company has been successful first by being a category disruptor and then by ensuring that, as we evolved, we stayed true to our roots and the concept that made us a success in the early years. We have also been successful because of our collaborative approach and commitment to continual improvement.

### Female Founder

**Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company?**

**How?** It has been an advantage that is unique to Blo. Most of our franchisees and their staff members are female, and our customer base is almost entirely female. I think they are inspired by having a female leading the company. I can relate personally to our value proposition, which helps.

**Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones?** Good question! Is that the fact? I’m not sure!

**What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?** I have worked in the marketing and nonprofit sectors, which are dominated by women. I have also worked in the financial services arena and was shocked to discover that the world had not advanced as much as I thought it had in terms of how women are viewed in the workplace. Sometimes, I have to work hard to earn respect and credibility, which means having the courage of my convictions and being confident to speak up and be a leader.

**Which female leaders do you admire? Why?** I admire Sheryl Sandberg, the former COO of Meta. She wrote *Lean In*, which resonates with me. It’s all about taking your seat at the table as a woman in the workplace.

**Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How?** Absolutely. At POGO, I had no background in fundraising, and at Blo, I had no background in franchising. I have regularly sought out mentors in the industry.

### Looking Ahead

**What would you like to achieve in the next five years?** For Blo, we aim to have 135 doors open by the end of 2025. On the LashKind side, we are focused on growing responsibly and hope to have 50 doors open within the next few years. Aside from unit count, we are prioritizing growing unit economics for Blo and LashKind franchisees by offering a robust set of tools and resources from our corporate team, including a stellar business coaching program. We are also developing multiple revenue streams for franchisees, including our membership program, and we are working with wonderful brand partners for service and retail.

**What’s coming up that you’re excited about?** This year is poised to be exciting for the brand. We had record growth in 2024 at the unit and brand levels, and we have several areas of focus to drive continued growth in 2025. New unit sales will be strong, and we are excited about the quality of candidates who will become new franchisees. We are excited about continuing to help our franchisees drive success in their businesses. ■

# THE FRENCH WORKSHOP

## A LEGACY OF CULINARY ARTISTRY AND COMMUNITY

Written by **THEODORA CHRISTOPHOROU**

Growing up, I watched my father build a legacy in the restaurant industry after emigrating from Greece to New York. Through pizzerias and cafés, he showed us the value of quality and hard work. He created welcoming environments where friends and family could gather over delicious food. When my family and I embarked on a new venture, we wanted to channel that same entrepreneurial spirit into something unique: a bakery café that would elevate the art of French baking while offering a truly immersive experience.

### FROM IDEA TO ICON

Our deep appreciation for the artists and rich history of precision craftsmanship in French baking inspired the brand. French baking is renowned for its unparalleled techniques and commitment to excellence. These are principles we've adopted at The French Workshop. We wanted to make sophistication and artistry accessible to local communities, offering a genuine, high-end experience that transcends the typical bakery.

Our menu reflects this passion, and the process of developing it is a careful and thoughtful journey. Signature offerings, including Crème Brûlée, Tiramisu, Nutella Lattes, and Almond Chocolate Croissants, are crafted using premium ingredients, many of which are imported to align with traditional French standards.

While we honor tradition, we also embrace innovation, introducing seasonal specials and reimagining classic desserts with our unique perspective to align with modern culinary trends to keep the menu exciting for our customers. We always experiment with new ideas, including expanding our gluten-free and vegan options to meet customer preferences while staying true to our French pâtisserie roots.

Beyond the menu, we have crafted a space where guests can enjoy delectable treats and a slice of French culture. Whether it's the refined ambience, carefully curated dessert menu, or the experience, every aspect of the brand reflects our passion for French culinary artistry.

### STAYING COMPETITIVE

We thrive in the competitive bakery market by offering a distinct, high-end experience that goes beyond the typical offerings of baked goods and coffee. While many bakeries focus primarily on bread and pastries, we set ourselves apart with a thoughtfully curated selection of indulgent desserts that are as visually stunning as they are delicious. Every detail, from the premium ingredients to the artisanal craftsmanship and elegant presentation, transforms each creation into more than just a treat.

When walking into The French Workshop, you feel as though you have entered a charming Parisian

neighborhood café where guests can unwind and savor quality food and coffee. With soothing French soundtracks playing in the background, the layout is designed to encourage conversations. It features elegant seating areas and a welcoming vibe. The ambience is a blend of classic French bistro aesthetics with contemporary furniture mixed with vintage touches and paired with a clean, minimalist décor.

A cornerstone of this experience is our open-concept "workshop," where guests can watch our pastry chefs in action as they meticulously craft and perfect every dessert. This unique feature highlights the skill and artistry behind our products and fosters a deep connection between our guests and the creative process, making every visit immersive and memorable.

### FRANCHISING WITH PURPOSE

As our reputation grew, we saw an opportunity to share The French Workshop experience with more communities. Franchising is a natural next step, but it is essential to approach it thoughtfully with a strategic, step-by-step plan. With our brand rooted in New York, our priority is to establish a strong presence in neighboring states, focusing initially on contiguous expansion through the Northeast before heading to other markets. This approach ensures we can provide franchisees with a high level of support. By partnering with experienced restaurant operators, we will uphold the quality, consistency, and exceptional guest experience that define us.

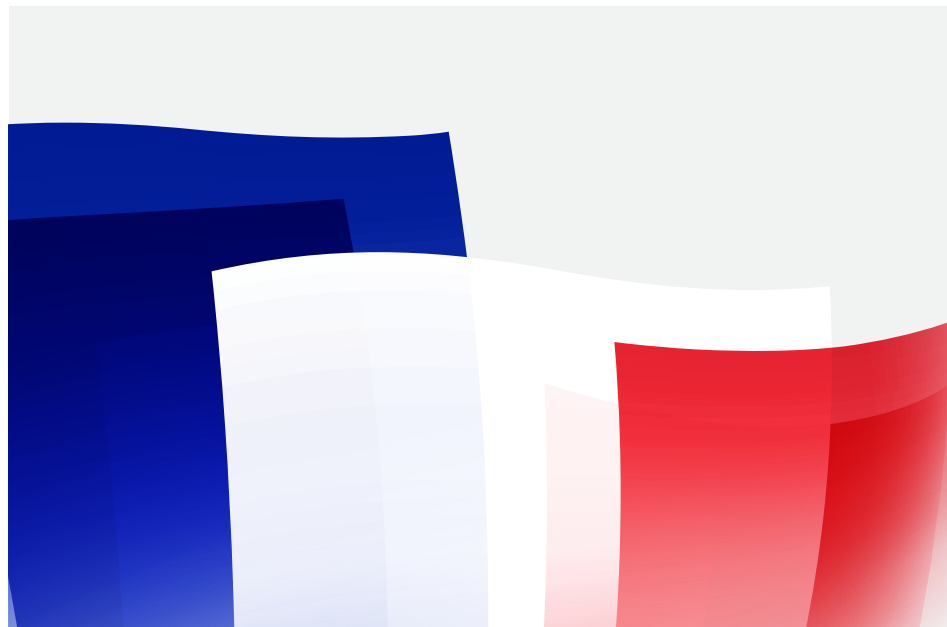
The growth of The French Workshop has been strongly supported by its long-standing partnership with the Zorbas Group, a leader in bakery operations since the 1970s. This collaboration has enabled The French Workshop to optimize production and distribution while consistently maintaining top-tier quality and will be invaluable as we continue our expansion journey across the U.S.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The future of The French Workshop is bright. As reported in our most recent FDD, we have achieved an AUV of \$5,037,757 and are focused on building upon this momentum. We are also engaged in ongoing conversations with numerous prospective franchisees excited to be a part of our growing brand. Our ultimate goal is to establish The French Workshop as a renowned name, synonymous with exceptional quality, authentic French pastries, artisanal bread, gourmet sandwiches, and premium coffee.

As we expand into new communities, we are focused on creating spaces where people can come together, indulge in exceptional culinary experiences, and feel transported to the heart of Paris. ■

**Theodora Christophorou** is senior vice president of operations at The French Workshop. For more information, visit [ownafrenchworkshop.com](http://ownafrenchworkshop.com).





“You can’t dictate culture—culture is how everyone in the organization behaves.”

# WINGING IT

## CEO focuses on unit economics for franchisee success

Written by **KERRY PIPES**



### SAM BALLAS CEO and Founder

Company: **East Coast Wings + Grill, Sammy's Sliders**

Units: **35**

Age: **59**

Years in franchising: **20**  
(actively franchising 14.5 years)

Years in current position: **20**

**S**am Ballas is driven by unit economics and getting consistent results. He’s leaned on that strategy throughout his tenure at East Coast Wings + Grill, a brand he founded and leads today. Heck, the brand’s mantra is “Driven by Unit-Level Economics.” Under his leadership, ECW+G has experienced measured strategic growth while building strong relationships with franchisees and ensuring their profitability.

As CEO, president, and founder, Ballas is proud of ECW+G’s results from 2024, when more than 40% of locations achieved record sales.

East Coast Wings + Grill got its start in 1995 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The brand now has more than 40 locations open or in development, and it has been named on top franchise lists by Entrepreneur and Franchise Business Review.

But there’s more than wings in Ballas’ portfolio these days.

In 2023, he made news by teaming up with award-winning chef Sammy Gianopoulos to introduce Sammy’s Sliders in Winston-Salem. Late last year, it was announced that the upstart brand will offer franchises in select markets across the country.

If all of that’s not enough, Ballas is also part of the creation and leadership team of ZorAbility, Inc., a firm that coaches and invests in emerging brands, guiding them through best practices in scaling a franchise. He also carves out time to serve as vice chair of the International Franchise Association (IFA) board of directors and sits on several IFA committees as well as serving as a member of the advisory board for Franchise Update Media’s Franchise Customer Experience Conference.

East Coast Wings + Grill is ready to take on 2025 with plans for expansion into new markets through smart growth, elevated guest experiences, and innovative menu items that cater to ever-changing consumer preferences.

Ballas says the company’s long-term vision focuses on responsible expansion and prioritizing sustainable growth for franchisees. The recipe is strategic growth into key markets and maintaining strong financial performance at the unit level.

“East Coast Wings + Grill stands out because of our excellent franchisee support system, our focus on unit-level economics, and an adaptable business model,” Ballas says.

### LEADERSHIP

**What is your role as CEO?** Chief visionary. It’s my responsibility to ensure that all the brand’s strategies are met.

**How has Covid-19 affected the way you have led your brand?** ECW+G has always been a lifestyle brand for me: It was never designed to have hundreds of units under my ownership. The pandemic validated this strategy as the brand performed well during it and emerged strong post-pandemic. I also transitioned my leadership team into an alignment structure where everyone has an equal voice and accountability for brand strategies. Our franchise owners have sustained ULE (unit-level economics) beyond national averages.

**Describe your leadership style.** I allow all my executive team to have their shoulders against the wheel, so to speak, along with me. My style post-pandemic has shifted to more of a coaching style.

**What has inspired your leadership style?** I have a passion for coaching and rooting for the

underdog. I consider it a victory when talented people grow and take on responsibilities that they never thought possible.

**What is your biggest leadership challenge?** Addressing long-term team members who need to be restructured or coached out of the company. It's true what they say: "Don't let the company outgrow you."

**How do you transmit your culture from your office to frontline employees?** As far as transmitting our culture from the corporate team to our franchisees, we have several tools to ensure the culture is embedded. However, ECW+G makes an effort to structure our desired culture in a cooperative fashion. You can't dictate culture—culture is how everyone in the organization behaves, so we need to ensure that we're working together to build and maintain a culture we all believe in.

**How can a CEO help their CMO develop and grow?** Every company has its secret sauce. CMOs often stick to their lane of expertise, but as a CEO, I encourage them to explore beyond that. I guide them to the edge, intervening before they overreach. This approach creates coaching opportunities and ensures alignment with our company's culture and strategic plans.

**Where is the best place to prepare for leadership: an MBA school or OTJ?** I firmly believe the real world provides the best education. I would hire experienced talent over someone with a post-graduate degree every time.

**Are tough decisions best taken by one person? How do you make tough decisions?** While I ultimately make the final call on hard decisions, I encourage my executive alignment team to weigh in first. Having more shoulders against the wheel often leads to improved outcomes.

**Do you want to be liked or respected?** Respected.

**Advice to CEO wannabes:** Hire smart people as soon as you can afford it.

## MANAGEMENT

**Describe your management style:** Coaching oriented.

**What does your management team look like?** In early 2024, I realigned my team. All my executives hold equal leadership roles and report to me. This team includes heads of marketing, franchise system operations, corporate operations, and franchise development—my "Fab 4."

**How does your management team help you lead?** With an aligned executive team, we share the same agenda while taking responsibility for different parts of the company.

