Franchising as a general concept has been around as long as business. One report traces the idea as far back as 200 B.C., when a Chinese shopkeeper opened a number of retail units and pioneered the chain-store concept, one of the foundations of modern franchising. Somewhat more recently, the British East India Company received an exclusive royal charter in 1600 to conduct trade between Great Britain and India and Southeast Asia—similar to the exclusive territories today’s franchisees receive.

Early 20th-Century pioneers such as A&W Root Beer, which began franchising its drive-in restaurants during the Roaring ’20s, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, which came along about the same time as the Great Depression, continued expanding and evolving the concept. Today’s business format franchise has only superficial similarity to any ancient Chinese retailer, but one thing hasn’t changed: Franchisees want to invest in concepts with staying power that will help them achieve long-term success.

When it comes to longevity, few firms can match the record of Dale Carnegie Training, which dates its origins back more than a century. The New York-based training and coaching company shares with business leaders and employees the human relations principles developed by its renowned founder, Dale Carnegie. Its premise—to help make organizations more successful—is equally timeless. “Our customers work with us so that they can stay competitive by leveraging the skills and talents of their employees,” says Piera Palazzolo, senior vice president of marketing.

Dale Carnegie Training franchises appeal to business people who enjoy working with top executives in their communities and helping people and businesses grow and develop. “The work that we do through our training and coaching solutions create inspired, confident, and engaged employees,” Palazzolo says. “It is through that growth that the companies they work for begin to see an increase in productivity and creativity.”

The company’s program offerings expand constantly, and Dale Carnegie Training recently began providing online learning. “This year, we released a new sales course that focuses on the relationship side of selling and the human relations principles that are critical to instilling trust in the sales process,” Palazzolo says.

Today, Dale Carnegie Training operates in more than 200 locations and in 90 countries. “Recently, we have added Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Oman, and we continue to expand in mainland China,” says Jean-Louis Van Doorne, senior vice president of franchise support. During the next year, the company is targeting expansion in China and Africa. “We also want to expand in Germany, France, and portions of the U.S.,” Van Doorne says.

As long as people keep moving, and local businesses want to gain new customers from new movers in their communities, Our Town America will keep expanding. The company was started in 1972 by the father of President and CEO Michael Plummer, and today it still relies largely on providing local goods and services sellers with a direct
mail marketing channel to reach new customers who have recently relocated to their market areas.

The company’s appeal to franchisees rests on the same low-cost, low-overhead design that it has offered since the beginning. Many franchisees operate their businesses from home, Plummer says, because the model does not require space for retail sales or inventory. Another attractive feature of Our Town America franchises is that revenues are recurring, generated from direct mail marketing deals that local business owners maintain month after month. “People stay with us for long periods of time,” Plummer says.

Our Town America is, however, constantly refining its approach, says Plummer. For instance, within the past year it has begun offering businesses the opportunity to target mailings more precisely than by entire ZIP codes. “Now we can target neighborhoods within ZIP codes and by demographics of median income, family size, and age,” he says.

Our Town America operates in 65 markets, mostly from the Midwest to the East Coast but with a number on the West Coast. By the end of 2016, Plummer anticipates completing a major expansion that would add another 20 markets. And he sees demand for Our Town America’s 43-year-old offering continuing indefinitely. “People are always moving,” Plummer says. “And there’s always going to be a need to replace sellers of goods and services when you move into an area. That’s never going to change.”

The continued presence of franchising as a key business concept also seems unlikely to ever change. However, even the British East India Company’s royal franchise on a huge global trading territory didn’t give it eternal life. The company that fielded its own army and for centuries ruled like a sovereign nation was disbanded in 1873. The lesson for franchisees who want long-term success is: It is as important as ever to select a true master of franchising when choosing a concept to invest in.
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