

Is a franchise for you?

Freedom to work from home, ability to set your own hours: just a couple of the reasons why a growing number of women are becoming franchise wise.

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Business in a box. For Ottawa's Jennifer McFee, that was the appeal: "I chose franchising because all the groundwork of getting a company up and running was already done," explains the former accountant. Two years ago, McFee, 46, quit the corporate world and decided to go it on her own - but not entirely alone. She purchased a Concierge Home Services franchise, which not only gave her the safety of an established business, but offered her the freedom to set her own hours.

Benefits of owning a franchise

For just those reasons, a growing number of women are hopping on the franchise bandwagon.

"Female entrepreneurs are the fastest growing segment," says Lori Karpman, a Montreal-based franchising consultant and lawyer. According to Karpman, 70 per cent of those starting their own businesses are women.

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Not only are there more women, but according to franchise lawyer Ned Levitt of Toronto, the bulk of them are in their forties and fifties. "Women who have accomplished certain things in business are taking a serious look at becoming franchisors," he says. "Female franchisors have a better chance of succeeding because they have the people skills needed."

And it's not all coffee shops and beauty salons. According to the Canadian Franchise Association (CFA), women are getting their hands dirty in industries ranging from automotive to home inspection to financial services. Home-based franchises requiring a smaller investment are particularly popular, says Karpman. "We see a lot of divorced women with a lump sum of money who need to work but also have kids, so they want something to fit with their lives."

Lorraine McLachlan, CFA president and CEO, says for many women, franchising offers the perfect fit. "With a corporate job, you can work very hard and get laid off through no fault of your own," she points out. "In a franchise, you're dealing with a 'sweat equity' component. The more effort you put in, the greater your likelihood of success."

Where do franchisees start?

Jennifer McFee started where many people do - at the great Canadian dream: Tim Hortons. Requiring an initial investment of \$194,000, she quickly deemed buying a Timmies too pricey. Then she heard about Concierge Home Services, a housecleaning, house and pet-sitting company.

Look for low start-up cost franchises

The start-up costs were \$21,000, which included franchise fees and a manual covering all the job requirements. McFee began with seven clients and now has 34. Her biggest challenge has been staffing. Because Concierge requires that employees be bonded, McFee is required to do police checks. "When I tell them that, three out of five people are running," she says.

McFee trains employees, courts prospective clients, checks on cleaners, prepares schedules and follows up with existing clients. During Ottawa's bus strike in 2008, she often had to drive employees to their cleaning gigs. She frequently rolls up her sleeves and scrubs houses. "I go in with the cleaner and we do the whole house the first time," McFee explains. "You do what you have to."

It's that kind of attitude that's helped make McFee's business successful; she was earning a profit within the first three months. "Operating a franchise gave me the blueprint so that I could grow it this big," she says. "I never would have been this big on my own."

Keeping the day job

When Diane Yum of Regina purchased her Two Blonds & a Brunette Gift Co. franchise in November 2008, the 47-year-old kept her day job as a senior associate in an investment firm - just in case. Although her goal is to run the gift basket company full-time within five years, "with the economy just getting back on its feet, I can't do that yet," she says. "It's going to take a good two to three years to get my name out there and grow my business."

Still working as a senior associate, Yum chose this particular franchise because she wanted to be her own boss and to explore her creative side. And for her, the franchise fee was manageable: The initial price was \$20,000, plus \$2,500 yearly, which covers training, initial inventory and a website.

Yum has converted the lower level of her house into an office, where she's set aside an area for making up the baskets. She's enlisted the help of her husband, who does some deliveries and advertising. "I wanted something fun and different, something I could work around my own schedule," she says. "When it's something that excites you and isn't just about paying the bills, it inspires you more. I've been pleasantly surprised with how everything is going."

Transforming small business into franchise

In 1991, Lorelei Hepburn decided the time was right to start an organic lawn care service. As an environmental technologist with an interest in soil, she's passionate about getting people off pesticides. "I wanted to change the world one lawn at a time," she says.

Hepburn began by consulting with clients about how to care for their lawns, but soon found herself servicing an area spanning southern Ontario from Oshawa to Oakville. "The business just kept growing and growing," she explains. "I was on the road from 6 in the morning until midnight. I figured there had to be a better way." In 2000, she transformed her company, called Environmental Factor, into a franchise. She contacted the CFA, attended its lectures and checked out other lawn care franchises. "I educated myself before jumping in." Hepburn turned to a franchise lawyer to help her draw up a contract for franchisees duplicating her company - a step in the process she calls essential.

Today, at 50, Hepburn has 15 franchises across Ontario and New Brunswick. While several years ago she sold five franchises in one year, she admits she's starting to slow down. "It's like having a new child," she says of her work. "You have to be there 24/7. When a franchisee is standing on a lawn and doesn't know what to do, he phones me and I have to be there to help him."

As well, Hepburn's business received an unexpected boost when the Ontario government banned pesticides last year. "We went from our normal business in spring of 2008 to 400 per cent growth in the spring of 2009."

Environmental Factor has now outgrown its old head office and adjacent 4,000-square-foot warehouse and has moved to a larger facility. Hepburn has also opened an office in Buffalo, N.Y., from which she offers her lawn care products to the American market.

Despite all the labour, Hepburn says she prefers the franchising life. "The hours are long and it's very tiring, but I love what I do. You have to," adding, "If I want to make more money, I just work harder. And no one can fire me!"

Breakfast franchise success

Dubbing her franchise the best in breakfast, Cora Mussely Tsouflidou is an inspiration to any woman starting a new life in middle age. In 1987, at age 40, she found herself divorced with three teenage kids to support. "Nobody wanted to hire me, but I had to show my kids Mommy was strong."

So Mussely Tsouflidou sold her house and used the money to start her first restaurant, called Chez Cora, in the Saint-Laurent area of Montreal. It was so successful that, by 1993, nine Coras were sizzling away in Quebec. When a woman approached her about turning her business into a franchise, Mussely Tsouflidou spent a year doing research. She then standardized her recipes and the look of her restaurants and started franchising.

Today, the Cora empire spans the country, with 120 restaurants and another 10 set to open by the end of this year. Mussely Tsouflidou's goal is to have 250 restaurants in Canada, and she's starting to look southward.

Making the switch from boss to franchisor required a different approach. "When I owned nine restaurants, I was the big boss and I was able to dictate how things worked," she explains. "Even though franchisees sign an agreement saying they'll stick to your recipe [for success], they're entrepreneurs. You're the franchisor, but you can't dictate; you can only convince them to follow your recipe."

Mussely Tsouflidou's advice to anyone considering a similar move is to have a sound venture and ensure the product answers a need. In addition, franchisors need the ability to instruct franchisees. "You have to be able to teach what's worked for you," she says.

Mussely Tsouflidou says her work is her passion. She laughs, "My office is in my head. Even if I'm lying on the patio, my brand is the love of my life. I can't differentiate between when I'm working and when I'm not."

If anything, she feels the job has been easier because she's a woman. "Having children, I learned how to suffer, encourage, and reprimand when it's needed. I also learned things don't always happen the way you planned. You have to be able to react. I always encourage women that they have what it takes. If I could do it at 40, imagine what they can do."