**Favorite management gurus: Do you read management books?** I enjoy autobiographies, like those of Jack Welch and Howard Schultz. I'm also a fan of Patrick Lencioni's books, which provide great real-life insights.

**What makes you say, "Yes, now that's why I do what I do!"?** When we outperform ULE strategies, and franchise owners express gratitude.

## OPERATIONS

**What trends are you seeing with consumer spending habits in your stores?** Traffic has decreased, but our ambassadors are spending more per visit than usual.

**How is the economy driving consumer behavior in your system?** Guests are consolidating visits, focusing more on weekends rather than weekdays, which has reduced overall visit frequency.

**What are you expecting from your market in the next 12 months?** In 2024, we experienced same-store sales growth, and we've set a higher target for 2025. We also forecast 18% new unit growth in 2025.

**Are your franchisees bullish or bearish about growth and adding additional units?** Half of our 2025 new unit growth will come from existing franchise owners.

**Are commodity/supply costs any cause for concern in your system?** While supply costs are always a concern, the past few years haven't been significantly different from previous challenges.

**In what ways are political/global issues impacting the market and your brand?** Since the 2024 election, most impacts have been positive.

## TECHNOLOGY

**How much influence does your IT department have on your brand?** Our IT department primarily supports unit-level operations. It acts as an extension of and support system for all our departments. We let business needs take the lead and then determine how technology can fulfill those needs.

**How have your company's tech tools changed over the past five years?** We've implemented many tech stacks and now operate with an outsourced IT department. Our tools are constantly evolving, so it's critical to evaluate them regularly to ensure they remain relevant as technology advances. At the same time, we balance this with franchisees' tolerance for change. It's essential to stay ahead in technology while avoiding change fatigue and minimizing the operational impact of new tools.

**How does technology influence your decisions?** Technology is now a top-of-mind consideration in our quarterly discussions. It plays a significant role in shaping our strategies and solutions.

**Are you using AI? How?** Yes, we use AI within specific platform integrations as well as tools like ChatGPT across departments.

**How do you measure your ROI on technology investments?** At the corporate level, ROI is measured by improved departmental efficiencies. At the unit level, we track benchmark performance.

**How did/do you create a culture where use of technology advancements is welcome and used?** We are continuously evolving this aspect by identifying specific tech stack needs and researching solutions that deliver value. I take a patient approach, ensuring that every piece—expense models, tech deliverables, and implementation processes—is effective and efficient before adoption.

## PERSONAL

**What time do you like to be at your desk?** With Zoom as the new normal, I sometimes start my day at home and arrive at the office mid to late morning. On a regular day, I'm in the office by 8 a.m.

**Exercise in the morning?** No.

**Wine with lunch?** Rarely—just a few times a year.

**Do you socialize with your team after work/outside the office?** Occasionally.

**Last two books read:** *Around the Corner to Around the World* by Robert Rosenberg and *Stop the Shift Show* by Scott Greenberg.

**What technology do you take on the road?** Grammarly.

**How do you relax/balance life and work?** Golf and spending time with family.

**Favorite vacation destination(s):** The Bahamas and Greece.

**Favorite occasions to send employees notes:** When they outperform within a brand strategy.

## BOTTOM LINE

**What are your long-term goals for the company?** For ECW+G, 50 operating units or \$100 million in sales. For Sammy's Sliders, 60 locations within three to four years.

**How has the economy changed your goals for your company?** It hasn't.

**Where can capital be found these days?** ULE (unit-level economics).

**How do you measure success?** Happy franchise owners making money.

**What has been your greatest success?** Sustaining our brand philosophy of being "Driven by Unit-Level Economics" even when the franchise space demands faster growth.

**Any regrets?** I wish I had my existing executive team at their current intellect six years ago.

**What can we expect from your company in the next 12 to 18 months?** Sustaining our philosophy and achieving smart growth! ■



“Ultimately, everything we achieve comes through people, so ensuring we have the right team in place is key.”

# HOME MATTERS

## Leader commits to culture, relationships, and market share

Written by **KERRY PIPES**



### CHARLES FURLOUGH President and CEO

Company: **Pillar To Post**

Units: **450**

Age: **59**

Years in franchising: **10 as a franchisee;  
17 years as a franchisor**

Years in current position: **2**

**C**harles Furlough doesn't give lip service when it comes to supporting franchisees and their success. That's because the president and CEO of home inspection franchise Pillar To Post was a master franchisee for the brand in 1998. Before joining Pillar To Post's executive team, he spent 10 years on the franchisee side, so he knows the challenges franchisees face and the resources they need to thrive.

Furlough was first hired as VP of operations for Pillar To Post in 2008, became senior vice president in 2017, and was named president and CEO in 2023. He and former CEO Dan Steward have been credited with bringing technological advances to the home inspection industry. One example was the recent launch of the Pillar To Post HomePage, a centralized platform that simplifies the home inspection process by providing customers access to all aspects of their inspection.

He's also committed to sharing the brand's culture and cultivating strong relationships with franchisees.

Pillar To Post has more than 450 franchises throughout the U.S. and Canada, and Furlough sees it as the leading home inspection company in North America. Under his leadership, the brand is focused on providing franchisees with the tools and support they need to succeed so that they can deliver exceptional customer service.

“Regardless of market trends, our focus remains on growing market share and supporting our franchise owners,” he says.

#### LEADERSHIP

**What is your role as CEO?** My role is to grow and protect the brand; this should be the role of any CEO. Ensuring the brand's strength and stability while pushing for innovation is at the heart of what I do every day.

**How has Covid-19 affected the way you have led your brand?** Covid-19 fundamentally changed how we work with a shift to remote operations almost overnight. It forced us to rethink our approach and innovate in ways we hadn't before. Many of the changes we implemented during that time were so effective that they've become a permanent part of how we operate today.

**Describe your leadership style.** I focus on hiring the best people, setting clear goals, aligning everyone to a shared plan, and maintaining accountability. With great people and a crystal-clear road map, there's no need to micromanage. It's about empowering the team to deliver their best.

**What has inspired your leadership style?** It's a mix of my personal preferences for how I like to work and what I've learned by observing others throughout my career. Watching different leadership styles at various companies has shaped how I approach my role today.

**What is your biggest leadership challenge?** People. Finding, hiring, and managing the best talent is always a challenge—not a problem but certainly a significant focus. Ultimately, everything we achieve comes through people, so ensuring we have the right team in place is key.

**How do you transmit your culture from your office to frontline employees?** By spending time with them whenever possible and communicating consistently and clearly. We emphasize clarity of goals, a shared plan, and our core values. Our people are hired and evaluated based on these values, which naturally fosters the right culture.



**How can a CEO help their CMO develop and grow?** By providing clear goals and a shared plan and removing any roadblocks in their way. As a CEO, it's essential to support your team and empower them to succeed.

**Where is the best place to prepare for leadership: an MBA school or OTJ?** Education acts as an accelerator. It's possible to learn everything on the job, but it just takes longer without the school background. That said, there's no substitute for having the right people around you and getting hands-on experience. Both education and on-the-job training play essential roles, but it's the combination of the two that truly prepares you for leadership.

**Are tough decisions best taken by one person? How do you make tough decisions?** While tough decisions are often made by one person, the best come after gathering input from a strong team. Surround yourself with people who share your core values and have relevant expertise. In the end, though, the responsibility lies with the leader.

**Do you want to be liked or respected?** Ideally both, but if I had to choose, I'd prioritize being respected.

**Advice to CEO wannabes:** Leadership is the single most important thing. Be someone your team wants to follow and focus on building a strong leadership team around you. Value your people, and always lead with intention and integrity.

## MANAGEMENT

**Describe your management style:** Today, I see myself more as a leader than a manager. My focus is on hiring great people, setting clear goals, building a shared plan, and fostering a culture of accountability.

**What does your management team look like?** They are not just managers; they are leaders. They play a critical role in setting direction and ensuring our shared vision is executed effectively.

**How does your management team help you lead?** They're deeply involved in creating our plans and ensuring alignment. Their contributions and commitment are crucial to our success.

**Favorite management gurus: Do you read management books?** I don't follow specific management gurus, but books like *Good to Great* and *The*

*7 Habits of Highly Effective People* have been influential. There is always something to learn from business books if you're open to it.

**What makes you say, "Yes, now that's why I do what I do!"?** Seeing our people succeed. It's rewarding to witness their journeys, whether they are franchise business owners starting from scratch and growing into thriving businesses or longtime franchise owners transitioning their businesses to the next generation.

## OPERATIONS

**What trends are you seeing with consumer spending habits in your stores?** Consumer habits in our space haven't changed significantly. Home inspections are a necessity for buyers, and demand remains steady. While housing supply has normalized compared to 2021, the need for professional inspections hasn't wavered.

**How is the economy driving consumer behavior in your system?** With rising home prices, inspections are more critical than ever. Consumers recognize the importance of professional insights when making such significant investments.

**What are you expecting from your market in the next 12 months?** Real estate sales are projected to increase by about 12% this year, which aligns with a gradual recovery.

**Are your franchisees bullish or bearish about growth and adding additional units?** They're bullish. Even in a challenging market, we're seeing optimism and increased hiring activity across our network.

**Are commodity/supply costs any cause for concern in your system?** Not significantly. Fuel costs and labor have had an effect, but other costs haven't had a major effect on operations.

**In what ways are political/global issues impacting the market and your brand?** Mortgage interest rates are the biggest factor. While they feel high compared to the past decade, they're in line with historical averages. Strong home appreciation over the past several years and the rise in interest rates have driven down affordability. However, with four million home sales in the U.S. alone—rising back toward normal—there is still an enormous opportunity in front of us.

## TECHNOLOGY

**How much influence does your IT department have on your brand?** Technology serves our mission; it doesn't drive it. We focus on enhancing the customer experience and ensuring our tools support that goal rather than chasing trends.

**How have your company's tech tools changed over the past five years?** We've significantly improved our tools. One example is the launch of the Pillar To Post HomePage, a centralized location for clients to access all aspects of their home inspection. It's a simple yet transformative advancement for our customers.

**How does technology influence your decisions?** Technology plays a role in influencing decisions by aligning with our goals and what we're trying to achieve. It's not about seeking out the latest innovations for the sake of it. Rather, we focus on identifying the challenges we're facing and then exploring what tech is available that can help us solve those problems effectively.

**Are you using AI? How?** At this point, we're using AI minimally. However, we do see its potential in the home inspection space. We're learning more about it, researching options, and figuring out how AI can help us improve what we do.

**How do you measure your ROI on technology investments?** ROI depends on the goal. Technology can enhance the customer experience, improve efficiency, and reduce costs. Success is measured by how well it achieves these objectives.

**How did/do you create a culture where use of technology advancements is welcome and used?** Creating a culture where technology is embraced starts with clearly identifying what each piece of tech is meant to achieve and communicating that purpose effectively. Everyone needs to understand why we adopt specific technology, whether it's to enhance the customer experience or meet specific goals. We ensure that there's clear instruction, so no one has to figure things out on their own.

## PERSONAL

**What time do you like to be at your desk?** By 7 or 7:30 a.m.

**Exercise in the morning? Wine with lunch?** I don't typically exercise in the morning, and I don't have wine with lunch.

**Do you socialize with your team after work/outside the office?** Since my team works remotely, we don't have the same opportunities to socialize outside the office regularly. However, whenever we get together in person, we make the most of it. We take advantage of every meal and any extra time we have to connect. It's important to me that we maintain strong relationships and take the time to bond outside of work whenever possible.





*I focus on hiring the best people, setting clear goals, aligning everyone to a shared plan, and maintaining accountability. With great people and a crystal-clear road map, there's no need to micromanage. It's about empowering the team to deliver their best.*

**Last two books read:** *Hero of Two Worlds* by Mike Duncan is about Lafayette during the Revolutionary War period. Benjamin Hardy and Dan Sullivan's *10x is Easier Than 2x* explores how thinking big can be simpler and more effective than incremental growth.

**What technology do you take on the road?** My cell phone and laptop.

**How do you relax/balance life and work?** Flying as a private pilot, playing golf, and spending time with my family and grandkids help me unwind.

**Favorite vacation destination(s):** Anywhere in the western third of the U.S. or Canada.

**Favorite occasions to send employees notes:** When great things happen in their personal lives.

**Favorite company product/service:** Our home inspections.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

**What are your long-term goals for the company?** Our long-term goal is to remain the industry leader in home inspection. We are committed to maintaining our position and continuing to grow by supporting our franchise business owners in building large and profitable businesses. In an industry typically dominated by one or two-person operations, we are evolving into a brand recognized for large-scale inspection companies. We have a higher-than-average number of large

franchise business owners, and we expect our growth to continue over the next five to 10 years following an executive business model that drives both expansion and sustainability.

**How has the economy changed your goals for your company?** Not at all.

**How do you measure success?** Personal success is tied to the health and happiness of my family and me. When it comes to business, success is all about working with a team I truly enjoy collaborating with. Together, we set aggressive goals and achieve them, and seeing the impact of those achievements on our staff and franchise business owners defines success for me.

