

## **Pedaling franchises**

VACATION FUN: Firm that started resort bike renting goes nationwide.

By Maria Zate Ventura County Star writer

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For entrepreneur Brian McInerney, life is a beach and a bike. And he's managed to turn his love of bike riding into what he calls a one-of-a-kind franchise idea that was born in Ventura County.

McInerney is the founder of Santa Barbara-based Wheel Fun Rentals, which offers specialty bike rental franchises in beaches and parks in six California locations from San Francisco to Fountain Valley.

The idea for the franchise started back in the late 1980s when McInerney was living in Ventura and working as a commercial and residential real estate broker. His favorite activity was bike riding, and the four-wheeled Italian surreys caught his eye because a group of people could enjoy a leisurely ride together without having to break a real sweat. He thought the surreys would be a good addition to bike rental shops, and in 1989 he formed a partnership with an Italian surrey manufacturer to help him distribute the bikes in the states.

"It started out as a hobby business at first," said McInerney. "It was fun and family-oriented. And you were dealing with people who were on vacation and looking for fun activities."

McInerney opened up a few rental shops of his own, including one at the Holiday Inn in Ventura in 1989, and he established a distribution network to eventually include 225 operators nationwide. From this base of operators, he saw a franchise opportunity.

He approached Al Stonehouse, then the president of Diamond Back Bicycles in Camarillo, in 1999 to discuss the franchise idea. Together they spent a year doing market research and found strong potential for an amusement-driven business targeting baby boomers looking for family-type activities.

In December, long-time Uniglobe Travel franchise owner Jim Colitz also joined the company to serve as vice president, with Stonehouse as president. Wheel Fun has franchise locations in Oxnard, Encino, Solvang, San Francisco, Fountain Valley, and Santa Barbara, and plans to add another 10 to 15 franchises in California this year. A franchise costs about \$200,000 to \$320,000 depending on the territory.

McInerney estimates that a beachfront site rents an average of 75 to 100 bikes a day in the summer, with rental prices ranging from \$6 an hour for a standard two-wheel bike, up to \$25 an hour for a six-seater surrey.

Wheel Fun sets itself apart from other shops in that it offers a wide range of specialty bikes, said McInerney. Renters can choose from "the chopper," a single seater that resembles a motorcycle, to a two-seater "deuce coup," to a "quad sport" go-cart-type bike, to a surrey that can seat up to nine adults. Most of the bikes can be used by small children as well as adults.

With a projected \$1 million in franchise business this year, Wheel Fun sees the potential of expanding its franchise network to include the 225 rental operators that buy bicycles from the company. These "hub" sites may support from one to five additional "spoke" sites, adding up to more than 1,000 potential locations, McInerney said.

He isn't the only one who's optimistic about the business. Success magazine in North Carolina recently named Wheel Fun one of the Top 10 Hottest New Franchise Concepts of 2000.

"It's new, fun, and appealing to a growing number of potential franchisees," said Jane Shealy, a senior editor covering franchising for Success Magazine in North Carolina. "Baby boomers looking to retire early from corporate America, run their own show for a change and live in an area most people only see during a week's vacation each year."

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