

Birds on the Brain

> WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED INC.

WILD BIRDS UNLIMITED GROWS ITS BUSINESS BY CONNECTING NATURE LOVERS WITH QUALITY PRODUCTS, ADVICE AND SERVICE.

BY STACI DAVIDSON

Birds of a feather definitely flock together, as demonstrated by the success of Wild Birds Unlimited (WBU) Inc. Serving customers throughout the United States and Canada, WBU strives to provide the best-possible products and knowledgeable local advice to help nature lovers and backyard bird-feeding enthusiasts attract the kinds of birds they want to their yards. This successful business formula has yielded more than 280 franchises, fulfilling WBU's mission to "bring people and nature together and do it with excellence."

Entrepreneur magazine has ranked WBU in the Annual Franchise 500 every year since 1987; *Franchise Business Review* has given WBU a Franchise 50 Franchisee Satisfaction Award in 2010 and 2011; and WBU has been listed on the *All-Business AllStar* list of "best of the best" 300 franchise companies since 2009. Now in its 30th year of business, WBU has come far since its inception, although the company has remained true to its



// Wild Birds Unlimited has grown to have 280 franchisees in the United States and Canada, and has helped grow bird feeding as a hobby.

founding values of delivering high-quality customer experiences.

"We appeal to such a broad base of people," explains Paul Pickett, vice president of franchise development. "But what brings all of them together is the love of birds and a desire to connect with nature."

The idea for WBU planted itself in

PROFILE

Wild Birds Unlimited Inc.

www.wbu.com

Annual revenues: More than \$118 million

Headquarters: Carmel, Ind.

Employees: 38

Specialty: Retail stores specializing in bird feed and bird feeders

CEO Jim Carpenter's head after he applied to medical school and was rejected. Armed with a bachelor's degree in Biology and a master's in Horticulture and Plant Physiology, Carpenter began working at a garden center near Indianapolis, "doing everything from customer service to purchasing to picking corn and planting pumpkins," Pickett says. Carpenter most enjoyed working in the store's bird-feeding section, and after developing relationships with that section's suppliers, decided to start a mail-order company dedicated to backyard bird feeding.

"He wanted to sell the products and plants that would attract birds to customers' backyards – the entire habitat," Pickett says. "He originally planned for it



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// Wild Birds Unlimited opened its first retail store in 1981, and the company began franchising the concept in 1983.

to be a mail-order operation, but he realized he had enough money saved to pay for one year of rent on a store, so in 1981 he opened a store in Indianapolis. Working with his wife and a partner, he began franchising the concept in 1983.”

A Mutual Love

The WBU concept “took off almost immediately,” Pickett says, and in the early days of the business, Carpenter established the best practices that are still in use. First and foremost, each WBU location strives to ensure great customer experiences. This starts with providing top-quality products at a fair price, but also involves providing information about bird feeding, helping to solve problems customers are having (squirrels are a common concern) and answering questions. Each store is lo-

cally owned and operated, and WBU prides itself on the information it can pass on to nature lovers.

“Everything we do is about helping our customers enjoy the hobby more,” Pickett explains. “We carry the birdseed out to the customers’ cars for them – that is standard – but we’re also always talking about birds. We are creating a community based on a mutual love of birds and nature.

“We treat all customers like they’re golden and treat each customer the same,” Pickett adds. “Customer service doesn’t have boundaries.”

Fueling a Passion

WBU remains a strong franchise concept and is known for its customer service because all franchise owners are trained in the best practices established by Carpenter. Pickett explains the franchise owners

and their staffs receive extensive training so they “understand and know in-depth how we work together to serve customers’ needs.”

This involves learning the proper products to attract the greatest variety of birds in owners’ local areas, as well as how to give the best advice for any backyard environment.

“Our training focuses on 10 touch points that help franchise owners and their staffs be successful,” he says. “Our

C&S Products goal for the past 25 years has been to create consumer-driven products that would be profitable for our retailers. To accomplish this requires developing quality products that consumers can count on. Through product-development collaboration with Wild Birds Unlimited, our relationship has grown from a few, private-label suet cakes to innovative, new products to enhance consumer’s wild bird feeding hobby. We will continue to invest in our company and make sure our consumers get the best value for their money spent. Congratulations to Wild Birds Unlimited and their continued success!

training program is branded, focused and consistent so they understand our expectations and how to deliver the best customer service.”

The corporate office also helps franchise owners with business planning, site selection, store design and layout, lease negotiation and marketing tools. WBU’s ongoing support involves help with purchasing, human resources, merchandising and hobby and nature education.

“Most of our franchise store owners were originally customers, and all of them are passionate about bird feeding,” Pickett says. “The owners become local experts, so passion for the hobby is important criteria. We help ensure they are

a great match for the business and help them make good decisions.”

Pickett stresses that WBU’s training and values not only help ensure franchise success, but also have yielded a staff with extensive tenure and knowledge.

“I started in 1989 and was the first full-time employee of a Wild Birds Unlimited franchise,” he says.

“Sue Hernandez is our office manager, and she started in 1989 as Jim’s assistant,” he adds. “Jim Lesch, director of purchasing, has been here for 21 years, and so has Pat Parkinson, our vice president of retail sales, who has been here for 16 years. Director of Retail Operations Amy Moore grew up in this business –

her family owned one of the franchises in Michigan. Simply put, this is a phenomenal place to work, and we are very fortunate to have a very long-term staff.”

WBU isn’t focused on growing its business in any specific geographic areas, but it does plan to open more stores and grow the number of customers it reaches. As a result, it will expand interest in the hobby and connect more people with nature.

“It is great to help establish venues that spread the word of bird feeding and Wild Birds Unlimited,” Pickett says. “We will grow, and our first focus while doing so is delivering the same quality message and mission to more people.” *•mt*