**What has been your greatest success?** Success is working with an incredible team, setting ambitious goals, and achieving them in ways that positively impact everyone involved.

**Any regrets?** Generally speaking, no. However, if I had to point to something, it would be that I've accomplished so many great things in my life and sometimes wish I could have done them sooner. Time moves fast, and looking back, it would have been nice to have started some of those things when I was younger.

**What can we expect from your company in the next 12 to 18 months?** Continued growth, innovation, and a focus on supporting our franchise business owners as they build large, profitable businesses. ■



# MAINTAINING THE FRANCHISE VOICE

New leadership in Washington, D.C., doesn't change goals

Written by **MATT HALLER**

**T**he turning of the calendar ushered in not only a new presidential administration and Congress, but also fresh opportunities for the franchise sector to grow, thrive, and create opportunity for all. IFA has been laser focused on our forward-leaning plans to go on offense to advance policies that will supercharge America's 830,000 local franchises and the more than 9 million workers they support.

Even casual observers of last year's presidential contest no doubt remember the starring role franchising played on the trail, especially Vice President Harris' proud history of working in a franchise and President Trump's turn behind the fryer in Pennsylvania. Now, it's time to funnel that campaign energy into enacting commonsense policies, advocating for long-term certainty for small businesses while keeping a watchful eye on the potential of destructive policies, especially at the state and local levels.

From making the 2020 joint-employer standard law to extending the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act to

righting the ship with new leadership at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), IFA has put forward a road map of concrete policy priorities to protect, enhance, and promote the model.

As part of IFA's efforts to ensure franchising is part of the conversation in Washington, D.C., in the lead-up to the presidential inauguration, IFA hosted a D.C. media event with Semafor, bringing together top lawmakers, journalists, and policy influencers for a conversation on our policy road map as well as the pressing issues of the day and the important role that franchising plays.

Our team has been working with the new administration and Congress on the appointment and confirmation process of nominees who are important to franchising. In January, IFA members and the senior leadership team met with former Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer, R-Ore., in Washington, D.C., ahead of her confirmation hearing to be the next U.S. Secretary of Labor.

Following a wide-ranging discussion about the priorities and goals of franchisors and franchisees in the year ahead, especially certainty surrounding the joint-employer standard, IFA publicly supported Chavez-DeRemer's nomination. We were one of the first major business organizations to do so.

We've also been engaged in debates over agency heads at the FTC, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Small Business Administration, to name a few. They are key allies in helping us achieve the policy goals for our members.

We urge you to get involved with the process: Invite your representatives to your business, set up a meeting in Washington, attend IFA events, including the IFA Legal Symposium in May or the Advocacy Summit in the fall, or participate in an Open for Opportunity Roadshow stop. There is no shortage of ways to ensure that your priorities and concerns are front and center for those responsible for passing laws. Your voice and your story, and the stories of those you serve, are the most impactful ways to communicate with those who pass laws that affect your day-to-day business.

We look forward to working alongside you toward the advancement of a legislative agenda that lifts people up and provides economic opportunity—bipartisan principles everyone can get behind. ■

**Matt Haller** is president and CEO of the International Franchise Association.





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# CALL TO ACTION

**Turn marketing spend into  
successful franchisee recruitment**

Written by **HELEN BOND**



It's a new year and a new era of franchisee recruitment. Franchisors are ready to return to the business of growth, and they're finding motivated and informed buyers.

"The volume on the lead generation side is exploding," says R. Scott Sutton, chief development officer of Empower Brands. "Across all channels, we are seeing that lead generation will continue to be a competitive and difficult row to hoe as we get into a very active calendar year of 2025. Add a high volume of interest and an increased amount of tactical execution among competitors and other franchisors, and you've got high competition."

It's no secret that recruiting the right franchisees is critical to the success of any franchise system. It can truly make or break it. But in today's competitive landscape, where capturing attention has become a commodity, how do you ensure lead generation efforts draw in candidates who truly share your brand's vision and values?

To stand out, franchisors are taking a modern, data-driven approach. This includes identifying their ideal franchise partners, tracking detailed engagement metrics, and using those insights to adjust and refine strategies in real time while staying within budget.

The focus has shifted from a sales-centric development model to prioritizing quality over quantity.

Empower Brands has adopted a franchisee selection process that puts the candidate first. Sutton says this nuanced candidate-driven strategy resonates with prospects eager to become part of Empower Brands' family of 10 commercial and residential service brands.

"I think there is a tendency for franchisors to talk too much about themselves," Sutton says. "There's a place for that, but we've really led with, 'How you can achieve your goals and aspirations in partnership with Empower and let us talk to you about how.' I think candidates really want to understand and be seen and heard for what they're trying to achieve."

### Modern approach

At its core, franchisee recruitment's end goal remains: identify, attract, and convert qualified prospects into high-caliber franchise partners. Today's development process, however, is no longer about casting the widest net. It requires a combination of targeting specific buyer personas on multiple channels, hyperpersonalized targeting, compelling messaging, and consistent follow-up to attract and retain attention and earn the candidate's trust.

"Our approach is to attract people like a magnet," says Dustin Thompson, director of franchise development and marketing for Jack in the Box, with roughly 2,200 locations, and Del Taco, home to 600 restaurants.

When Thompson joined Jack in the Box in 2021 to help the mission to reignite nationwide franchise growth, there was a website but little else to support the effort.

Thompson has played a pivotal role in transforming development efforts and the look and feel of franchise opportunities with Jack in the Box and Del Taco. Key initiatives included revamping and optimizing the recruitment website and mapping out a data-driven plan for market expansion to guide digital and traditional marketing and advertising. Recruitment strategies, except for public relations, are handled in-house.

Transparency is at the heart of the dual brand's franchise development approach supported by a vertically integrated content, marketing, and franchise sales tech stack that automates, supports, and tracks all things franchise recruitment.

Taking a page from Marcus Sheridan's popular book, *They Ask, You Answer*, Thompson focuses recruitment efforts on building a better buyer experience through an easily accessible and digestible hub-and-spoke lead-nurturing content strategy that helps would-be franchisees self-qualify.

"The key is content, and our goal, whether it is a social post, blog, or video, is to answer questions so that people can determine whether we're a good fit for them or not before they ever have to inquire," Thompson says.





**R. Scott Sutton**  
Empower Brands  
Chief Development Officer

Creating a lead generation team within the franchise development department has been a win-win for the franchisor, saving money and making it easy to develop high-quality, brand-authentic content that generates strong leads.

The creation of seamless, tech-forward lead generation processes has resulted in a halo effect for Jack in the Box and Del Taco, legacy brands with more than 120 years between them. The approach shines a modern and innovative light that aligns with the expectations of today's franchisees, says Van Ingram, vice president of franchise development for both brands.

Without any budget increases in the past three years, both brands have experienced a steady influx of leads and prospects ready to become franchisees.

"We're creating more qualified candidates, people who understand what they're getting into and are advanced already," Ingram says. "By the time they show up and we put them in front of our qualified operations staff, they are 'approvable.'"



**Dustin Thompson**  
Jack in the Box, Del Taco  
Director of Franchise  
Development & Marketing

## Multi-brand efforts

Multi-brand franchisors are finding success and maximizing budgets with strategies that harness the power of the franchise network and highlight each brand's value proposition.

Empower Brands' franchise recruitment arsenal includes standard digital marketing tactics, like paid search, paid social, optimization, retargeting, online engagement (particularly on LinkedIn), and loads of A/B testing. Sutton also looks to outbound and offline tactics, such as public relations and event-based marketing, including E-Day, a monthly gathering at Empower Brands' corporate office in Richmond, Virginia, that gives prospective owners an inside look at operations.

With a vibrant system of brands, ranging from 40-year-old industry leader Archadeck Outdoor Living to Bumble Roofing, founded in 2019, Empower aims to reach and match highly qualified candidates with the right franchise fit within the overall portfolio based on the model, market, and motivation to become a franchisee in the system.



**WE ARE SEEING TODAY,  
WITHOUT FAIL, A MORE  
EDUCATED CANDIDATE  
THAN WE'VE EVER SEEN  
—BAR NONE.**

"We are seeing today, without fail, a more educated candidate than we've ever seen—bar none," Sutton says. "And when I say educated, it might be about our model, it might be about the market, it might just be about franchising, or all of those. But I will tell you that people are more educated today, in my opinion, than they've ever been."

While Sutton is spending more money to reach those discerning prospects than in the past, he knows his data. He uses it to calculate ROI, hedge his bets, and watch his budget when driving decisions and staying innovative. Metrics, like lead volume, close rate, and cost per lead, guide every move. Channel investments are based on prior performance and a tolerance to experiment with a new tactic to see if it delivers and converts in a meaningful way.

"We do fail fast," Sutton says. "Things that aren't working, we're pivoting those dollars into other channels."



**Van Ingram**  
Jack in the Box, Del Taco  
Vice President of  
Franchise Development

Unleashed Brands' marketing strategy works on two levels. Each brand—Urban Air Adventure Park, The Little Gym, Sylvan Learning, Snapology, XP League, Class 101, Premier Martial Arts, and Water Wings Swim School—receives a customized marketing plan tailored to its unique growth goals, development stage, and target audience. Platform-wide initiatives, such as shared campaigns and cross-promotional efforts, create synergy across the entire portfolio, explains Abby Fogel, vice president of brand management and communications for Unleashed Brands. System-wide, the company awarded more than 200 new franchises and opened 116 new locations in 2024.

"This dual-layered approach optimizes growth for individual brands while leveraging the collective power of the platform," Fogel says.

## ROI

Unleashed Brands starts every franchise development marketing budget by reverse engineering the process to meet growth goals. Factors that influence budget decisions include:

- The number of new franchisees projected for each brand
- The historical cost per deal, factoring in potential market changes or variations in lead quality

The total marketing budget is calculated by multiplying the target number of franchisees by the cost per deal. From there, it's all about strategic allocation, Fogel says.

"We divide the budget across key channels: digital ads, content creation—like fresh videos and storytelling—PR, and more, balancing lead generation with building long-term brand awareness," Fogel says. "A portion is also reserved for testing new strategies or making website enhancements. This ensures we're staying innovative and adaptable in a fast-changing market."





**Abby Fogel**

Unleashed Brands

Vice President of Brand  
Management & Communications

Staying agile is key, which means keeping up with industry and tech trends. These days, headlines are dominated by artificial intelligence (AI).

Unleashed has turned to AI as the initial touchpoint for leads, handling outreach and scheduling introductory calls with recruiters. The move has reduced the time it takes to go from an inquiry to a scheduled call and increased the number of calls booked. Unleashed Brands is reaching more qualified prospects faster than before using AI.

“By automating those early interactions, we free up our team to focus on building deeper, more meaningful relationships further down the funnel,” Fogel adds. “AI helps us be efficient without sacrificing the personal touch that’s so important in franchise development. We have crafted compelling content that we constantly refine to maximize our efforts.”

Thompson is also intrigued by leveraging AI to pull data and provide immediate insights.

“It can provide real-time reporting on trends you may or may not have felt but couldn’t put your finger on,” Thompson says. “It can quickly find commonalities between lead conversions, which can help you make data-informed decisions much quicker.”

Advancements in video also provide a competitive edge. Feature-rich, tailored video allows Thompson and his team at Jack in the Box and Del Taco to easily produce messaging for outreach or follow-up via a cell phone or computer. It’s a more personal approach than email.

“It’s not uncommon for our sales team to record five-plus videos per day,” Thompson says. “We do this to stand out from our competition, but most importantly, we do this because it allows us to connect with people remotely in a more personable way. This entire business is built on relationships, and that starts from the first time they interact with our franchise website.”

Josh York, founder and CEO of GymGuyz, was an early adopter of innovative strategies to promote brand awareness. The brand practices a hybrid

franchise development model using brokers and organic, omnipresent marketing. York, who launched his brand from a dining room table in 2008, is a pro at sharing the story of GymGuyz. He relies largely on digital methods, and his “Fuel Your Drive” podcast generates an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 downloads per episode.

“If someone’s not talking about you, then you’re not making enough noise,” York says.

The world’s largest in-home and on-site personal training company, with 180 locations in 27 states and three countries, remains in growth mode, projecting to open 85 to 100 locations in 2025.

“We award franchises; we don’t sell them,” York says. “I make sure I’m very disciplined when it comes to trying to bring in the right people.”

### Overcoming hurdles

The opportunities in franchise recruitment aren’t without challenges. They include managing rising costs while adapting to new automated tools and other budget constraints and capturing the attention of buyers in an increasingly crowded digital space.

