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BizSmarts

# How I ... Made bird watching into a business

Michael Zuiker, owner Wild Birds Unlimited, Arlington

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Don't try to tell [Michael Zuiker](#) he built a niche business with his 23-year-old Wild Birds Unlimited bird seed retailer. Bird watching, he points out, is the second most popular hobby next to gardening with 60 million enthusiasts. And he plans to make it into a million-dollar business in Arlington.

What's your background? I got a degree in architectural technology. My job was architect project manager for Marriott and Roy Rogers. I was on the franchiser side, helping franchisees develop and grow and build. I understood that relationship. I was a point person for the actual design and building for the actual restaurants, the interior designers, the kitchen designers. In the late '80s, we were downsized and our whole department shut down.

Why not go with another architecture job? The whole construction industry, there was a recession. There was just no building going on. I had a hard time going on job interviews doing the exact same work for about 85 percent less than I was making at Marriott. It was hard to swallow that. There weren't really a lot of opportunities out there in the Washington area.

Why not get into a food franchise then with your experience at Roy Rogers? When I looked at the different franchise opportunities, the things I could financially afford to get involved in — a Jiffy Lube and a TCBY. I didn't know anything about that. When I saw Wild Birds Unlimited — it was more about nature. My whole family, growing up, we were fishing and camping and doing all things outdoors. This is something I really, really love and something I could really do.

How much were the franchise startup costs? In those days, in 1991, it cost \$7,000. I used personal savings. I was married at the time, so my wife and I decided, "Let's take a shot at this. Let's pool together our savings." We went out and researched a bunch of other [Wild Bird] store owners at the time. They were just getting started. We were store No. 66.

What did you learn from the other stores? I drove from my house in Washington to Indianapolis, their headquarters, and stopped at three different stores along the way in Ohio and Indiana. I looked at their layout, their products, the whole concept, how the franchise was helping them get going. Because I had not done retail before, I did a part-time job working at the nature center in Tysons Corner. If you're working with the public and do retail, you better find out whether you like it. I liked all the different people who came in, the challenges.

How long did it take to get started? In those days, it wasn't much at all. I developed my S-corporation. I had my store open right before Thanksgiving in November in 1991.

How did you learn more about bird feeding? There were a lot of good books out there when I started. The franchise has been very good about having a naturalist on board who does research and sends us information. We're constantly reviewing and educating ourselves. There's a little side group of hobbyists called birders. I am not one of those. I can't tell you the weight of different species of birds. I can recognize songs, but not every song out there. If a bird showed up in Washington state that was not supposed to be there and is actually a Russian bird, there are some people who will go on a plane and go find that bird. Those are the real birders. They take their birding to a different level.

How were the early days? I'm in a great location in North Arlington, in a very good, high-end residential neighborhood, even back in those days. But the shopping center needed some work, and we had a lot of tenants coming and going and not making it. I was always able to pay myself something, but I wasn't growing like I wanted to. Most of us have a lot of underlying stories in our lives that either help us or put a little roadblock in our way. I had the same things happen — death of parents, birth of our first son — that add to your balance being off. They didn't stop me from being successful, but they challenged me a little more.

How did you find your location? It's one of the biggest strip mall shopping centers in Arlington. I had lived in Arlington for over 15 years. I knew all the little shopping centers. I took a tour with the franchise developer. We looked in a five-mile radius, three-mile — income, demographics. Even though the shopping center wasn't run well, it always had the potential to be a super shopping center.

So what did you do to grow in those days? I did a lot of newspaper ads. We developed a mailing list and mailed postcards to people. Because I'm athletic and like exercise, I gathered a group of high school kids together and walked through the whole of Arlington and put fliers up. I don't think there's a place I did not walk. That was a fairly inexpensive way to do it. I offered the kids \$5, and we got a bunch of fliers and had pizza and Coke afterward.

I imagine it's tough to inform the vast public that a specialty store like yours exists. If I had a little more finances, I would have tried more cable advertising — the History Channel, Discovery Channel — and just mass-hit the audience. I did some commercials with my son at the time — he was 4. I was not able to do it like a Budweiser would, 400 times in one football game. I had to do a little bit of everything that I could financially afford. So I'd say let's

do 22205 of Arlington, let's do 22207.

How did you know those walking trips worked? Our business would keep growing, and we would get those coupons back. We would see a new group of people from that ZIP code. It was hard, it wasn't easy, but it was another layer of trying to get people to find us.

When did you finally feel some sustainability? Eight or 10 years ago, the shopping center got some new partnership, and they totally renovated to the tune of cutting off a fourth of it and building a huge double-decker grocery store. Once that took hold, and Starbucks came two years before that, it started to really change the whole dynamic to be a successful shopping center. And growth really started taking off. The last seven, eight years has been real growth. Most of the annual growth is 3 to 4 to 6 percent on a good year. The last three years, we're moving it above the 10 or 12 percent range.

