

# Birds of a Feather

BY MIKE ANDERSON | Contributing Editor

## Stores Flock Together Under Their WBU Brand

ACCORDING TO A RECENT Audubon study, 50 million Americans call themselves “birders” (I do). Birding is the fastest growing hobby, the second most popular hobby, and its recreation participants almost exceed those of hunting and fishing, combined. Soon, birding could bump baseball as the official national pastime (wishful thinking?).

By definition, a hobby is “something that one likes to do in one’s spare time”. So with spare time at a premium today, where do birding hobbyists find fuel to ignite, maintain, and accelerate their hobby?

### Paving the Way

Initially the birding hobby was fragmented and undeveloped. Garden centers, hardware stores, and mass merchandisers dabbled in meager “wild bird” departments in hopes of snagging some sales. These stores, often lacking the necessary education and product knowledge to engage the untapped birder market, became mired in the rudimentary levels of the hobby. Some astute industry pioneers sensed the hobby’s potential and brought birding to a new level.

Specialty retailers emerged across the U.S. and Canada serving customers who watched and fed backyard birds. With clever names like “Feathered Friends”, “The Bird House”, and “For the Birds” these stores often began as an outreach to other birding enthusiasts with the owners simply sharing their passion for the hobby.

Today, hundreds of excellent independently-owned wild bird stores faithfully



The next year, he customized his first blend of bird seed.

A vision was forming. If Jim could enjoy operating a retail store, sharing his love of birding with others (and earn a living doing it), then surely there were other birding enthusiasts who might enjoy owning their own store as well. Carpenter envisioned a group of shops all around the country offering product and advice to fellow birders, but the vision needed help.

Within two years Jim partnered with Dick Schinkel, a Michigan naturalist who operated Ol’ Sam Peabody, a wholesale bird feeding products supplier. Together they co-founded Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc., a franchise company.

“I was so inexperienced in franchising in 1983,” recalls Carpenter. “I made up my own model and drafted a franchise agreement that I would sign myself as a franchisee. I always believed in offering as much service as we could to our franchisees instead of delivering only what was dictated in the Franchise Agreement.

“About 20 years ago, we named our headquarters the Franchise Support Center and that name guides us every day. I have always believed that we should have a small Franchise Development team and a large Franchise Support team. Our staff’s performance at the FSC is judged by how well our stores do, not on how well the Franchisor does.”

### Those Early Days

The entrepreneur spirit was alive and well in the Carpenter home and family

provide birders with remarkable product selections and advice. These independents strive to serve their communities as the “go-to store” for birding needs and questions.

### A Vision Takes Flight

Jim Carpenter knew little about business in the late 70’s. Fresh out of Purdue with a Masters Degree in horticulture, Jim ran a small garden center and produce stand for two years.

“I taught plants and birds just as I had taught undergrads about horticulture, and formed the hobby-selling style that way,” recalls Carpenter. “I gathered customer addresses from day one and started the practice of customer newsletters.”

In 1981, Carpenter launched a start-up shop in Indianapolis with a name that says it all, “Wild Birds Unlimited”. This first WBU backyard nature shop was birthed out of Jim’s love of birding.

support helped make the vision a reality.

“My wife, Nancy, helped me grow the company for about 15 years,” says Carpenter. “Then, she stepped back to raise our 2 daughters. Nancy helped in all phases of growing the company as she was, at different times, our chief trainer, oversaw the business consultants, and organized our annual and regional meetings. We used Nancy’s artwork for our advertising for those 15 years as well, as she is an excellent artist. Our daughters Rebecca and Casey have both worked at the Franchise Support Center through the years, but now Casey is working part-time in the marketing department while she goes to school.”

Ask any specialty retailer about their experiences when adding a second or third store and they will likely bring up issues like the increases in day-to-day complexity, and the feelings of inadequacy in operating multiple outlets. Imagine, then, operating a growing franchise of many stores, and you’ll understand the need Jim Carpenter felt for improving his business skills after he bought out Schinkel’s interest in 1989.

“I don’t believe anyone innately knows how to grow a company,” says Carpenter. “Starting a business is easy compared to growing it. So after about 10 years of growing this company and experiencing the pain of the unknown, I decided it was time I went to back to school.