“You can have the best content available, but if it doesn’t capture a candidate’s attention within a few seconds, the ability to convert that lead drops drastically,” Thompson says. “As consumers ourselves, we know all of our candidates are receiving marketing and advertising messages 24/7 across their desktops and, predominantly, mobile devices. The amount of time we have to grab their attention with a digital ad or social post is extremely short.”

No matter the approach for lead generation and recruitment, each provides franchisors valuable lessons for strategically allocating resources to maximize marketing and advertising budgets as long as it’s being tracked.

Measuring clear KPIs, such as engagement rates, click-through rates, conversion rates, and the amount of time audiences spend on content,



**Josh York**

GymGuyz  
Founder & CEO

“

**THIS ENTIRE  
BUSINESS IS BUILT ON  
RELATIONSHIPS, AND  
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THE FIRST TIME THEY  
INTERACT WITH OUR  
FRANCHISE WEBSITE.”**

remains critical to measuring and refining the effectiveness of every step of the development process.

Still, there’s no guarantee the prospect you sign will be the franchise owner that recruiters first envisioned. York emphasizes the importance of defining and understanding your ideal franchisee profile.

“It’s really understanding your avatar of who is going to be successful,” York says. “But that’s always going to be a challenge. You have to do a good job and make sure you have the infrastructure and operations internally to support that person and make sure you are driving them and holding them accountable.”

Ultimately, brands with a high-value proposition, strong unit-level economics, and happy franchisees have a story to tell. At Empower Brands, referrals from existing franchise owners remain the top tactic for conversions as the platform seeks to grow and scale the culture of its system.

“I think you can create an emotional call to action by putting the candidate as the hero in the story, not the brand,” Sutton says. “If you’re adopting the science and you can blend in the art, then you’ve got something that’s special, and fundamentally, you’ve got a good brand.” ■

# Getting Results with Best Practices

The franchise development team at Del Taco and Jack in the Box exemplify best practices in targeting high-quality prospects while maximizing the impact of their marketing and advertising budgets. The moves to overhaul the franchise development process for both brands, which lean heavily on transparency and in-house video content creation with a personal touch, are paying off.

Without increasing the budget from 2022 to 2024, the multi-brand franchisor achieved significant improvements across all stages of the recruitment process, including a 71% reduction in cost per deal, a 68% decrease in cost per qualified lead, a 245% increase in total leads, a 209% growth in qualified leads, a 154% rise in sales-qualified leads, and a 164% surge in meetings booked.

Dustin Thompson, who serves as director of franchise development and marketing for both brands, shared how the brands are achieving lead generation success and lessons other brands can adopt.

## Define goals annually

Effective franchise recruitment begins with clearly defined objectives. The team sets annual targets for marketing qualified leads (MQLs), sales qualified leads (SQLs), and target markets to ensure everyone on the development team is on the same page with the goals of both brands.

## Leverage data

Data analytics drives every step of the recruitment process.

“Once we’ve defined our target audiences and are aligned on what qualifies as a qualified lead, we take a running average of our historical conversions from each funnel step from prior years to make a data-informed decision on what metrics are most closely related to achieving our lead goals for the year,” Thompson explains.

The lead generation team monitors each step of the lead generation and sales process. The more than 30 KPIs tracked include website conversion rates, video views, minutes of videos watched, email engagement metrics, the speed of lead follow-ups, and the cost per lead, MQL, SQL, and closed deals.

These goals and insights are analyzed daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly via a robust sales and marketing tech stack that provides a comprehensive window into what works and what doesn’t, so adjustments can be made.

“This allows us to keep producing the content our candidates need to determine if our brands are a good fit for them as quickly as possible,” Thompson adds.

If Thompson’s CMS/CRM doesn’t provide what he needs, he seeks tools that support the development effort. For instance, integrating the video marketing platform Wistia has provided a seamless way to deliver data directly into a candidate’s profile and identify the content that resonates the most so that the team can refine its approach.

## The right message

Understanding the target audience is important when driving direction. With data on ideal candidates and target groups in hand, Thompson and his team shift their focus to where they are looking to expand the presence of Jack in the Box and Del Taco.

“Where do those people live? Where can we target those people?” Thompson says. “Then we work on setting up marketing, digital marketing, and partnerships with magazines and publications to go out and find those groups. The second part is identifying and sharing that information with those potential prospects on our website.”

Creating personas and segmenting potential candidates informs digital strategies, content strategies, and offline methods, such as trade shows, to connect in person, Thompson says.

For example, if targeting a prospect in the hotel industry, the messaging might focus on how QSR franchising differs from hotel franchising, define available territories, and/or explain site requirements. Extensive website content is easy for prospects to find and digest.

“The key is conversations,” Thompson says. “We want to generate really beneficial conversations with qualified leads, and this allows us to get in front of those leads faster because we’re providing more information to them sooner.”

## Advice for Recruiting Franchisees from the Pros

- “Stay flexible and open to change—that’s my biggest piece of advice. The franchise world is always evolving, and the strategies that worked last year may not resonate with today’s candidates. Take time to review and adapt your processes regularly to keep up with the market and your audience’s needs. Most importantly, remember that technology is just a tool. At the heart of every successful franchise system are strong relationships, whether it’s with franchisees, customers, or your internal team. Stay focused on building trust, creating value, and fostering a culture that people want to be part of. That’s what will set you apart in the long run.”  
—Abby Fogel, vice president of brand management and communications, *Unleashed Brands*
- “Most brands do not have lead generation teams within their franchise development departments, and I think this is a huge miss. We were able to bring these roles in-house, which saved a great deal of money on agency fees. Beyond that, it provided us the ability to produce better content more quickly. Because our content is produced in-house, the content we write, produce, and record is done so by those who are living the brand each day. This leads to better quality content, which leads to better quality leads.”  
—Dustin Thompson, director of franchise development and marketing, *Jack in the Box and Del Taco*
- “I would encourage anyone in the franchise marketplace looking at their ad budget to be prepared to make incremental spend. But you’ve got to know your data. You have to know where your dollars are performing, where you’re getting ROI, and where you’re not. If you’re not doing that, then you can spend more, but you’re at risk for not delivering anything above what you’re delivering today.”  
—R. Scott Sutton, chief development officer, *Empower Brands*
- “With the continuation of the world toward convenience and how people have everything within seconds on their phone, you have to continue to be very aggressive with creating that omnipresence. You can’t do one thing and not do the others. You have to have your hands in a little bit of everything. Test and see what works, and if something doesn’t work, pull away from it and try something else.”  
—Josh York, founder and CEO, *GymGuyz*



# How do you deploy your marketing spend to deliver your brand's message and maximize ROI?



## ELYSE BLOUIN

Chief Marketing Officer  
WellBiz Brands

In today's fast-paced business environment, effective marketing is integral to achieving organizational success. From setting clear goals to optimizing budget allocations, marketing plays a pivotal role in driving immediate results and long-term growth. Here's an inside look at how we approach marketing planning, budget management, and campaign evaluation as a team at WellBiz Brands.

When setting annual marketing goals, we begin by aligning them with our organization's overarching objectives. This includes key priorities, such as achieving sales targets, attracting new customers, and enhancing member retention. By closely examining the resources and capabilities needed to meet these goals, we ensure our strategies are ambitious and achievable. We view marketing as a strategic partner within the organization, working to support overall financial performance and long-term success.

Balancing short-term wins with long-term vision is critical when aligning our marketing spend. During budgeting, we account for customer demand, sales objectives, and seasonal opportunities where heightened efforts can yield significant returns. By investing in a mix of brand-building initiatives and performance marketing, we create a cohesive, full-funnel strategy. This ensures immediate impact while fostering lasting brand equity and customer loyalty.

As leaders of the marketing team, we take full ownership of managing and allocating the budget. This responsibility allows us to direct resources strategically toward initiatives that align with our organizational priorities. This approach enables us to remain agile, optimizing spend to meet immediate demands and seize long-term opportunities. By maintaining this flexibility, we quickly adapt to changing market conditions or capitalize on emerging trends.

An effective media mix is central to maximizing ROI. We leverage a media mix model to evaluate the performance of each channel and its contribution to overall sales. This data-driven approach provides insights into historical trends, helping refine our channel allocations. Additionally, AI-driven tools enable us to optimize spend dynamically, ensuring resources are directed where they can make the greatest impact. Digital channels, such as search, social, and programmatic advertising, remain top priorities that are complemented by investments in targeted audio and video platforms to engage audiences where they consume content most.

Measuring the success of marketing spend relies on KPIs that provide actionable insights. ROI is a top priority for us, offering a direct measure of financial return. Booking conversion rates also play a significant role, reflecting the effectiveness of campaigns in driving customer engagement and sales. These metrics help ensure our efforts are effective and aligned with WellBiz Brands' overarching goals.

As we modernize our reporting capabilities at WellBiz Brands, we're focused on gaining deep insights and robust data on campaign performance. This evolution will enable us to identify and share examples of highly successful marketing campaigns that deliver exceptional ROI. By enhancing our ability to capture and analyze performance metrics, we set the stage for transparency and effectiveness in our marketing efforts.

In conclusion, a strategic and data-driven approach to marketing ensures alignment with organizational goals, optimized resource allocation, and measurable impact. By continuously refining our strategies and leveraging the latest tools and insights, we're committed to driving sustained success and creating meaningful connections with our customers. ■



*By optimizing our media mix, we balance cost-effectiveness with impactful storytelling, using video for top-of-the-funnel awareness and engagement.*



## MARIA TRUJILLO

Chief Marketing Officer  
Cicis Pizza

Cicis deploys its marketing spend strategically through a full-funnel media approach that ensures consistent brand visibility and drives measurable ROI. Supporting more than 270 locations nationwide, our marketing strategy is designed to maximize both awareness and engagement while catering to each Cicis store's specific needs and market potential.

We maintain a year-round presence with targeted efforts during key periods, like May through September when kids are home from school and family dining becomes a priority. By optimizing our media mix, we balance cost-effectiveness with impactful storytelling, using video for top-of-the-funnel awareness and engagement. Social, display, and search campaigns play crucial roles in driving store visits and conversions at the bottom of the funnel, allowing us to remain efficient and results oriented.

Our stores are organized into tiers based on their potential sales contributions, enabling us to customize the media mix for maximum effect. Broadcast spending is carefully allocated to designated market areas with a high concentration of Cicis locations, ensuring that these regions benefit from market-wide buys. Meanwhile, digital media is precision targeted within a trade area radius for individual stores, reaching customers where they live and dine.

To further maximize ROI, we've partnered with Arm Candy and Epsilon to harness the power of data-driven paid media. These partnerships have allowed us to leverage purchase history insights to effectively engage Cicis' active guests while reactivating lapsed customers. Through these targeted campaigns, we've successfully increased visit frequency, ensuring our media spend delivers measurable outcomes.

Ultimately, Cicis' marketing spend is deployed with a dual focus: supporting our core brand messaging while amplifying the visibility of our LTOs and seasonal promotions. By blending data, creativity, and a customer-first approach, Cicis continues to reinforce its position as a legacy brand evolving to meet the needs of today's consumers in a competitive dining landscape. ■





## CRISSY RUSSO

*Vice President, National Brand Marketing*  
Junk King

At Junk King, a strong marketing mix is at the core of our strategy. By combining digital and traditional tactics, we can create a balance between building brand awareness and driving quick-hit conversions. Our approach is centered around the marketing funnel, focusing on awareness, consideration, conversion, and loyalty to ensure that every dollar spent contributes to growing and retaining our customer base.

To maximize ROI, we push hard for market share through brand awareness campaigns while leaning into conversion-focused tactics that drive immediate results. But it doesn't stop there. Retaining customers is critical, which is why we invest in repeat and referral campaigns designed to build long-term loyalty.

Cost efficiency is another key priority. We work hand in hand with operations to ensure we deliver the best quality service as great marketing always

starts with great operations. When customers experience exceptional service, they're likely to return and refer us to friends and family, which naturally amplifies our marketing efforts without additional spend.

Finally, staying ahead of trends is crucial. Whether it's exploring new digital platforms or reimagining traditional approaches, we're always evolving our strategy to ensure we're connecting with customers in ways that are relevant and impactful. By combining a dynamic mix of tactics with exceptional operations, we deliver our brand's message effectively and maximize ROI across the board. ■



## ABBY TAYLOR

*Co-Founder and Chief Marketing Officer*  
Playa Bowls

At Playa Bowls, we've spent years testing and refining our promotions and messaging to learn what resonates the most with our target audiences. This allows us to confidently focus our resources on the strategies that will get the most bang for our buck while ensuring every campaign is meaningful and delivers results for our locations.

Staying true to our story has been our key to success. From our humble beginnings as a cart on 8th Avenue in Belmar, New Jersey, to nearly 300 locations nationwide, this connection to our roots helps us effectively deliver our brand message. Many of our loyal fans have been with us since the start and have grown alongside us through each new state and community we offer the chance to escape to "Pineappleland."

