

Free Your Toes: A Look At Flip Flop Shops

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Fri, Oct 7 2011

Look down at your feet.

This isn't one of those "made you look" jokes, although if it were I bet I just got most of you. On a more serious note, now that you have looked down, chances are majority of you are currently able to wiggle your toes freely in a pair of flip flops.

In 2004 Todd Giatrelis and Sarah Towne founded Flip Flop Shops as a result of a trip to Vegas that Sarah took for a work conference. After walking around in uncomfortable shoes and not being able to easily find a pair of flip flops to purchase anywhere she and Todd decided to create a solution by opening a retail store that catered only to that person yearning to free his/her toes.

Todd and Sarah started the first shop in Boston and between 2004 and 2008 the chain grew to have five locations across the country. In that time, Brian Curin stumbled upon one of the shops in Arizona and it was love at first sight. Brian assembled previous business partners Darin and Alan who had worked together on growing several businesses including Cold Stone Creamery, Southwest Grill, Planet Smoothie and more.

The three had been searching for an opportunity where they could put their skills toward something that fit their lifestyle and that they were passionate about and flip flops was the perfect fit. They put a deal together with Todd and Sarah, redesigned and rebranded the shops, secured distribution with some of the top flip flop brands and launched the new Flip Flop Shops in January 2008 and started franchising shops all over the country.

They were able to take a billion dollar industry that really had no focused outlet in retail and create merchandising and a store environment that specifically catered to the product. "Until we came along, flip flops were poorly merchandised, kind of like an afterthought," says Curin. "You could go into a surf shop or department store or whatever it is and you could find some of the brands and styles but not all of them. What we did, is we basically made them the star of the show, much like sunglass hut did with sunglasses."

Today, flip flop shops has over 115 shops in their system across three countries. When it comes to picking a new location for a shop, prime real estate is key to ensure that there is a lot of foot traffic. Climate is fairly irrelevant, despite the fact that flip flops are generally associated with warm climates, some of Flip Flop Shops' most lucrative locations include Denver, CO and Edmonton, Alberta Canada. Warm climates are very successful for the franchise as well, but that is not as much of a surprise.



I touched base with Brian Curin to get some more inside scoop on Flip Flop Shops:

How did you get such a strong brand following for the shops?

What we did, is very quickly I spent the bulk of my time, throughout the California coastline, with Darin. He and I spent a ton of time at the headquarter offices of each one of the hot brands - earning our stripes as you call it. There is a lot of mutual respect that happens in the industry. We came in saying, "hey this is what we're going to do," and I think a lot of brands were like, "ya sure you are." So we said let's prove it and do what we say were going to do, and show that we're really good partners and that there is respect for these brands- these are products we grew up with. I grew up, and my first wet suit was an O'Neill wetsuit. I grew up rocking Vans, starting in the fifth grade, and having the posters on the wall. So it was one of those situations where we thought let's dig deep and show this industry what we can do, and earn their business and respect and really friendships too. There is a ton of respect for the business acumen, and out of it there has been some awesome personal relationships that have developed over the years too.

How do online sales work for you?

We actually created our online as more of a service for our franchise system. So all our shops can order any of the product that is online and book that sale for the customer. So let's say you went into one of our shops and they didn't have your size or color, or maybe one of the brands wasn't being carried in there, but obviously it's part of our system. Instead of losing a sale, they can immediately jump online and say, "Hey, I can get that for you, and have it shipped right to your house, or hotel, or to the shop," so it works out really well.

Tell us a bit about how you developed the shop environment and experience?

When we were looking at the retail scheme of things, and looking at all the different concepts out there, one of things we always did really well, with Coldstone and Lowes, with any concept we did, was it was very experiential for the customer. We touched on all senses; it wasn't just the music or wasn't just the food or wasn't just the graphics. With Flip Flop Shops, when we designed it, we actually did the consumer research. We did three months of consumer research, real-time data capture, it was extremely accurate, and we found out who our core consumer was, and then we built our concept around that consumer. That is a huge reason why, we believe, the success that we have is there, because we built the concept for the people who buy the most product, who visit our shops the most. When you look at our shops, one of the things, we actually trademarked a term, called "environmentally responsible retail."

It starts with our cork floor. We have a natural cork floor, which is a sustainable product. We use bamboo for design aspects around the cash wrap, and things like that, which is again a sustainable product. Recycled particleboard for a lot of the design elements where the graphics hang, and we use water based glues and paints in the construction. The cork floor, the reason we did that, is we were looking at a lot of cool designs that other retailers did, like stone, really interesting things. And for us, we said, "What do people do in a flip flop shop? They take their shoes off, or their flip flops off and they try flip flops on. So why not have a warm floor? And a floor that is a little bit soft and has a little bit of cushion in it." So we did that.

We hit on every sense for the consumer. We have a proprietary coconut, suntan oil scent that lofts through the shop and about five feet out of the shop. So as you walk up to it or by it, you pick up this great scent, which harkens you back to the beach and vacation and holidays and being relaxed. And then, once you're in the shops, it's not overpowering, it's just a very subtle scent.

If you have yet to experience a Flip Flop Shops location for yourself, it is time to find the nearest location! The team predicts managed growth over the next couple of years. With over 9000 franchise applications to choose from, only 48 were chosen thus far, showing that there is a strategic and well thought out method to the madness of growing the franchise.

From the strong brand relationships to the satisfied customers that enter Flip Flop Shops across the country on a daily basis, this business model seems to be working out well for partners Brian, Darin and Alan, who can continue to move forward in a business that they enjoy.

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