“I started attending many business growth conferences and joined a local group that teaches leadership skills and growth tactics for business owners. I also hired a Strategic Advisory Board that has a combined 130 years experience in business ownership and consulting or teaching entrepreneurship, customer service and retail leadership. We have met quarterly since 1995, and they are invaluable in mentoring me to be a better leader. Lesson: No matter how long you have owned your business, an outside mentor is essential to helping you grow your skills as a business leader.”

The model WBU store was perfected and more independently-owned outlets were added over the years. Today the Wild Birds Unlimited brand signage is proudly displayed at more than 270 locations in the U.S. and Canada.

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### Honing the Hobby

I recently caught up with Jim Carpenter, the President and CEO of Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc. and he shared with me how the stores are doing today along with a few insights into their future:

**B.B. Some store marketing refers to “Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop”. Do you see the stores expanding the birding hobby into**

### additional backyard nature items?

We have always considered ourselves a Nature Shop through our merchandise and our advice. However, by using ‘Nature Shop’ in our marketing we are distinguishing ourselves from the pet trade in caged birds.

**B.B. What type of training and certification does WBU offer their store owners and staff?**

We have a program that helps our sales associates quickly become an informed 'Certified Backyard Birdfeeding Specialist.' Several books and videos must be studied, and a test must be passed in order to earn the Certification. We also have a Chief Naturalist and a Manager of Hobby and Nature Education on staff that creates educational programs for our owners to train their staff and to share with their customers in their local community.

## Navigating Economic Thickets

### B.B. What initiatives does WBU take to withstand recessionary disturbance?

Our Franchise Support staff provides store owners with materials that help keep the hobby and its joys in the forefront. We have techniques that we teach to ensure a very high standard of customer experience to every person that walks in the store. We also focus on bringing fresh new products to our customers. In 2009, we reorganized our staff and designated one individual solely devoted to new product development. Over the past 4 years we have brought over 80 new products to the market and our top line sales have grown every year during the recession.

### B.B. Do economic uncertainties cause member stores to become complacent?

"Complacency sometimes is a result of finding a comfort zone in how things

work and days and hours worked. Also, the comfort zone results when the complexities of retail management have been reduced to 'current practices' instead of 'best practices'. We always try to encourage business growth by discussing with each owner what sales goal is possible in their market and by sharing the best practices in leadership and operations that can help them achieve those goals.

## Motivating Members

### B.B. Are there programs WBU uses to encourage and engage store owners with the franchise?

Our 1-to-1 Business Consultants build a Consultation Plan with each engaged owner that creates a simple roadmap to the goals of the owner. This plan is checked and assessed every month. In 2009, we began testing another methodology, using peer (owner-to-owner) consulting with facilitation provided by FSC staff. This is designed to enhance the value of the businesses involved through intense financial analysis, accountability to the group, and the knowledge gained from fellow owners. Our initial results have been very positive and we continue to look for ways to expand this program.

I also write an annual Strategic White Paper. I spend many months studying our data and the world at large, receiving guidance from the Franchise Support Center staff and store owners, and write down exactly the direction of our retail stores, and services from the franchisor. With this White Paper, our store owners have a part in setting the future direction and are informed of the decisions I have made as to where we are going. Valuable as well, is knowing that hundreds of other ideas were considered, but did not make the final cut. This Paper helps keep our store owners engaged in the business of



being a retailer and the part they play in the overall Wild Birds Unlimited concept.

## Group Support

### B.B. What type of meetings or conferences might be available for a franchisee to attend?

We have a very intensely useful annual meeting of stores that we now call our Enterprise Leadership Conference. At this meeting, our goal is to help our store owners advance their skills in operating an enterprise that runs as simply as possible, by having systems that are simple to learn and delegate. We also teach how to think strategically regarding products and advertising, and how to use the tools and relationships offered by the franchisor to run an enterprise instead of a mom-and-pop business. In addition to our Franchise Support Center staff, we bring in industry experts and use our franchise store owners who have achieved success in specific aspects of their business to teach sessions during the conference.

We also conduct about two dozen Regional Meetings per year, so that we can spend a day or more with folks in their own region. Our own private Vendor Mart is held annually and brings the best of current and new vendors to our stores.

## Community Impact

### B.B. How does WBU help their stores impact and serve their communities?

We create a monthly marketing campaign designed to offer tested compelling reasons for retail customers to visit our



stores, and support this whenever possible with exclusive product deals from our vendors. The campaign is available online for owners to tailor the message to bird activity in their local market.