A major part of our strategy in 2025 involves getting back to our roots and creatively telling the story of what makes Playa Bowls unique. We prioritize platforms, like Instagram and TikTok, which allow us to showcase our visually stunning bowls

and foster a sense of community while maintaining the playful, beachy vibe that defines us as a brand. Whether we reach people through collaborations with influencers or new limited-time menu item promotions, every effort needs to tie back to celebrating healthy living and creating a space where everyone can find their Playa. X, Pinterest, and LinkedIn are also essential in meeting our target demographics where they spend the most time online.

Additionally, our Playa Rewards program allows us to speak directly to our guests through email, push notifications, and exclusive promotions. Rewards are tailored to their purchasing habits, ensuring that every interaction strengthens their connection to our brand story. ■

# Teeing Up Good Times

CMO drives brand engagement with both types of golfers

Written by KERRY PIPES





**J**ed Lewis maintains a balancing act as CMO of Five Iron Golf.

Sure, he plays the traditional role of leading the brand's marketing strategy, brand positioning, and campaigns to drive growth and connect with key audiences. But, he says, there are two distinct customer bases the brand must cater to.

"At Five Iron Golf, we strive to appeal to both avid golfers who live and breathe the game and social, casual players seeking a fun, welcoming environment," he says. "Walking this tightrope requires a deep understanding of the entire spectrum of customer relationships with golf and creating a brand experience where everyone feels at home."

More than 45 million Americans age 6 and up played golf in 2023, according to the National Golf Foundation. That breaks down to 26.6 million people who played on golf courses and another 18.4 million who participated in off-course golf activities at driving ranges, indoor golf simulators, and golf entertainment venues. The team at Five Iron Golf wants a piece of both markets.

At its core, Five Iron Golf integrates technology, social engagement, fun, and a spirit of competition, bringing a fresh take to the indoor golf experience. Its centers offer customers year-round accessibility in the middle of urban locations. There's something for everyone and every level, including golf lessons, corporate events, social gatherings, and casual play.

The brand is experiencing growth across North America, Asia, the Middle East, and Australia. There are now 34 locations in 15 states and five countries. Earlier this year, Five Iron Golf announced its largest franchise development deal to date: 12 locations are set to open in Florida. Those are impressive numbers for a brand that got its start in 2017 and only began franchising in 2023.

Lewis circles back to the marketing challenges of reaching different types of golfers. "On a tighter budget, it's a balancing act of investment across the consumer journey, but it is critical to make sure we are always bringing new people into the brand," he says.

**Describe your role as CMO.** It's about developing a deep, nuanced understanding of our diverse consumer base and truly getting to know what they want and expect from the brand and how Five Iron Golf fits seamlessly into their lives. This goes beyond identifying preferences; it involves uncovering the motivations and behaviors that drive engagement with our brand.

**What's the most challenging part of being a CMO today?** The most challenging aspect is navigating the balance between catering to diverse audiences and maintaining a cohesive brand identity.

Our mission is to ensure that Five Iron Golf is a space where no matter your familiarity or skill level with the game, you find something that resonates with you. For the seasoned golfer, we offer cutting-edge technology and an environment to

hone their skills. For the casual player, we provide an accessible, fun atmosphere where the focus is on enjoying the experience rather than perfecting the swing.

What makes this possible is Five Iron's ability to break down barriers traditionally associated with golf. There's no need to travel long distances to a course or limit play to fair-weather months. Our locations offer year-round accessibility in the heart of urban centers.

**What are the three most important keys to being an effective CMO leader today?**

1. **Be consumer obsessed.** We do everything we can to stay close to the needs and behaviors of our core consumers.
2. **Crawl, walk, run.** At Five Iron, we pride ourselves on our agility and ability to stand up ideas quickly, run time-bound or geographic tests, and scale if we see success.
3. **Be mindful and invest in the entire customer journey.** I am wary of overinvesting in lower-funnel digital marketing tactics that are attractive because they are measurable while ignoring the importance of awareness and brand building at the top of the funnel.

**How do you prepare a marketing plan and execute the strategies?** Extensive research across all major markets forms the foundation of our strategy. This includes analyzing key insights and identifying core personas to uncover how each persona interacts with the brand and what they want from their experience with Five Iron.

Once we have a clear picture of our audience, we examine the full marketing funnel from awareness to consideration to conversion. This holistic view helps us determine where we can have the most significant impact at each stage of the consumer journey.

The insights gathered from research guide our strategic decisions, enabling us to craft targeted campaigns that resonate with diverse audiences. These strategies are then executed with precision, ensuring that every touchpoint, digital and physical, aligns with our goal of delivering a compelling and consistent brand experience.

**How do you measure marketing results and effectiveness?** At Five Iron Golf, we rely on a comprehensive set of KPIs to evaluate the effectiveness of our marketing efforts. As we evolve into a data-centric organization, two key metrics stand out for me: website traffic and new user traffic. These indicators provide valuable insights into whether our campaigns successfully drive awareness and attract fresh audiences to the brand.

In addition to these, we monitor standard marketing KPIs, such as return on advertising spend, click-through rates, and other engagement metrics. However, I place particular emphasis on new user website traffic because it is a clear indicator of our ability to reach untapped audiences and expand our customer base.

**Discuss your core consumer marketing strategies and objectives.** Our consumer marketing strategies are grounded in extensive research that has allowed us to identify distinct customer personas and their motivations for engaging with Five Iron Golf. These personas help us understand the various reasons people are drawn to the brand, whether for golf lessons, corporate events, social gatherings, or casual play. Using this insight, we develop individualized tactics tailored to the specific needs of each persona and overarching strategies that tap into broader trends.

**How do you go about creating a customer-centric marketing and brand philosophy?** It starts with the foundational work of truly listening to and understanding our consumers. This means conducting in-depth research, analyzing data, and challenging assumptions. One of the most common pitfalls for marketers is allowing personal biases or anecdotal observations to influence decision-making. At Five Iron Golf, we focus on insights that apply across our diverse markets. Listening to our customers helps us refine our strategies and ensure that every marketing initiative reflects their needs, desires, and expectations.

**Describe your marketing team and the role each of them plays.** The marketing team at Five Iron Golf is a collaborative group of specialists, each bringing their expertise to the table:

- The VP of marketing oversees all major initiatives and ensures alignment with the company's broader goals.
- The head of social media and content manages our social media presence and creates engaging content that amplifies the brand's voice.
- The integrated marketing managers focus on website marketing and SEO strategies while ensuring a seamless user experience across digital platforms.
- The in-house graphic designer develops creative assets that visually represent the brand and resonate with our target audience.
- The digital marketing director leads the digital marketing strategy, optimizing campaigns and managing the advertising budget to maximize ROI.

Together, this team drives Five Iron Golf's marketing efforts with creativity and precision.

**Why is it so important for the marketing department to have a personal touch when it comes to helping the brand connect with franchise prospects?** At Five Iron Golf, we recognize that each franchisee has unique goals, challenges, and local market dynamics. By taking the time to understand their needs, we gain valuable insights that help us refine our strategies. This collaboration builds rapport and ensures that our approach aligns with the realities of their business environment. This personal, tailored approach strengthens our partnerships and ensures that each

franchisee feels supported, equipped, and confident to succeed.

**How does this help your franchise sales and development effort?** By fostering personal connections and offering tailored marketing support, we create a collaborative environment that empowers franchisees to thrive. This approach allows us to understand the unique needs of each location, enabling us to focus PR and media buying where it will have the greatest effect. By gaining insight into local markets, we can craft marketing strategies that drive both awareness and conversions, balancing the serious golf performance side with the social and entertainment appeal of Five Iron Golf.

**What ways/tools do you rely on to do this?** We rely on a blend of technology, direct engagement, and shared resources to support our franchise partners. Regular communication and internal playbooks form the foundation of our organic approach, helping us launch new locations, build awareness, and establish a loyal customer base.

We also provide access to enterprise systems for scheduling, email marketing, and CRM, ensuring franchisees can manage operations efficiently. Tools, including a print platform and editable templates in Canva, empower our partners to easily create localized marketing materials.

**Do today's prospects expect more from the franchise marketing department? What, and how do you provide it?** Franchisees now look for support that goes beyond broad, global initiatives. At Five Iron Golf, we pride ourselves on working closely with each of our franchisees to address their specific needs while aligning with overarching brand objectives. This tailored support ensures that franchisees feel heard and equipped to succeed in their local markets while benefiting from broad strategies that drive our brand's growth. Whether it's marketing materials, local campaigns, or operational support, we focus on providing actionable, individualized solutions that empower our franchisees.

**How is today's consumer and marketing data helping you fine-tune your marketing initiatives?** Consumer and marketing data play crucial roles in refining our strategies at Five Iron Golf. We are heavily data centric and make it a point to analyze data daily. This allows us to optimize our digital campaigns and out-of-home advertising efforts by making informed decisions about where and how to place our brand's touchpoints for maximum effect.

To support this, we have dedicated resources focused on data analysis, ensuring that our marketing decisions are not based on intuition but on real-time insights. By continuously evaluating data, we can adjust our tactics and investments to serve our target audiences and enhance the overall customer experience.

**Describe the evolving role of social media in your brand's marketing efforts.** Social media

has become an integral part of our brand's marketing strategy. At Five Iron Golf, we have a dedicated social media lead who manages our organic social media presence. We post daily to entertain and engage our customers. Our main focus is to inform, entertain, and build a sense of community among our followers.

We understand the importance of staying connected with our audience on a regular basis, so we strive to have meaningful content to share at all times. Additionally, we have taken steps to partner with influencers who align with our brand values, helping to expand our reach and connect with new audiences. Social media is no longer just about marketing; it's about creating a platform where our brand and customers can interact, share experiences, and build lasting relationships.

**How do you work with other internal departments, and does technology help?** Marketing at Five Iron Golf is the central hub that connects all departments. We work closely with sales, operations, and product development teams to ensure that all efforts are aligned and driving the same objectives. Communication between departments is key to executing integrated campaigns that resonate with our consumers.

Technology plays an essential role in this cross-department collaboration. Tools like Asana help us track and manage projects efficiently, ensuring everyone is on the same page and meeting deadlines.

**Which technology tools are most valuable to you and why?** Several technology tools are vital to our marketing efforts at Five Iron Golf:

- Asana is a project management tool that helps us stay organized, track progress, and collaborate effectively on various marketing initiatives.
- CRM and email tools allow us to nurture customer relationships, deliver targeted messaging, and track engagement.
- Data collection and insight-building tools provide valuable consumer insights and enable us to make informed decisions based on real-time data, helping us fine-tune marketing strategies and maximize ROI.

**How do you stay on top of changing technology?** Staying ahead of the curve when it comes to technology is a priority at Five Iron Golf. We are always assessing new tools, trends, and technologies to help us evolve the business and communicate effectively with our consumers. The key is constant fine-tuning and adapting to changes as they happen rather than reacting after the fact.

**How do you manage costs and budgets for the marketing department?** We manage marketing budgets by considering them as a percentage of overall revenue, which helps ensure that our spending is aligned with the company's financial performance. We also break down the budget by product line, consumer segment, and seasonality,

allowing us to allocate resources efficiently and focus on high-impact initiatives at the right times.

**Do you see vendors as business partners? Why/why not?** Absolutely. We view our agency partners as true collaborators rather than just service providers. The agencies we work with must understand our brand's challenges and goals as well as the problems we're trying to solve. Our external relationships are built on mutual respect and shared objectives, and we strive to maintain partnerships that feel like an extension of our internal team.

**How is your marketing/branding strategy developed, and how does it flow through the system?** Our marketing and branding strategy begins with a deep dive into understanding our core audience through extensive research, persona development, and market analysis. This foundation ensures that every decision is rooted in data and designed to meet the needs of our diverse customers.

Once the strategy is defined, it flows seamlessly through our system. It starts with leadership alignment to ensure buy-in across all departments and extends to product design, messaging, and activation. We focus on equipping teams, both internal and franchise partners, with clear guidelines, creative assets, and actionable insights that reflect the brand's voice and values. By measuring performance and gathering input from franchisees and consumers alike, we can fine-tune our strategy, improve product offerings, and ensure relevancy in a dynamic market.

**What advice would you offer to aspiring CMO executives?**

- **Know your audience inside and out.** Deep consumer insights are the foundation of successful marketing. Invest in understanding your customers' needs, motivations, and behaviors.
- **Stay adaptable.** The marketing landscape is constantly changing. Embrace innovation, test new ideas, and don't be afraid to pivot when necessary.
- **Focus on collaboration.** Great marketing is a team effort. Build strong relationships with cross-functional teams and external partners to ensure alignment and success.
- **Balance data with creativity.** Leverage data to inform decisions, but don't lose sight of the power of storytelling and brand building to create emotional connections.
- **Never stop learning.** The best CMOs are always curious, seeking out new trends, tools, and perspectives to stay ahead in an ever-evolving field. ■



# Persona Non Grata?

## A case for breaking away from persona marketing

Written by **JACK MONSON**

**T**he idea of persona marketing is simple: create detailed profiles of your ideal candidates based on demographics, behaviors, and interests and make targeted campaigns that supposedly resonate with them.

