

## Wild Birds Unlimited Executive Interviewed on Top Franchise Review Blog

*(Ambrosio's note: Lately, I've been featuring a lot of niche franchises on the blog. Not only do I find them interesting and fresh, their success in the marketplace proves that focusing on a specific target market — even a narrow one — and serving them well can lead to a very profitable business. Wild Birds Unlimited caters to bird watchers and bird lovers. You'd think that the market potential for this business is limited, but you'll soon learn that this is far from the truth. I'd like to thank Paul Pickett, VP of Franchise Development for [Wild Birds Unlimited](#), for graciously accepting my invitation to do an exclusive interview with Franchise Chatter.)*

### **Franchise Chatter (FC): Can you tell us the story of how Wild Birds Unlimited got its start?**

**Paul Pickett (PP):** In 1981, Jim Carpenter, Founder and CEO of Wild Birds Unlimited, combined his retail experience with his avid enjoyment of nature and backyard bird feeding to open the first Wild Birds Unlimited store in Indianapolis, Indiana. Though this retail concept had never been attempted in a serious way, Jim soon discovered a great demand for a store where people could purchase high-quality items to attract backyard birds. Customers were eager to talk about their hobby or their latest bird sighting.

With several people intrigued with the idea of owning a shop like Wild Birds Unlimited, Jim decided to franchise the concept. Two years later the first franchise location opened, eventually growing to over 270 stores throughout the United States and Canada.

### **FC: For those unfamiliar, what kind of products do you sell in your stores and online? What are your most popular items? What is your sales mix like?**

**PP:** Our retail merchandise consists of all the products necessary to attract birds and other wildlife to a customer's backyard, such as bird food, bird feeders, bird houses, hanging hardware (to mount and hang feeders and houses from), bird baths/fountains and bird and nature-related gift items.

Bird food is the strongest selling product line due to the fact that it is a consumable and makes up about 50% of an average store's sales.

### **FC: Can you describe the target customer for a Wild Birds Unlimited store? How big is the market potential for your business?**

**PP:** The Wild Birds Unlimited product assortment appeals to anyone who appreciates birds and nature. Our target customer is middle aged (between 45 and 64 years old), a home owner, with some college education, at the middle to upper income level. We also appeal to dual income families without kids, retirees and young families.

The market opportunity for our products is significant. 55.5 million people participate in bird feeding and wildlife watching in their own backyards. \$5.4 billion is spent annually on bird feeding and watching wildlife, \$4 billion on bird seed and wildlife food, \$780 million on bird feeders, bird baths and nesting boxes, and \$656 million on binoculars and spotting scopes.

### **FC: Who do you consider to be your competitors in this space and what are some of your advantages over them?**

**PP:** Our biggest competitors are the big box stores that sell backyard bird feeding supplies. We have a much higher quality product and can provide customized advice and education on the hobby of backyard bird feeding. Our franchise store owners and their staff are local, trusted



experts and deliver an exceptional customer experience — something that the big boxes cannot deliver.

We have one competitor in the franchise industry, Wild Bird Center, but they are a much smaller system.

**FC: What is the ideal location and neighborhood for a Wild Birds Unlimited store?**

**PP:** The ideal location for a Wild Birds Unlimited store is an upscale, high traffic, high visibility shopping center with a strong anchor, such as an upscale grocery store or higher-end retailer. We need good parking (one of our customer service standards is to carry the bird seed and other products out to our customer's vehicle).

We appeal to a middle to upper income level customer, so we stay away from lower end, discount shopping areas and neighborhoods.

**FC: How has your ecommerce website affected sales at your physical stores? Who fulfills your online orders and earns the sale?**

**PP:** Ecommerce has not had a major effect on our brick and mortar stores, primarily because our strongest selling product line is bird food, which is expensive to ship, and because our customers want the one-on-one advice and interface with our owners and their staff.

We do have an online store — our franchisees fulfill the orders and earn the sales. The order goes to the store that is willing to fulfill the order and is located closest to the customer.

**FC: Can you describe the ideal franchisee for Wilds Bird Unlimited?**

**PP:** Our ideal franchisee is someone who is organized and focused, committed to building the business, understands financial statements or willing to learn, comfortable with computers and the Internet, committed to developing a staff that delivers the ultimate Wild Birds Unlimited customer experience, and committed to following the Wild Birds Unlimited best practices.

It's also important to be passionate about bird feeding and nature in general, committed to delivering exceptional customer service, energetic and friendly, hard working with a strong work ethic, and able to multi-task and prioritize.

**FC: What specific steps do your most successful franchisees take in order to build and grow their respective Wild Birds Unlimited businesses?**

**PP:** They follow the Wild Birds Unlimited best practices, they get involved in their communities, and they are committed to our mission of "We bring people and nature together and we do it with excellence".

**FC: What are your goals for Wild Birds Unlimited in the next few years and how do you plan to grow the brand?**

**PP:** Our goals include driving individual store sales and profits to new heights. This is a goal that we have each and every year and Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc and everyone here at the Wild Birds Unlimited Franchise Support Center are committed to this goal.

And, of course, we are always focused on unit growth. In the last 18 months, we have implemented a number of new strategies to increase our growth, such as offering much more financing assistance and creating a whole new franchise development web site and online development process.

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