

The 10 **Hottest** New Franchises

by JANE SHEALY

In the 21st century, franchisers continue to focus on service-oriented industries, but variety and unusual industries are spicing things up a bit. And mergers, alliances and co-branding are making strange bedfellows -combining daycare facilities with business centers, coffee shops with mail delivery, and gas stations with drycleaners.

Among the most innovative contemporary franchises are junk removal, handyman repairs, and one-stop pet care shops. Other service-oriented businesses such as a business brokerage, low-cost legal assistance, and a supermarket for metals also make the grade. A dry cleaner that uses an environmentally friendly process and a men's clothier who calls on clients in their offices reflect a growing trend in caring about more than just the bottom line. Leisure-time activities and one of the latest Internet-driven enterprises round out our Top 10 list of the newest, most innovative franchises.

Metal Supermarkets

Some weird and wonderful people pass through the doors of Metal Supermarkets looking for some weird and wonderful things, according to Joe Miller, president of the company's franchise division. Customers have included sculptors, tool and dye manufacturers, a miniature army-tank craftsman, shop owners making their own signs, a mechanic who needed to line the inside panel for a B-52 bomber, and even body piercers looking for odd pieces of stainless steel.

They all found what they were looking for, Miller says, adding there was no minimum purchase required and no extra charge for special cuts.

"These manufacturers, maintenance workers and hobbyists who need fast access to raw materials are our target market," Miller says. "Our specialized metal distributors carved out a small niche that was not well served"

The company built its business around serving that market - 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Corporate headquarters also own 25 per cent of its locations and uses those outlets for training and experimenting with value-added services.

The business requires inventory, working capital, and equipment that pushes the first year's investment to about \$200,000, Miller says. And while most franchises have had some experience in working with metals, others have had none. They just have an interest in selling a product that has a long shelf life, is difficult to shop lift, and is not subject to fashion.

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