While this method has been popular in many industries, is relying on personas for marketing franchise ownership opportunities effective?

Franchise development marketing is a very different vibe than the numbers game of consumer marketing. The decision to invest in a franchise is too personal, nuanced, and dynamic to be reduced to static stereotypes.

Personas are static and often based on outdated research. A candidate's behavior changes as quickly as the marketplace does. Static personas can't keep pace with evolving technologies or economic changes that impact how and why people consider franchise ownership.

A persona like "corporate refugee" ignores the motivations and circumstances that drive individuals to explore franchise opportunities. It reduces the decision-making process to stereotypes and assumptions, missing the mark with potential candidates who don't fit neatly into predefined boxes.

One last knock on personas: Do you fit any certain persona? Personas feel like something that

we think fits everyone else but not ourselves. I'm guessing that we're all in dozens of CRMs labeled as some persona that we would argue is a bad match with the real us. It's a snapshot of what someone else wants us to match. This risks alienating high-potential candidates who don't align with the imagined archetype. It leads to marketing efforts that feel inauthentic and out of touch.

Here are a few ideas to break away from the templated personas and create marketing messages that may touch someone at a place and time that matter to them.

### **Stop generational targeting**

The first step to get away from using personas is to stop lumping so many people together and calling it targeting. Let's start with overly simplified age groups.

Many marketing experts have hung their hats on marketing to Millennials and now marketing to Gen Z. We've all been subjected to endless talk of targeting each general age group, and each group makes broad assumptions about the next. Good targeting is not painting 90 million people with the same brush.

### **Market to situations**

Share content that people in the right situations will find compelling.

Stop retelling your origin stories and start looking at conversion stories within your brand. No one cares about your franchisees' demographics, age, gender, ethnicity, or background. Candidates want to hear about the experiences that lead to successful business ownership. Were they in a similar situation? That's what makes an impression.

### **Improve content creation**

Are your ads generic? Have you used phrases like "be your own boss" in the past few years? It's time for a change!

The content of your ads is all that matters going forward. The growing AI focus by ad platforms means less manual targeting and more views of your ads based on the content and the likelihood of engagement.

### **Adopt intent-based marketing**

When strategies are designed around what prospects are actively seeking, franchisors are far more likely to find prospects in an appropriate place in the decision-making journey.

For instance, someone searching for "best franchises to own in 2025" is likely in the early research phase while someone exploring your franchise's financial requirements page is closer to making a decision.

Tailoring your marketing efforts to these intent signals yields better results than relying on persona-based assumptions about what your audience might want. These intentions ignore the candidates' demographics and personas, and so should we! ■

**Jack Monson** is the CEO of franchise development marketing agency Brand J and has been helping franchisors with digital marketing for 15 years. He is also the owner and host of "Social Geek," the top podcast in franchising.



# WORLD-CLASS CUSTOMER SERVICE

How Chick-fil-A gets a young workforce to deliver

Written by **JOHN DIJULIUS**

The most common complaint I get from my audiences and consulting clients is about how bad the young labor force is and how this generation doesn't want to work hard. I cannot disagree more. This is a crutch leaders use to avoid improving employee culture and building a strong recruiting and onboarding experience.

If the younger generation is so poor, how do The Ritz-Carlton, Chick-fil-A, Apple, Starbucks, Nordstrom, and John Robert's Spa consistently produce an excellent customer experience with the same generation?

### Coach them up

Competency is important to Chick-fil-A's recipe, but it is not the priority in their selection process. Most companies start with competency. However, competency can be taught, and in many customer-interacting positions, you can find employees with similar skill sets. Chick-fil-A prioritizes character and chemistry over competency, and it begins with a conversation.

During the interview process, Chick-fil-A focuses on asking, "Why do you want to do this?" The "what" and the "how" are elementary, but the candidate's "why" reveals authenticity. After the initial interview, Chick-fil-A deepens the strategy, testing whether this person wants to do this job and whether existing employees want the potential candidate as a colleague. They put prospective hires in a restaurant, observe them, and give them time to shadow existing employees. The candidate can see what the job requires and get a feel for if it is right for them. Managers also get a feel for the candidate.

### Create emotional bonds

Chick-fil-A says its service is consistent because it invests more than other companies in training employees and helping them advance their careers—regardless of whether those careers are in fast food. The company creates emotional bonds with its employees.

Leaders are encouraged to ask new hires about career goals and try to help workers achieve them. "Do you know the dreams of your team?" leaders are constantly asked. For Kevin Moss, a Chick-fil-A manager of more than 20 years, supporting his team has meant funding an employee's marketing degree and paying another worker to take photography classes.

Moss says he tries to support employees in times of need. For example, if an employee's family member is in the hospital, he will send food to the family and hospital staff. "I've found people are more motivated and respond better when you care about them," Moss told Business Insider.

This best-in-class, customer experience-leading company offers leadership positions in all of its restaurants with increased pay and responsibilities. Crew members can work toward director positions in marketing, cleanliness, kitchen operations, and drive-thru operations. "The better we train, the longer people stay with us," Moss says. It is a focus on bringing out the best in people so that the best can then be offered.

### Employee experience

We can look to Chick-fil-A's business model to see why it's an industry leader in the restaurant business year after year. It goes beyond basics, such as food quality, restaurant cleanliness, and speed of service. It's about more than chicken sandwiches. Chick-fil-A's leaders know there is a direct correlation between customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction.

Training employees to deliver superior customer service begins with high standards in employee selection. This means choosing people with high character who exhibit chemistry with existing employees, investing in their training, offering leadership positions, and supporting their goals outside their Chick-fil-A roles. This approach attracts and retains great talent, leads to frictionless customer experience, inspires customer loyalty, and keeps the company tops in customer satisfaction.

Chick-fil-A is meticulous about whom it selects to run its restaurants (operators and team leaders) and work in its restaurants (team members). Chick-fil-A's selection process for franchisees is impressive. The company receives about 20,000 applications annually for franchises and awards only about 100 new stores annually. How many institutions do you know that have a 0.5% acceptance rate? Harvard University's acceptance rate hovers around 5%, about ten times higher than Chick-fil-A's. Bain & Company's acceptance rate for 60,000 or so recent college grads who applied for jobs last year ran just under 2%, reinforcing how picky Chick-fil-A is.



### Talent magnet

Chick-fil-A's widespread reputation for offering a world-class customer experience filters out potential candidates who are looking for only paychecks as well as those who don't want to be held to a high standard or make a positive impact.

Chick-fil-A places tremendous importance on selecting amazing leaders. One of their primary decision filters for making informed decisions when selecting the best leaders is asking, "Is this someone who cares about others and will pour genuine love and care into their team? And is this someone I would want my child to work for? Also, is it apparent that these values are part of this potential employee's lifestyle outside the workplace?"

When the core team of leaders (operators and their top directors) consists of these kinds of people, great talent gets interested. So many companies view recruiting and talent as if it's "throw out the line and drag in the fish." But what if that fish wants to jump into the boat? Magnets attract, and when you start with a quality core of leaders, quality is reeled in. ■

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# How do you appeal to and attract the most promising prospects?



## LISA MONTANIO

*Director of Franchise Development*  
CMIT Solutions

Attracting top-tier franchise prospects is about fostering a diverse, inclusive, and supportive environment where CMIT Solutions business owners can thrive. Our franchise network has unique strengths, perspectives, and talents, offering opportunities that align with both professional ambitions and personal goals. While we welcome individuals from all backgrounds, there is a strategic emphasis on veterans and women as part of our 2025 vision.

Veterans possess qualities that seamlessly align with the CMIT franchise model. Their leadership, discipline, and ability to work within structured processes position them as exceptional business owners. Veterans often approach challenges with a mission-driven focus, and CMIT's franchise system provides opportunities that allow them to continue serving their communities. In addition to helping veterans navigate the transition from military to careers, CMIT also addresses barriers by providing tailored support and resources to make business ownership accessible.

Women bring adaptability, resilience, and a unique ability to balance priorities—traits that enable them to excel as business owners. CMIT Solutions understands the challenges women often face,

particularly in navigating industries where they are underrepresented. By offering a business model that promotes flexibility and work-life balance, CMIT empowers women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures while maintaining their other commitments. The franchise opportunity also fosters a supportive environment where women can connect, mentor, and collaborate. This approach ensures that female franchisees feel empowered to take control of their careers and build financial independence.

To further enhance the appeal to these groups, CMIT provides comprehensive training, ongoing resources, and a strong support network. Franchisees benefit from the collaborative spirit within the CMIT community, which combines the personalized attention of locally owned businesses with the collective strength of a national network. This dual approach ensures every franchise owner has access to enterprise-level technology and industry-leading expertise while serving their local markets. ■



*Prospective operators are assured of the brand's profitability, operational simplicity, and robust support infrastructure, which includes marketing, training, and operational guidance.*



## CAROLYNE CANADY

Chief Development Officer  
Dave's Hot Chicken

At Dave's Hot Chicken, appealing to the most promising franchise prospects is an art and a science. My decades of experience in franchise development and operations have taught me that the key lies in aligning with individuals who share your vision, values, and passion for the brand.

**Q:** What keeps this kind of growth sustainable?

**A:** Exceptional unit economics, a simple operational model, relentless authenticity, and franchisees who see Dave's as a can't-miss investment opportunity.

First, we attract prospects by showcasing a compelling brand story that speaks to our scrappy spirit. Dave's Hot Chicken began as a passion project among friends in a parking lot and has become one of the fastest-growing brands ever. That's thanks to social media savviness and early investments from industry heavyweights, like the investment group behind Wetzel's Pretzels and Blaze Pizza.

Consistency reigns. Whether you're grabbing a bite in L.A., Dubai, or anywhere else, the energy, vibe, and quality remain unmatched. And like everything at Dave's, this is no accident. It's the result of top-tier in-house training, streamlined operations, and a straightforward menu that ensures every location feels personal and authentic. Our bold, crave-worthy hot chicken appeals to customers who seek flavor, quality, and consistency, creating a loyal fan base that drives foot traffic and repeat business.

Franchisees are consistently expanding into new territories, driven by outstanding financial performance and support from the franchisor—a clear sign of trust in our brand.

Fortunately, we're able to leverage our proven track record of growth. Since 2019, Dave's Hot Chicken has demonstrated exceptional performance, leading to rapid domestic and international expansion. Prospective operators are assured of the brand's profitability, operational simplicity, and robust support infrastructure, which includes marketing, training, and operational guidance. This combination of factors gives them confidence in their ability to achieve long-term scalability.

Of course, nurturing relationships is critical to maintaining the best franchise partners for our brand. To create the foundation for a lasting and fruitful partnership, I believe it's important to have transparency and open communication to discuss expectations, franchisees' goals, and how we can mutually support each other.

You can teach someone to run a restaurant, but you can't teach them to embody Dave's Hot Chicken's values: mind-blowing food, great service, and an awesome vibe—and we won't settle for anything less! ■





## BROOKS SPEIRS

Vice President of Franchise Sales  
Bojangles

When it comes to franchise development, the most effective approach is grounded in authenticity and mutual success. One of the most important things to convey to prospective franchisees is that we're not just a franchisor; we have skin in the game too.

As a brand with nearly 300 corporate-owned locations, Bojangles demonstrates our commitment and shared risks to create a foundation of trust with new and existing franchisees. A key part of this involves making smart, calculated decisions that prove you understand the business at all levels. For instance, testing new strategies internally rather than rolling them out to franchisees first shows commitment to minimizing risk and ensuring success. It's about investing in the concept yourself before inviting others to join you. When you are confident that your system works under your ownership, it becomes a much stronger opportunity for your franchisees.

Another crucial aspect of franchise development is creating opportunities for open dialogue with prospects. By hosting franchise events, like seminars and educational opportunities in target mar-

kets, you can engage potential franchisees directly, answer their questions, and make them feel part of the process. These events demonstrate that you're willing to invest in the system and in the education and success of those who will represent your brand.

Franchisees are looking for more than just a business opportunity; they're looking for a partner who understands their needs and challenges. A franchisor with corporate-owned locations is in a unique position to relate to franchisees because they've walked the walk. This shared experience strengthens the relationship and shows that the support you offer is based on real, operational expertise.

