



Wild Birds Unlimited's Director of Merchandising Creates Brand Distinction with Industry-Leading Products

Wild Birds Unlimited

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Growing up, Jim Lesch and his family spent a lot of time outdoors, hiking, camping and enjoying birds and nature. Then, one Christmas, Lesch wanted to buy his parents a new bird feeder for their backyard, so he went to a local bird feed store in Indianapolis. As it turns out, the store he visited was [Wild Birds Unlimited](#), and it was Founder and CEO Jim Carpenter's first location.

This wouldn't be Lesch's last run-in with [Wild Birds Unlimited](#). Fast forward to 1986, and Lesch was graduating from college with a business degree. He went on to a career in real estate as an appraiser. His office was located in the same building as Wild Birds Unlimited's Franchise Support Center, which was a young and growing company at the time. With Carpenter, at the helm, Lesch eventually got to know Wild Birds Unlimited's leadership team. So when he was looking to make a career change back in 1990, he knew the perfect opportunity.

"Around the same time that I was looking to make a career change, Jim was looking to grow his support center staff. The timing worked out perfectly. Jim wanted someone who could help with the brand's product and merchandising—someone who could help create and develop advantageous relationships and buying programs with our suppliers and to build a product line that was uniquely ours. And that's exactly

what I've focused on for more than 25 years," Lesch said.

Wild Birds Unlimited had 55 stores when Lesch joined the team, and shortly thereafter they started to develop and expand their private label products to better differentiate themselves from competing stores. This included everything from the brand's exclusive classic hopper feeders which were designed by Carpenter and received a rare 3D trademark to its patented Advanced Pole System® which provides dozens of options for creating a bird feeding station while ensuring that the pole stands up straight.

"A big part of that push has been the fact that we want to offer the best products on the market. We think through every single detail for the customer who is truly passionate about this hobby. We want only the best of the best on our shelves," Lesch said. "We want to make sure that, in the end, we're providing value to our retail customers, but also providing growing profitability for our store owners. That's what we continually try to get better at each day."

This includes constantly tweaking the bread and butter of Wild Birds Unlimited—its bird seed.

Back in the early 1990's, Lesch and his team worked with franchise store owners and partnered with their key seed suppliers to bring premium oil sunflower to the market so that customers could enjoy a cleaner, higher quality product. And later that decade they started developing No-Mess blends that have no shells, are 100% edible and provide the customer with better value. "Bird food is what really drives our business. It's what brings birds into backyards. If we can provide the best variety and quality of bird food, it all starts there. Then you create the unique feeders and accessories," Lesch said. "We put a lot of time and resources into developing unique bird food products that attract specific types of birds. Like Jim's Birdacious® Bark Butter®, a spreadable suet created by Carpenter that has attracted 140 different species of birds across North America. In the end, our products help customers have a better bird feeding experience and that helps each and every one of our stores grow their sales and their profits."

That focus on doing what's best for franchise store owners and retail customers has served Wild Birds Unlimited well as today there are more than 300 stores in the US and Canada. "We've certainly come a long way. Through constant innovation, a genuine passion for what we do and dedication to Jim's original mission of bringing people and nature together and doing it with excellence, I think we've really established something incredible" Lesch said.

But perhaps the biggest highlight for Lesch in his storied career with Wild Birds Unlimited has been working alongside Carpenter's vision. From the very beginning, the brand's founder and CEO has always had a clear idea of what his business is all about. It's one that's very focused on sharing the joy of bird feeding with customers. And that's something that Carpenter has written the book on, literally as his book *The Joy of Bird Feeding*, a 432 page guide to attracting and feeding birds, will be available this spring.