In the mid-1800s, franchising itself was new. Inventor Isaac Singer had just begun asking people to pay fees, analogous to today’s franchise fees, for rights to sell his improved sewing machines in specific territories. Franchisees also trained customers to use the devices. This innovation helped Singer overcome barriers to marketing, distributing, and manufacturing what became the world’s first successful sewing machine.

Franchising innovation slowed until Ray Kroc pioneered business format franchising a century later. Franchisees of Kroc’s McDonald’s concept were among the first to pay franchise fees that gave them not just the right to sell something in a territory, but also extensive training and support in operating the business. Since then, business format franchising has remained the dominant standard.

Snap Fitness is an example of a franchise concept that has prospered by innovating on the basic business format franchising formula. Snap Fitness franchisees operate streamlined, state-of-the-art fitness centers that are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Because of their reduced footprint, clubs can be located conveniently and economically close to customers, providing quality, affordable workouts with equipment and an experience that rivals big-box fitness clubs. For franchisees, the brand offers an attractive opportunity to enter the fitness field affordably and profitably.

“Franchisees are drawn to Snap Fitness because we provide them with a simple process, turnkey systems, financing assistance, and world-class support throughout their franchise journey,” says Steele Smiley, Chief Officer responsible for franchise development.

Snap Fitness was founded by Peter Taunton in 2003 and began franchising in 2004. Expansion since then has been dramatic. Today, the company has 2,000 locations open or in development around the world. The majority are in the U.S., but the brand is experiencing rapid growth internationally.

Current plans call for a total of 1,550 to 1,600 operational locations within 12 months. Target markets include North America, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Southeast Asia.

As the proven franchise concept grows worldwide, Smiley said, Snap Fitness remains competitive in the industry by rolling out new products and value-added
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services within its clubs. “Innovation is the mark of a healthy system,” Smiley said. “Just recently, we completed a club redesign that will propel us forward for another five years and beyond.”

Fleet Clean Systems of Melbourne, Florida, has brought innovation to the vehicle cleaning business with a mobile concept that caters to customers that own fleets of vehicles requiring regular cleaning. “The mobile fleet washing business is a little-known industry because it is hidden from the consumer’s view, which may be why there are so few players in the market,” says Skye K. Robinson, director of franchise operations for Fleet Clean.

“But the demand is very high. According to the American Trucking Association, more than 30 million trucks and trailers are registered in the U.S., and all of them need to be washed.”

Fleet Clean appeals to people interested in investing in a franchise in part because it is a business-to-business concept that generates recurring revenue from corporate customers. Overhead is low, because many franchisees operate as mobile businesses, and that contributes to high profit margins on sales. And, because customers are often large corporations with multiple, widely dispersed locations, new Fleet Clean franchisees often find customers lining up as soon as the new franchise begins operations.

After beginning franchising in 2013, Fleet Clean has grown to eight franchise owners in as many states, including Arizona, Texas, Kansas, New Mexico, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. “Fleet Clean expects to open 15 new locations during the remainder of 2015 with locations throughout the U.S.,” Robinson says.

Manufacturing has very few franchise opportunities, and one of the most fascinating and appealing is SealMaster. Franchisees of the Sandusky, Ohio, company manufacture and sell pavement sealer and also distribute pavement maintenance products and equipment for the pavement maintenance industry. “Customers include federal, state, and local governments, property management firms, pavement maintenance contractors, airports – essentially any public or private entity charged with pavement maintenance and preservation,” says Rick Simon, director of franchise operations.

Another striking feature of the SealMaster franchise concept is the size of the territories. Each franchisee has exclusive rights to a territory as large, in some cases, as an entire state. This means there are just 48 territories in the 50 American states. And most of those are already owned by existing franchisees. With only about 15 territories left, SealMaster is in the final stages of developing its domestic franchise system. “Once they’re sold, the exclusive opportunity to own a SealMaster franchise will come only if an owner leaves the system, which is rare,” Simon says.

SealMaster franchisees enjoy enviable recession resistance. The territories are also economically appealing, with the 23 SealMaster franchises operational more than five years averaging $5.2 million dollars in annual sales, with 42 percent average gross profit.

For the final phase of the company’s U.S. expansion, SealMaster is targeting New England, as well as areas west of the Mississippi including the Dakotas, Wyoming, Iowa, Idaho, Washington state, central and Northern California, Nebraska, Louisiana, Oregon, Kansas, Montana, Nevada, and Utah.

Bruster’s Real Ice Cream franchisees deploy constantly changing flavors to attract customers, while never varying from the basic formula of fresh, real ingredients in premium ice cream treats. Each franchisee of the Bridgewater, Pennsylvania-based company can offer daily up to 37 flavors, chosen from nearly 150 recipes. Items include cakes, pies, and waffle cones made, like the ice creams, in the store where they are served.

While staying true to its roots, the company continues to innovate. One recent development is a new dine-in format to complement end-cap and walk-up standing service formats. This format features indoor seating as well as additional product offerings. Bruster’s Real Ice Cream has more than 190 units open and plans to top 200 units before the end of 2015.

These innovative franchisees’ refinements of Singer and Kroc may be the beginning of a new age in franchising creativity – this one spurred by regulation. One of the biggest changes in franchising history occurred in 1978 when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) began requiring franchisees to give prospective franchisees detailed franchise disclosure documents. Now, new challenges may come from provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and potential changes to minimum wage laws. One thing seems sure, however. With more than a century and a half of surviving all environments and circumstances behind them, franchising’s innovators will respond creatively and effectively.
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