Finally, it's important to focus on showing the heart of your brand. Prospective franchisees want to know how they'll be supported and what kind of resources will be available to them. When you can communicate how your corporate strength fuels their success, you make the partnership appealing. Success is built on transparency, shared investment, and mutual support, and when you lead with that, you'll attract the most promising prospects. ■



## JEFF STURGIS

Chief Development Officer  
Another Broken Egg Cafe

At Another Broken Egg Cafe, we typically see three types of franchise prospects who ultimately become franchisees:

1. The experienced multi-unit operator with one or more units in one or more concepts who is looking to diversify their portfolio and recognizes the opportunity in the daytime-only dining segment
2. The experienced, nonfranchised business owner with a proven track record of success in those various enterprises attracted to us through their familiarity with our proven business opportunity
3. The local owner-operator in a small market with strong ties to the community and the intention and commitment to be active in their business

Knowing all of this, our approach to attracting these prospects varies more than the approach to appealing to them. From an appeal standpoint, we focus on several key things, including our strong AUVs and economic model, the daytime-only, one-shift operations, and the unique positioning of the brand within the daytime-only segment.

Prospects also appreciate the strength and experience of our leadership and support team, our commitment to building a successful franchise model for our franchisees, and our ability to be a

place of local community pride and connections as well as the restaurant of choice in a market. We are intentional in providing a transparent, open, and thorough path to understanding the franchise opportunity, the brand, our culture, and the brand's future. Our willingness to be honest in what we look for in a franchisee is an important part of the overall appeal. We also listen to what a prospective franchisee looks for in a brand.

As to how we attract our target prospects, we communicate with potential prospects directly and through public relations, utilizing storytelling around the brand, our franchisees, our food, and our culture. We also actively engage with the restaurant and franchise media channels. Many of our prospective franchisees are intentional in their research into the restaurant industry and the daytime segment in particular, so we want to be present and part of the conversation when they gather their information.

Commonly, candidates tell us that their research shows the growth and progress of the brand, the efforts we put into creating a great guest experience, and the great franchisee experience we provide. Finally, due to our 100-plus locations and the growth in new units over the past couple of years, the cafes themselves are a big source of attraction to the franchise opportunity. ■

# A CULTURE OF CURIOSITY

Inquisitive salespeople make the best recruiters

Written by **EVAN HACKEL**

If you ask franchise company executives to name the most important traits their franchise sales representatives should have, chances are they will say, “persistence,” “assertiveness,” and “the ability to be organized and follow up.”

They are right. Those are important traits for any salesperson to have. But time and time again, I have seen that there is an even more important characteristic that the very best salespeople possess: curiosity.

Why curiosity? There are many reasons. The most important is that when franchise salespeople are curious in their approach to understanding their prospects, they uncover the prospect’s greatest personal ambitions and desires, and they can position your franchise to meet them.

They also discover the prospect’s greatest hesitations and fears about owning your franchise, so they can address them head-on and, if possible, stop them from paralyzing your prospect’s ability to move ahead with buying.

## GENUINE INTEREST

You need salespeople genuinely and authentically curious to know and understand who your prospective owners are and what they are thinking.

What questions should your salespeople ask your prospective owners? Here are some that I have seen work in powerful, revealing ways.

## Background

Start by asking, “Can you tell me about yourself?” You can then ask:

- “Where are you from?”
- “Did you attend school, and what did you study?”
- “Who is in your family?”
- “What are the most powerful goals motivating you right now?”
- “What are your most powerful dreams for your children and family?”

## Abilities

Next, ask, “What are your greatest strengths and skills?” Follow up with:

- “Has your career allowed you to utilize your greatest abilities in the past?”
- “What about your current job?”
- “Can you describe what your ideal workday would be like?”



## Work history

Dig into their past by asking, “Can we talk about your professional life up to now?” You can then ask:

- “What do you feel has been your greatest success until now? Why do you feel that way?”
- “Is your current employer or work allowing you to fully express who you are? Is it limiting you?”
- “What do you feel your greatest accomplishment has been? What skills did it bring out in you, and how could it have gone better?”
- “Can you also describe something that did not go well for you in your work? Can we discuss why that might have happened?”

## Look ahead

Now, look to the future by asking, “What would you most like to accomplish in your life?” Natural questions follow:

- “What would you like to be doing three years from now? How about in five or 10 years?”
- “What would you like your financial security to look like three years from now? How about in five or 10 years?”
- “What are your goals for your children and your family?”

## QUESTIONS AREN'T ENOUGH

They must be asked by an empathetic salesperson who listens actively, follows up, and digs deep and whose personal warmth encourages prospects to open up about themselves.

That is why it is key to recruit salespeople with the right kind of personalities to become more and more curious in their selling. Or if you already have a salesforce in place, it is critical to train them to be curious, be interested in other people, listen actively, follow up on what prospects have said, and apply high levels of curiosity in their interactions with others. I encourage you to direct special attention to training current sales representatives who might have become set in their current way of selling.

## TEACH THE APPROACH

- Model the curious attitude you want your salespeople to practice. That means getting to know them, learning about their families, and understanding their motivations and ambitions.
- Celebrate and reward team members who demonstrate curiosity in their work and lives.
- Follow up with new franchise owners after the sale to be sure they are adjusting and thriving as your franchisees.

True curiosity is not about probing into someone’s private life or making them feel interrogated. Instead, it is about caring deeply about other people. When you genuinely care about people and encourage your salespeople to do the same, you have taken critical steps toward building a phenomenally successful franchise. ■

**Evan Hackel** is CEO of Ingage Consulting and Delta Payment Systems and an advisor to Torral Training. He is a thought leader in the fields of leadership and success and an author, speaker, and entrepreneur, who has been instrumental in launching more than 20 businesses and has managed a portfolio of brands with system-wide sales topping \$5 billion. He is the creator of *Ingaged Leadership* and author of *Ingaging Leadership Meets the Younger Generation*. Reach him at [ehackel@ingage.net](mailto:ehackel@ingage.net), [www.evanhackel.com](http://www.evanhackel.com), or 781-820-7609.



# A WHALE OF A DEAL

## How to engage and land multi-unit franchisees

Written by **PAUL WILBUR**

As we know, multi-unit operators (MUOs) are the whales of the franchising industry, representing a significant share of total franchise units and possessing the expertise and capital necessary to drive expansion. For many franchise development executives, these franchisees offer immense opportunities if approached with the right strategy. Engaging these seasoned operators requires thorough preparation, personalized communication, and strategic use of data.

Multi-unit operators dominate several industries. They operate a significant majority of units in Quick-Service Restaurants (82.60%), Beauty-Related Services (78.56%), and Sit-Down Restaurants (71.77%). Other industries with strong MUO presence include Baked Goods (60.04%), Automotive (57.88%), and Real Estate (55.30%). Additionally, more than half of the units in Frozen Desserts, Retail Food, and Business-Related Services are run by MUOs. This highlights their critical role in industries that benefit from scalability and operational efficiency.

Here are some ideas to ensure productive discussions and lasting partnerships with MUOs.

### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Before engaging with any multi-unit franchisee, it is critical to do your homework. Multi-unit operators know about franchising and expect prospective partners to understand their portfolios, growth strategies, and operational preferences.

When targeting MUOs, it's essential to focus on industries where they already have a strong foothold. Highlighting synergies with their existing operations, showcasing scalability, and presenting strong performance metrics, like AUV and market growth potential, will resonate.

For industries with emerging MUO opportunities, emphasizing diversification and long-term profitability can make your franchise offering attractive. Personalization and data-driven insights

are key to effectively capturing their attention and building lasting partnerships.

### PERSONALIZE YOUR APPROACH

Your outreach to MUOs must go beyond mass marketing. These franchisees are already receiving pitches from countless brands. To stand out, you need to highlight:

- **Scalability of your franchise concept.** Emphasize operational processes, technology integration, and supply chain support.
- **Alignment with their portfolio.** Showcase how your brand fits into their existing business model. For example: If they operate mainly in QSRs, focus on operational synergies, such as streamlined food preparation or customer traffic patterns. For MUOs with diversified portfolios, highlight opportunities for cross-brand promotions or diversification benefits.
- **Performance metrics.** Present compelling data, such as AUV, EBITDA, and year-over-year growth rates.

### DATA-DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT

MUOs rely heavily on data to make decisions. To build credibility, you need to leverage market insights that align with their strategies. This could include:

- **Market saturation levels.** Show how your brand can thrive in the territories they operate.
- **Demographic data.** Demonstrate the viability of your franchise based on local consumer profiles.
- **Industry benchmarks.** Compare your franchise to competitors in terms of scalability and profitability.

For instance, if targeting an MUO with a focus on Frozen Desserts, you can point to the fact that MUOs own 53.92% of units in that segment, making it a proven area for multi-unit ownership.

### KEY INFLUENCERS

Finally, you need to connect with the decision-makers. In multi-unit franchise organizations, decision-making can be complex. Some decisions rest with the franchisee/owner while others may involve executives responsible for operations, finance, or development. You need to:

- Identify the right decision-makers within the organization.
- Access their contact information to ensure direct outreach.
- Understand their roles and responsibilities, allowing you to customize your message for maximum effect.

Creating relationships with the right individuals is crucial to avoid delays and ensure that your opportunity is presented to those with the authority to act. Armed with this intelligence and tailored strategies, you can make a pitch that will resonate with these mighty whales, ensuring productive partnerships and long-term success. ■

As COO of FRANData, **Paul Wilbur** is instrumental in building the research and consulting framework at FRANData. He plays an integral role in the strategic development of FRANData's suite of franchise solutions. Nearly a 20-year veteran at the company, he is the franchise business model expert and plays a key role in fostering strategic advisory relationships with some of FRANData's biggest clients.

# Global Analysis

International markets offer opportunities and challenges

Written by WILLIAM EDWARDS

The global franchise landscape continues to evolve rapidly, presenting opportunities and challenges for brands seeking to expand their franchises into new countries. We know from experience that it takes about the same amount of time, money, and resources to expand into small markets as it does to expand into large ones that have the potential for more units, more sales per unit, and eventually, more royalties paid back to the franchisor. It also takes the same amount of time, money, and resources to expand into the wrong countries for a specific franchise.

Most readers will be aware of GlobalVue, a ranking of countries as places to do business that my company has published quarterly since 2001. It addresses factors that relate to doing business in 40 countries. This chart can be downloaded at <https://edwardsglobal.com/globalvue/>.

This article compares key markets across North America, South America, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, providing specific 2025-focused insights into market dynamics, growth potential, and local franchise development for franchise executives to consider in their country expansion planning now.

## Foreign vs. local

First, let's look at the balance between local and foreign franchise brands in a country. In our experience, when a country has 90% or more local franchises, it can be a real uphill battle for foreign brands to break through and succeed. This does not mean avoiding such markets, but it means entering may take longer to reach unit critical mass.

Here's why: Local franchise brands often have deep roots in the community. They've spent years building strong customer relationships and earning solid reputations. People tend to stick with what they know, and local brands typically have a solid understanding of their customers. They're in tune with the culture and usually offer pricing that makes sense for the local market.

For foreign brands, this presents significant challenges. Adapting products or services to fit the expectations of the local market isn't always straightforward. Both customers and prospective franchisees may hesitate to embrace a foreign brand, questioning whether it truly fits their lifestyle or meets their needs.

On top of that, governments sometimes stack the deck in favor of local businesses. They might provide incentives or advantages to homegrown brands while making foreign companies jump through additional hoops with strict regulations. It's like being the new kid in school: You've got to work extra hard to fit in and prove your value.

With this background, let's look at the positives and negatives of key franchise countries in 2025.