### **B.B. How do you see the WBU stores impacting their communities five years from now?**

I see Wild Birds Unlimited being a major force in 'Bringing People and Nature Together', which is our mission. With all things digital becoming such a major part of everyone's lives, I believe watching birds in your own back yard is the best way for many millions of people to maintain a genuine connection with the real world of nature. I specifically hope we help engage a new generation of kids and their parents in the hobby of feeding birds. I hope our impact will be that we help people create a sustaining relationship with birds and nature that will not be forgotten as we keep developing our land and our personal spaces.

### **Satisfied Stores**

**B.B. Congratulations! I understand WBU is ranked #10 in the large most-popular franchise category for 2012, according to Franchise Business Review, and ranked # 17 in franchisee satisfaction in all retail franchises of any size. What makes the WBU franchise so appealing?**

These rankings are based entirely on franchisee satisfaction. Generally, it is considered fantastic to be in the Top 50, so we are near the front of the pack! We always hope to improve our performance and so far we have been pleased to see our franchisees give us good enough marks to move us to a higher rank each year.

In general, we survey our franchise store owners when we are considering a major new initiative to get their input and we use our Franchise Advisory Council as a sounding board when we meet twice each year.

Finally, at the Franchise Support Center, we hold ourselves to the same standards we expect of our stores by continuing to find new and innovative ways to support our franchise owners' efforts to keep our retail customers engaged in the hobby.

### **B.B. Moving forward, do you see prospective "conversion franchisees" as a viable alternative to your traditional franchise model?**

Yes, we do see conversion franchising as a viable option for both us and independent store owners. There is a point in every business owner's career when the tasks of 'doing it all' can become a burden and a hindrance to growth. We provide best practices and tools in all areas of retail operations and marketing based on the results of hundreds of stores. The best results come when all efforts by the owner and staff are targeted towards implementing best practices instead of trying to figure out what they should be.

### **Help for Gray Hair**

**B.B. When it comes time for a WBU store owner to think about retiring, does your office offer any programs to assist in making a seamless transition/sale to a new owner?**

I have always considered that a successful franchise ownership experience also includes eventually selling your store for the best value. So we provide aid to a franchisee that wants to sell their store. We give guidance on everything from valuing their business to finding buyers to all the hundreds of details involved in the transaction.

### **Meritorious Commendation**

In summary, and referencing the entire Wild Birds Unlimited organization, Carpenter adds, "We actually live our mission, vision, and values."

Brand names are all around us; however the recognized pioneers behind the brand are relatively few. The Volkswagen Beetle had its Ferdinand Porsche. Apple had its Steve Jobs. Chick Fil-A has its Truett Cathy, and so on. It is a shorter list in our birding business industry. However, when it comes to a recognized and respected brand and the pioneer behind it, Wild Birds Unlimited and Jim Carpenter would have to be credited for serving our industry well and for advancing the birding hobby. His contributions have benefitted us all. 🐦

## **Wild Birds Unlimited® Timeline**

- 1981:** Carpenter opens the first Wild Birds Unlimited shop.
- 1983:** With a partner, Carpenter founds Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc., the parent company for selling Wild Birds Unlimited franchises. The first franchise store opens.
- 1987:** Nancy Carpenter, Jim's wife, joins the company full-time and eventually oversees training, retail store services and creative design.
- 1989:** First Canadian Wild Birds Unlimited franchise opens.
- 1992:** The 100th Wild Birds Unlimited franchise opens. Carpenter designs the WBU Classic hopper bird feeder which was awarded trademark status for the WBU logo.
- 1995:** www.wbu.com launches
- 1996:** The 200th WBU franchise opens.
- 1997:** Wild Birds Unlimited opens its first Internet store.
- 1999:** Pathways To Nature® Conservation Fund launches as a partnership between Wild Birds Unlimited and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.
- 2004:** WBU flagship store in Indianapolis relocates, updates visual merchandising brand standards and starts the first test of a new loyalty program, The Daily Savings Club, which morphed into the WBU loyalty program.
- 2006:** WBU celebrates its 25th Anniversary.
- 2008:** WBU introduces a new bird food created by Jim Carpenter, Jim's Birdacious® Bark Butter®.
- 2009:** Automatic polling and benchmarking of store POS data initiated.
- 2010:** EcoClean line of birdfeeders introduced. WBU launches its Facebook page.
- 2011:** Wild Birds Unlimited celebrates its 30th Anniversary.