When did you become profitable? I took money out of the store from day one. There were all these theories that you don't take any money out for three years, then you're profitable for five years. I don't think I like that scenario. I have to pay my bills, I have to eat. But in terms of seeing the real good profit, the last four, five years has done that.

What are the biggest changes you're seeing in your industry? There's an overall sense of telling people that "Hey, look outside, there's a lot going on out there." You see the advent of Discovery Communications with all their great programming. We're getting a lot more younger families coming in, telling us their children can mention 30, 40 birds in their backyards. I think they're just enjoying the concept of being outside, being in nature, more.

How do you deal with running a business that's so niche? I don't think it's as niche as it comes across. There are so many aspects to the yearly cycle of birds migrating and birds in the backyard. I have people coming in my store who say their neighbors are getting birds and "I'm not getting any." There are a lot of yards and a lot of people who spend time in their yards. It's just a great hobby. And the location I have, there are no apartments or condo buildings.

What's your competition like, including from other Wild Bird Unlimited franchises? They're always looking at more locations. There are areas in Northern Virginia, Fairfax County, Prince William County that have really grown that would be good for someone. We had a gentleman who had a store in Germantown, but he didn't have the greatest location and decided to move to Frederick. He's doing better in two years in Frederick than 10 years in Germantown. I have a boundary that protects me. I have all of Arlington, a little of McLean and Falls Church. There are a few independent people in my territory that are competition, you have a little bit of Home Depot, hardware stores and nurseries.

Is it a seasonal business? There are so many different aspects to backyard bird feeding. Most of those birds in the Mid-Atlantic, they stay year round. They don't migrate. Then you add on the fact that hummingbirds just showed up — they love that. In the winter, you get unique birds, and if you keep food out, you can get them. It's just continuous.

How were you affected by the brutal winter this year? We had some tremendous sales numbers. We were \$20,000 this January over last year. The cold, the snow, the ice, people see the birds out there — and birds do have to eat more to keep going. The natural food is covered by snow, so they come to feeders more often and eat more.

Did you capitalize on the cicadas that came in town? We kind of missed that one a couple years ago. We got some free press — we made cicadas T-shirts — and they didn't show up. We had people coming in and saying, "Are they here yet, they coming?" We made these great T-shirts that made it look like a rock 'n' roll band with all the cities they were going to.

Are there other things you look out for like that? The snowy owls that came this winter. Snowy owls do not come south very often, but this winter for some reason they came out of the Arctic en masse. They're gorgeous.. One accidentally got hit by a car in downtown Washington. It got rehabilitated and sent back to the wild. We keep our ear locked for that all the time. Sometimes they come so fast, we're not able to move quick enough for it. Now there's a huge migration of insect-eating birds, which will not come to seed feeders for the most part. But if you put out a birdbath with water, you can see unique birds.

What are your best-selling items? No. 1 is the seed. Over the 30 years [Wild Bird Unlimited has] been doing this, they create great mixes. No. 2 is the squirrel-proof feeders. They don't want the squirrels to eat all the seed. Those are really big in the whole industry.

What do you have in your yard? Once we moved into a single-family home, we had bird feeders, bathhouses, I had a frog fish pond. I did something my neighbors probably didn't like: I dug up my front yard and built a butterfly hummingbird garden. I decided I didn't want to cut the lawn anymore. You'd be amazed at what shows up.

How do you stay relevant over the years? The material we're providing customers with, we've done email marketing. We send two a month — one will have a nice video on how to attract the hummingbirds. That little extra connecting with the customer that they like, but they're not getting inundated. We have some beautiful banners, signage, a new marketing program with postcards that [Wild Birds Unlimited] created.

What's next? I always had a goal to be a \$1 million store. I am getting there at a clip that I'm excited about. We're being real smart about our inventory, what we bring in, how much we bring in. We're being smart about our marketing — I grab the Falls Church Press, McLean Journal and advertise five weeks in a row for Mother's Day or four weeks in a row with a new bird seed sale. We do more outreach in terms of going to local fairs and local parks and giving out free coupons and bird seed. We have a great person helping us with our Facebook page. I didn't know how to do that before.

Do you plan more franchises? I'm going to stick with this one. I'm no longer married, so I'm doing this on my own now, which is fine. But I wouldn't be able to take care of my customers here and another location as well as I would want to.

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## The basics

Company: Wrenwood Inc. dba Wild Birds Unlimited

- What it does: Sells bird seed and supplies
- Leadership: [Michael Zuiker](#), president and owner
- Location: Arlington
- Employees: Five part-time

- Clients: In April, 1,509 customers
- Revenue: \$708,000 in 2011; \$700,000 in 2012; \$800,000 in 2013
- Website: [www.wbu.com/arlington](http://www.wbu.com/arlington)

Vandana Sinha oversees print edition.