## North America

### Canada

- **Positives.** Moderate economy, culture similar to the U.S. but different, a franchise-friendly market, going through an election in 2025
- **Obstacles.** Regional differences, competition from established players, multiple franchise disclosure requirements by province, low density of major population centers, issues with an ability to find country-wide licensees
- **Foreign vs. local.** Approximately 70% of franchises foreign, heavily influenced by U.S. brands

### Mexico

- **Positives.** Improving economy, investors seeking new brands, growing appetite for international brands, franchising well accepted
- **Obstacles.** Security concerns, regional economic disparities
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 45% foreign, especially in urban areas, a good balance between local and foreign

## U.S.

- **Positives.** Largest franchise market globally, robust ecosystem, established consumer base
- **Obstacles.** Intense competition, high marketing costs, diverse economic regions, no single country master franchisee
- **Foreign vs. local.** 90% local

## South America

### Brazil

- **Positives.** Large population, rising middle class
- **Obstacles.** Complex bureaucracy, regional economic fluctuations, difficult entry, foreign payment regulations
- **Foreign vs. local.** 95% local, foreign franchises growing

### Chile

- **Positives.** Economy going, more business-friendly environment than nearby countries
- **Obstacles.** Small market size, few major cities, sector saturation
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 25% foreign

### Peru

- **Positives.** Slowly reviving economy, demand for international brands
- **Obstacles.** Economic inequalities, underdeveloped infrastructure, unstable government
- **Foreign vs. local.** Around 30% foreign, appreciation for U.S. F&B brands

## Europe & United Kingdom

### Germany

- **Positives.** Large economy, high consumer trust in local brands
- **Obstacles.** High labor costs, strict employment laws, preference for local brands
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 85% local

### Poland

- **Positives.** Growing middle class and E.U. membership, modernization of the economy and laws
- **Obstacles.** Regional economic disparities, challenges finding investment capital for new franchises





- **Foreign vs. local.** About 14% foreign and growing

## Spain

- **Positives.** High tourism-driven demand, consumer interest in global brands
- **Obstacles.** Low unemployment, challenges finding good locations for franchise brands
- **Foreign vs. local.** Approximately 22% foreign, very accepting of foreign brands

## United Kingdom

- **Positives.** Mature franchise market, strong legal framework without a franchise law or disclosure requirements
- **Obstacles.** Market saturation, slow to make investment decisions
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 90% local, foreign brands well accepted

## Asia-Pacific

### Australia

- **Positives.** High disposable income, strong legal protections for franchisees
- **Obstacles.** High operational costs, market saturation in some sectors
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 30% foreign

### China

- **Positives.** Massive consumer base, growing urbanization
- **Obstacles.** IP protection issues, complex regulations, a reluctance currently to take on new foreign brands due to the economy and government concerns
- **Foreign vs. local.** Around 40% foreign, most growth from local brands

### Indonesia

- **Positives.** Large, youthful population, growing economy with substantial middle-class consumer base who like to shop at brands
- **Obstacles.** Increasing regulatory hurdles, local supply sourcing requirements
- **Foreign vs. local.** Approximately 35% foreign

### Japan

- **Positives.** High consumer spending, developed infrastructure
- **Obstacles.** High costs, especially for real estate, a rapidly aging population

- **Foreign vs. local.** About 25% foreign, open to foreign brands, primarily U.S. brands

## New Zealand

- **Positives.** A secure environment for business investments, no franchise regulations or disclosure requirements
- **Obstacles.** Relatively small market, limited scalability of franchises compared to larger countries
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 70% local

## Philippines

- **Positives.** English-speaking population, strong consumer demand, prevalence of spending on foreign brands
- **Obstacles.** Limited local partners (investment capital), infrastructure gaps
- **Foreign vs. local.** Roughly 45% foreign, balanced in local vs. foreign franchise brand presence

## South Korea

- **Positives.** Tech-savvy population, affluent consumers, several large-population cities
- **Obstacles.** High real estate costs, stiff competition, huge franchise regulatory burden, especially for foreign brands
- **Foreign vs. local.** Approximately 30% foreign, an overabundance of small local franchises favored by consumers

## Thailand

- **Positives.** Strong tourism-driven demand, rising incomes
- **Obstacles.** Political instability, complex regulations
- **Foreign vs. local.** Around 40% foreign

## Vietnam

- **Positives.** Rapidly expanding economy, a youthful demographic who seem entrepreneurial
- **Obstacles.** High competition, regulatory complexities
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 20% foreign

## Middle East & Near East

### Egypt

- **Positives.** Large, youthful population, urbanization

- **Obstacles.** Economic instability, challenges finding investors for new franchises
- **Foreign vs. local.** Around 40% foreign

## India

- **Positives.** Expanding middle class, vast market potential
- **Obstacles.** Infrastructure challenges, immense cultural diversity, challenges finding franchisees who will follow the foreign brand systems, very price sensitive
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 20% foreign

## Saudi Arabia

- **Positives.** High level of new franchise development, high consumer demand
- **Obstacles.** Regulatory challenges, cultural adaptation needs
- **Foreign vs. local.** About 50% foreign

## Turkey

- **Positives.** Strategic location, young population
- **Obstacles.** Economic instability, government instability
- **Foreign vs. local.** Foreign franchises growing, challenges succeeding

## United Arab Emirates (UAE)

- **Positives.** Hub for international brands, affluent consumer base
- **Obstacles.** High operational costs, almost saturated landscape
- **Foreign vs. local.** Approximately 70% foreign

### Bottom Line

By focusing on the positives, obstacles, and the balance between local and foreign franchises, this snapshot helps provide a clearer picture of the diverse franchising landscapes worldwide in 2025. Understanding these dynamics is critical for businesses aiming to succeed in international markets by choosing the right countries to enter for their specific franchise. ■

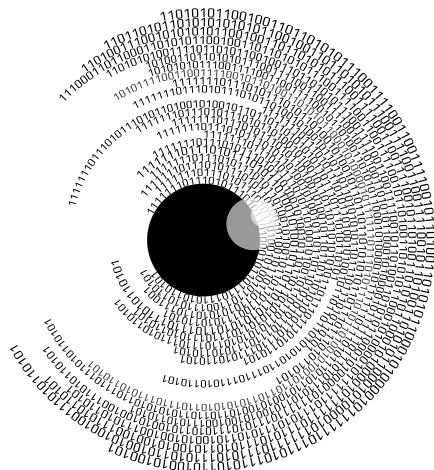
**William (Bill) Edwards**, CFE, is CEO of Edwards Global Services (EGS) and a global advisor to international businesses. With five decades of experience, Bill has helped more than 40 companies expand internationally. Contact Bill at +1 949 375 1896 or [bedwards@edwardsglobal.com](mailto:bedwards@edwardsglobal.com).



# The AI Smorgasbord

Tech success depends on personal taste

Written by DENNIS LESKOWSKI



In today's fast-paced world, juggling work, family, and endless to-do lists often leaves minimal time for thoughtful dinner plans. Do I carve out time to cook a fresh, homemade meal, opt for a quick fix, like pasta and sauce, or lean toward the convenience of a frozen option? Each requires some degree of time and effort, and I choose with quality, healthiness, and personal taste in mind.

Similarly, franchises are navigating the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and face a comparable dilemma: Should we adopt ready-made buy-off-the-shelf solutions, develop custom platforms, rely on established vendors, or embrace a hybrid approach?

As AI reshapes industries, making the right choice can define a franchise's path to growth in new ways. Let's dive into options and how to choose the best recipe for success.

## Buying from vendors

AI companies provide prepackaged solutions tailored to integrate seamlessly into business workflows. Additionally, numerous third-party AI consulting companies specialize in creating custom AI bots tailored to your franchise brand's specific needs.

**Pros:** This approach is plug and play. There's no need for heavy lifting internally because the tools are usually well tested and reliable.

**Cons:** Initially, it takes significant vetting to ensure you are interacting with a quality vendor. Solutions can be generic or extremely customized with increasing costs and deployment times. The biggest con, however, is the ongoing cost of AI "credits," which normally translate into high monthly fees.

## Building from scratch

Large platforms, like Amazon Web Services and Google Cloud, allow franchises to create AI systems tailored to their specific needs, from natural language processing to predictive analytics.

**Pros:** The flexibility is unmatched. You can build exactly what you need without compromises.

**Cons:** This path demands skilled engineers, long timelines, and a willingness to invest in infrastructure. For most franchises, this is the cook-from-scratch gourmet meal of AI. It can be worth the effort but only if your team has the capacity.

## Low-code/no-code

Low-code platforms allow users to create AI workflows with visual interfaces, prebuilt models, and simplified templates. This empowers people with limited technical expertise to build functional tools for their networks. Using the platform's step-by-step process, you link your knowledge base, input your business logic, add some FAQs, and then test it. It's a short learning curve but often requires a lot of testing to make it customer ready.

**Pros:** These platforms significantly reduce the time and cost of deployment. Franchisees or internal teams can get involved without deep coding expertise. This may be an ideal solution for your internal team.

**Cons:** What you gain in speed, you lose in scale. Low-code platforms often come with ongoing credit costs and limits on customization, making them best suited for simpler applications.

## Asking an expert

Many franchises already depend on software partners for CRM, VoIP, or marketing automation. Asking these providers to add AI capabilities can be a natural next step.

**Pros:** Leveraging existing relationships can save money and avoid the pain of switching systems. Plus, you can outsource the learning curve to the vendor. They will be responsible for its maintenance and improvement.

**Cons:** Be prepared for compromises. Your provider's road map may not align with your needs, and delays or incomplete solutions are common.

## How to decide?

Franchise AI decisions depend on three key factors:

1. **Budget.** If funds are tight, a vendor solution or low-code platform might be the best bet.

For larger franchises, custom builds may provide a competitive edge.

2. **Internal resources.** Do you have the technical expertise to manage a complex build? If not, consider simpler options or partnerships.
3. **Willingness to differentiate.** If AI is central to your growth strategy, invest in tools that align with your long-term goals even if it means a larger up-front commitment.

At Goldfish Swim School Franchising, our AI approach depends on what the business needs. Complexity and customization usually determine our preferred path. Sometimes, we have taken one path and ended up on another. It's okay to experiment with multiple options in the new arena of AI.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution for AI in franchising. The right choice depends on your franchise's unique needs, capacity, and ambitions. AI is a powerful enabler, but as with a good meal, success starts with knowing what you want and then choosing the right ingredients. ■

Dennis Leskowski is chief technology officer at Goldfish Swim School Franchising LLC.



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# OPEN FLOW

## Strategies for optimizing your recruitment pipeline

Written by **ART COLEY**

In today's competitive recruitment landscape, effective pipeline management is critical to achieving exceptional outcomes. A well-structured pipeline is more than just a tool; it's a strategic advantage that empowers development teams to work smart, build strong connections with candidates, and improve conversion rates. By implementing targeted best practices, organizations can streamline their processes, enhance candidate engagement, and set the stage for sustained growth.

Below are the top strategies for optimizing your recruitment pipeline and the transformative results they deliver.

### Use data-driven analysis

Tracking and analyzing candidate progress through the recruitment process is the foundation of effective pipeline management. By leveraging data, recruiters can make informed decisions and focus on high-impact actions.

- Regularly review pipeline reports to identify trends, bottlenecks, and opportunities.
- Highlight key metrics, like signing rates, conversion percentages, and follow-up frequency.
- Prioritize candidates based on their positions in the pipeline and their readiness to proceed.
- Use data insights to guide discussions and improve decision-making.

**Outcome:** A clear view of the pipeline enables improved call planning and prioritization to maximize results.

### Structured review calls

Regular, structured review calls with recruiters ensure accountability and help to identify areas for improvement. These conversations clarify performance expectations and drive actionable next steps.

- Use a standard agenda to guide discussions and maintain focus.
- Know the Five Key Buckets for every candidate: need, fit, timeline, decision criteria, and finances. The key is to go deep in each area and then go another level deeper!
- Evaluate information gaps and determine how to address them.

- Discuss whether candidates should move forward or if it's time to close their file.

**Outcome:** Structured calls foster alignment on candidates, ensuring that resources are focused on those with the highest potential.

### Prioritize follow-up

Timely and targeted follow-up is critical for keeping candidates engaged. Each interaction should end with clear next steps to ensure momentum is maintained.

- Assign specific follow-up tasks and deadlines for each candidate.
- Schedule discovery days, provide requested information, or involve leadership as needed.
- Use personalized follow-up strategies to build strong relationships with candidates.
- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of follow-up efforts to refine approaches.

**Outcome:** Strong follow-up actions lead to improved engagement, increased applications, improved discovery day attendance, and an increase in new high-quality franchisees.

### Collaborative alignment

Pipeline management thrives when teams collaborate effectively. Open communication and shared goals ensure that everyone is aligned on recruitment strategies and outcomes.

- Hold regular team updates to discuss pipeline progress and challenges.
- Encourage team members to share insights and best practices.
- Align on clear goals for each stage of the recruitment process.
- Identify potential roadblocks early and develop strategies to address them.

**Outcome:** Better collaboration leads to a seamless recruitment process and strong results across the board.

### Evaluate and adjust

Recruitment pipelines are dynamic and require ongoing evaluation to stay effective. Continuous improvement ensures that strategies remain relevant and impactful.

- Regularly assess pipeline performance to identify areas for improvement.
- Gather feedback from recruiters and candidates to refine strategies.
- Adjust tactics based on data insights, market trends, and team needs.
- Celebrate successes and incorporate lessons learned into future efforts.

**Outcome:** A flexible and adaptive pipeline enables consistent progress and ensures optimal outcomes.

Remember that effective pipeline management is not just a process; it's a driver of success. By embracing data-driven strategies, structured conversations, and collaborative alignment, recruitment teams can achieve remarkable results. These best practices not only streamline the recruitment process, but foster strong connections with candidates and create a foundation for sustained growth.

As you implement these strategies, remember that success is built step-by-step. By staying focused, adaptable, and aligned, your team can unlock the full potential of your recruitment pipeline. With the right approach, the possibilities are endless.

Let's go to work! ■



**Art Coley** is CEO of CGI Franchise. Using the proven Recruitment Operating System (ROS), Art and the ROS team help franchise companies implement and execute a predictable, repeatable, and sustainable franchisee recruitment program. The company is based in Temple, Texas, and works with brands worldwide. Contact Art at 281-658-9409 or [acoley@cgifranchise.com](mailto:acoley@cgifranchise.com).



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