Franchised businesses are poised to add more than 12,000 locations in 2015, for a total of nearly 782,000 and an establishment growth rate of 1.6 percent, according to the International Franchise Association (IFA). Franchises are expected to hire 2.9 percent more workers, and the fastest-growing franchise employers will be quick-service restaurants, with retail businesses ranking second, the IFA said in its annual economic outlook.

At the individual franchise concept level, growth can come from many different places. One example is Bricks 4 Kidz, a St. Augustine, Florida-based franchiser of businesses that teach children principles of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) through after-school courses, summer camps, and other programs using LEGO plastic building bricks. Creative Learning, parent company of Bricks 4 Kidz, as well as the Challenge Island and Sew Fun Studios franchise concepts, had 484 locations in February 2014, and a year later had grown to 658.

Brian Pappas, managing director of Bricks 4 Kidz, says franchisees’ excitement about creating a business providing children’s enrichment is one of the major factors driving growth. Featuring LEGO-brand bricks is another key element. “Our choice to use LEGO Bricks as the building tool is extremely popular with multi-generational entrepreneurs,” Pappas explains.

He also singles out the business model as an attractive feature, especially the mobile, home-based aspect. Franchisees typically at least start out working from home, holding programs after-hours at schools, community centers, and similar facilities. This model means low initial investment, low overhead, and rapid ramp-up to breakeven and profitability. The concept is simple to operate and requires no special background or skills, and franchisees face very few national competitors, Pappas says.

As for the customers of the franchisees: Bricks 4 Kidz offers parents an affordable way to help children learn principles of the STEM curriculum while also having fun. The programs are so popular with kids that many are presented as part of the entertainment at birthday parties. The programs are an easy sell to parents, Pappas says, and many franchisees decided to become Bricks 4 Kidz franchisees after experiencing it as customers. “The ability of customers to find classes and camps in various locations near them continues to draw more families,” he says.

Bricks 4 Kidz is a global brand of its own, with franchise locations in the U.S. and 35 other countries. The company’s plans call for a focus on expansion in China and India as well as throughout Europe, Pappas says. “If we keep growing at the current rate, adding 10 to 15 new franchises per month, we could possibly have another 150-plus franchises within the next year,” he says.

Not every franchiser measures growth by number of locations. Sandusky, Ohio-based SealMaster, for example, looks at system-wide revenues. Those were up a robust 9 percent in 2014 for the company, whose franchisees manufacture and sell pavement sealer and other pavement
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maintenance products, including heavy equipment, to governments, property developers and managers, and pavement maintenance contractors.

Its business model makes SealMaster unique. “It’s the only franchise system of its kind and the only one-stop pavement maintenance supplier in the country,” says Rick Simon, SealMaster’s director of franchise operations. And the entire U.S. has only room for about 48 SealMaster franchises. “Owners have protected territories as large as whole states in some cases,” Simon explains.

SealMaster franchisees have the opportunity to create substantial businesses. Of 23 franchises operational at least five years as Sept. 30, 2013, gross revenue ranged from $887,930 to $12.2 million, according to the company. The number of new franchisees in 2015 will be modest, however, since only about 15 territories remain in the U.S.

One rapidly growing franchise with plans for lots more is Baristas Coffee Company, a Seattle-based coffee chain. Baristas franchisees offer drive-through espresso beverages and pastries served up by attractively costumed female baristas. The company, which began franchising in 2014, has a dozen locations from Washington to Florida and has produced its own TV reality show, “Grounded in Seattle.”

The rapid expansion is not due entirely to the charm of Baristas servers, says Marc Hatch, vice president of Washougal, Washington-based NWBB Inc., the producer of “The Franchise Minute” radio program. “The growth rate of franchise opportunities is due in part to the support of the franchise itself as well as the cost structures for implementation of a franchise agreement,” Hatch says. “Rapid growth in franchises such as Baristas, which is expected to add 8 to 10 locations in the first quarter of 2015, is due to a combination of the high level of awareness created by the company, including the success of the reality show, and the low-cost structure available to implement a franchise.”

Melbourne, Florida-based Fleet Clean USA catches franchisees’ attention with a business that provides mobile vehicle washing services. The company had just three franchised locations a year ago and now has 10 franchised locations as well as six corporate-owned locations. 10. Low overhead is one reason for the strong growth. “Our business is mobile business, so we go to our customer,” says President Scott Marr. “Because we don’t have a physical storefront location, we can spend more money on sales efforts and employee-related initiatives.”

Another factor in Fleet Clean’s appeal is the opportunity to generate recurring revenue from some of the world’s largest corporations, who contract to have Fleet Clean franchisees clean trucks and other vehicles on a regular, consistent basis. “Neither inventory nor seasonality is a concern,” Marr adds.

This year should be equally expansive for Fleet Clean, with Marr expecting 29 to 30 locations by the end of 2015. Focus states include Texas, Florida, North Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee. “We have many lucrative markets still available, including Denver, Salt Lake City, Nashville, Austin, Miami, and others,” Marr says.

Since 1912, Dale Carnegie Training has been improving the performance of companies by increasing the engagement levels of their employees. With approximately 200 locations in more than 85 countries, the New York-based franchiser anticipates adding 14 to 18 in 2015 in China, Australia, the United Kingdom, Africa, the U.S., and elsewhere, says Jean-Louis Van Doorne, senior vice president of franchise support.

“Franchises appeal to corporate veterans creating new business lives,” Van Doorne says. “It’s for people who want to be in business for themselves, but not by themselves, and who want to be associated with a worldwide brand with 100-plus years of success.”

In a quarter-century of serving up premium ice cream, Bruster’s Real Ice Cream has expanded to approximately 200 units. “Our goal for 2015 is sustainable growth by adding another 25 franchise units to our system, both domestically and internationally, focusing on traditional and non-traditional locations,” says Corey Bradley, vice-president of franchise development and real estate for the Bridgewater, Pennsylvania-based franchiser.

Bruster’s draws consumers in with premium fresh-made ice cream and waffle cones and world-class customer service, Bradley says. Growth plans target the Southeast, Northeast, and West Coast. “We’re always looking for exceptional operators to develop our brand in uncharted markets,” Bradley says.

As franchising sails into the uncharted waters of 2015, these franchisers seem poised to meet or exceed the industry’s growth forecast. And, as their variety indicates, growth is less a matter of sector than of having a solid business model, attractive economics, and the special appeal of being different.
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