

Glowing Sales

A sports company has been driving sales with its line of glow-in-the-dark golf balls. Now Nitelite Sports is teeing up its latest set of products to score big in the specialty retail market. *Vanessa Geneva Ahern*



It was many years ago, in 1982, but Corky Newcomb clearly remembers when tennis star Bobby Riggs helped promote his company's glow-in-the-dark tennis balls. Newcomb, the founder and president of Nitelite Sports, followed the success of the lit tennis balls by introducing glow-in-the-dark golf balls.

It was a turning point for the Wolfeboro, NH-based company. Newcomb says Nitelite Sports sold millions of the golf balls over the next 25 years. Previously, golf courses had never made money at night—but they now saw that potential in the new golf balls. For example, The Marriott Hotel chain realized it “could increase food, beverage, cart and green fees by having tournaments at night,” says Newcomb. Shortly afterwards, the Hilton and Hyatt Hotel chains joined in.

Nitelite was a successful exporter as well, exporting products to 84 different countries, including Australia, Canada, Ireland, South Africa, and even Swaziland. In 1991 Nitelite was awarded the “New Hampshire Exporter of the Year” award by then Governor Judd Gregg.

New opportunity

Recently, Newcomb came across an article in a travel magazine that stated that a significant portion of the American public had cut back on vacations. Newcomb says the idea for a mini-vacation—or break in the backyard—was a result of this article. The Nitelites Family Fun pack, Newcomb says, is designed to give all families an active getaway from pressing everyday routines.

The pack includes a curve ball, football, glow-and-throw UFO frisbee, and a 24-pack of 8-inch light sticks. A light stick can usually give 5-6 good hours of light and can be re-ordered. Nitelite Sports products range in price from \$5-\$30.

Newcomb says that getting the family together for a round of nighttime touch football or a Frisbee contest is a great way to beat boredom and keep kids active.

Another home run

Eager to be a part of the thriving autograph sports memorabilia industry, Nitelite Sports will also launch its Talking Autograph

Baseball this spring. The baseball is a Rawlings official major league baseball with space for a photograph. It also has an embedded microphone to record and play a favorite player's voice.

Nitelite Sports recently reached out to a thousand current and former major leaguers about being part of the Talking Autograph Baseball team. Newcomb is excited about the responses he is getting from players who are interested in participating.

Specialty retail match

Newcomb says that both the family fun packs and the talking baseballs would be a great fit for the specialty retail market.



“We are approaching the kiosk mall market because we thought it would be a great demonstration product, when people see it. It has a high impulse consumer market mass appeal,” Newcomb says.

The company has completed work on a DVD that shows kids between the ages of 10-18 playing with the different products. The DVD, which highlights the Family Fun Pack, is a great way for consumers to see the glow-in-the-dark products in action, Newcomb says.

Newcomb adds that Nitelite Sports also welcomes inquiries from kiosk retailers who already sell novelty toys or sports products with strong impulse appeal. Their products have many potentially successful interfaces with existing specialty retail operations.

For more information, please visit nitelitesports.com or talkingautographbaseballs.com.

Vanessa Geneva Ahern is a NY-based freelance writer who covers business, health, travel, and wellness. She has written for various trade and consumer magazines including National Jeweler, SELF, and Fit Pregnancy. For more information, please visit girlgumption.com.



Cashing in on Crepes

A new franchise is looking to popularize crepes in the United States.

Vanessa Geneva Ahern

In 2002, when Mauricio Acevedo and his team of Colombian-born entrepreneurs brainstormed ideas about what would make a successful quick-service franchise in the United States, they asked themselves a few questions: What food is adaptable to every market, appeals to all members of the family, can be eaten any time of day, and has virtually no market competition? The unanimous answer was crepes and the idea for BannaStrow's crepes franchise was born.

According to Acevedo, crepes have many things going for them in the United States. For one thing, there is not much competition. "There is no national leader of crepes in the United States. Crepes are famous worldwide except here," he



says. Another advantage? You can have full-scale restaurant offerings without a full kitchen. BannaStrow's locations include kiosks and inline stores in malls. Even mobile trucks are being tested.

Batter up

BannaStrow's offers an assortment of crepes, salads and coffee ranging in price from \$3.80 to \$8.50. Options include Caesar



Crepe—with romaine lettuce, mozzarella and parmesan cheeses, Caesar dressing and choice of meat; and Smoked Salmon crepe—with smoked salmon, capers, Alfredo sauce and sour cream.

Sweet options include Peach Melba; and the Fruit Jumble with bananas and strawberries, and chocolate or caramel drizzled on top. The Fruit Jumble is the most popular item, and accounts for 30 percent of sales. These sweet crepes can be upgraded to deluxe with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

All ingredients are pre-cooked and or pre-cut so there is very little waste, Acevedo says. The only cooking involved is turning the batter into a crepe on a griddle as the customer watches. This is a skill that usually only takes a couple of hours of training to master.

Acevedo says that there is a misconception in America that crepes are fattening. He argues that crepes from BannaStrow's are healthy. "We have regular batter mix, and we just finished development on a whole-grain mix which is zero transfat, very low sodium, high in protein, and tastes almost the same in both sweet and savory options. The crepe itself doesn't compete with any of the flavors inside," says Acevedo. He adds that the "Crepe-Your-Own" option that the company offers allows customers to customize their crepes making them as healthy or hearty as they would like.

Franchise costs

Franchise setup costs range from 115K to 190K, depending on the size of the kiosk or operation. A franchise fee of 30K is included in the setup costs. This gives the franchisee access to the BannaStrow's system, brand name, support, and a marketing boost from their public relations firm. BannaStrow's can help the potential franchisee find a location, but franchisees are responsible for securing permits and dealing with any other local issues. Once the permits have been secured, a unit can be ready to open in 90 days.

BannaStrow's goal is to add 25 new locations every year, and reach a total of 125 locations by the year 2015. To accelerate the pace of growth, BannaStrow's is rolling out an "ambassador" program whereby an ambassador can lead growth efforts in a particular geographical area. Ambassadors must operate at least one BannaStrow's unit; the company will share a portion of the franchise fees and royalties in return for local knowledge and networking information, and support and training for new franchisees. "What we're looking for are entrepreneurs who want to create a long-term financially sound company and help us grow, and be our eyes and ears in places we can't be," says Acevedo.

Interested ambassadors need to contact BannaStrow's and submit a business plan outlining what they can do in an area with a timeline. Acevedo says that an ambassador or area developer looks for new franchisees, pre-qualifies them and helps with location scouting. Since the ambassador already has a working unit in place, potential franchisees get to see the operation before committing to the business.

Getting into malls has proven relatively easy so far. In Florida where the company has four locations (Miami International Mall in Doral, Canoe Creek Service Plaza in St. Cloud, Dadeland Mall in Miami, and West Palm Beach Service Plaza in West Palm Beach), permits are issued by the Department of Agriculture because the operation is not strictly considered a place that has cooking operations. Permits through the Departments of Agriculture are much easier to obtain.

BannaStrow's is in talks with potential franchisees in densely populated states like New York, California, Virginia, and Georgia. "We're open to everything," Acevedo says.

For more information, please visit bannastrows.com.

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