



# Top Players in Franchise Development: Paul Pickett

Wild Birds Unlimited

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Have you ever wondered what role passion should play in the success of your franchise? Do you really need to know what you're selling in order to find success in the first place? And, maybe more importantly: do you really need to *love* what you're selling?

Maybe not. People certainly sell things they don't believe in every day.

But, being able to answer yes to all of those questions has sure paid off for Paul Pickett. For more than a quarter-century, Pickett has been a large part of the heart and soul behind the rapid expansion of [Wild Birds Unlimited](#). Now serving as the brand's chief development officer, Pickett recently spoke with 1851 Franchise about how he got the opportunity to sell his passion through franchising. And—spoiler alert—it's not the route you might think.

## **How did you get your start in franchising?**

I graduated with a Masters degree in Ornithology (the study of birds) in 1988, and I moved to Indianapolis for love. Well, it didn't last. I had a job working at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis in the anatomy department, so I decided to stay in Indianapolis. Looking back, I have no idea why. The job was horrific. I worked for an endocrinologist dissecting rat brains all day. It was terrible. I hated it. But, I didn't know what else to do, and I needed a job.

Then, one weekend, I took a fortuitous trip to the Indianapolis Flower and Patio Show, where I ran into Jim and Nancy Carpenter, the founders of [Wild Birds Unlimited](#). They had a booth there, so I chatted them up, and asked if I could work in their Indy store on the weekends. They agreed to give me an interview a short time later. So, I came to the store for the interview. But, they were too busy with customers to speak with me right away, so I just offered to help, and actually ended up working there during what was supposed to be my interview. And, I sold \$150 in bird seed and feeders to a customer!

The relationship has grown from there, and here I am 27 years later.

### **How has Wild Birds Unlimited expanded its market share through franchising, and what role have you had in that process?**

When I signed on with Wild Birds Unlimited in 1989, Jim and Nancy wanted me to work on their franchise expansion. They had 29 units at that time, after opening their first store in 1981, and they had begun franchising in 1983. But, they were so focused on supporting the existing franchisees that they needed to hire someone to help with both support and development. So, that was my mission. And, I was able to help them sign on six new franchisees in just the first few months.

Over the years, the way we go to market has shifted completely. But, I'm proud that the DNA of our company hasn't shifted a bit since day one. The retail concept has gotten so much more refined since then. We have so much more data to rely on. In some ways, our desired qualified franchisee has changed, as we are looking for franchise store owners who are not only passionate about the hobby of bird feeding but also passionate about owning a very successful business. We can develop exclusive products and create private label products now that we couldn't do before. As a smaller retailer, you can be a lot more nimble to trends in the industry, and that's a strength of ours. But, our core has stayed the same. We're selling joy. We're selling experience and knowledge. We connect people to nature, and we are 100% committed to supporting our franchisees.

### **What role does that new breed of desired, qualified franchisee play in providing that joy to Wild Birds Unlimited's customers?**

A huge role. We have some franchisees that have been with us from day one. Not every one of them comes to us with the exact same love of birds that I had from day one, but they do all share one trait: they love people. They love spreading joy, even if they're not bird lovers or bird hobbyists from the start. That's something that we're using to continue growing our system.

Passion is a critical part of franchising success. This isn't a retail business where you can succeed by being absentee or hands-off. So, we're focused on continued growth of the system from a unit level economics perspective and making the business as easy to operate and profitable as possible. That means filling our development pipeline with stronger franchisee prospects, and also taking advantage of more online and digital resources for bird lovers.

### **What's next for Wild Birds Unlimited and for you?**

As CDO of the company, I have a responsibility to be a great leader. And, I take that very seriously. I know how lucky I am to be able to combine my true passion with business success. So, I don't foresee any significant changes in my role in Wild Birds Unlimited in the near future. If I have anything to say about it, I'll retire here. In the meantime, I'm excited to watch my team grow and to help individual franchisees thrive.

We're just scratching the surface. Think of all of the communities where we don't have a presence. Think of the opportunities for expansion. That's what excites me. After 27 years of being on the receiving end of

advice and mentoring, I'm in a position where I can provide some wisdom back to other franchisors who are just starting to grow. That's really rewarding for me.

So, my goal for the future is clear: focus on the brand's growth and focus on the mission. Combine your values with your mission and you'll never waver from success.