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Company taking on 'globally disorganized industry' sees double-digit same-store growth for over 2 decades

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Poolwerx, a franchise-model pool servicing company, is expecting to grow to more than 200 stores and over 600 vans in the United States by 2024 – with only 43 stores and 195 vans currently operating in the country.

CEO and Founder John O'Brien created the company in 1995 in Australia, where he's originally from. He then expanded to the states in 2014, selecting Dallas as headquarters for Poolwerx's U.S. operations.

In looking for an industry that would take off under the franchising model, O'Brien thought the pool service field was what modern companies and franchising missed.

O'Brien said he likes the franchise model because small business owners can have the clout of global marketing, training and support from a large business while still operating within their own communities. About 80 percent of Poolwerx locations are franchise-owned, and the remaining are corporate-owned.

O'Brien spoke with the *Dallas Business Journal* about the Poolwerx's plans for escalated expansion in the U.S., why the company selected Texas for its U.S. headquarters, and more:

Why did you decide to found this company?

All of my career has been in franchising since I left college, and I moved out of corporate franchising and into my own franchise businesses in my late 20s.

In the mid-90s, I went in search of a globally disorganized industry. One of the things franchising does is organize disorganized industries. I went on a search around the world, and I was in California when I saw this beat up power truck with no signs and rust, dropping oil. It had a surfer dude with a pool pole and a surfboard hanging out the back. I did some research and thought: If you're a pool owner, then you're wealthier than most. And if you're a pool owner that has your pool serviced, you're even wealthier. In fact, you're in a very small percentage of the population, but you've got that guy without a uniform with an un-uniformed, unsigned truck pulling up in your driveway.

It didn't add up. I bought a little store with three service trucks, and today we have over 150 stores and over 600 service trucks across the world.

How is Poolwerx different than other pool service companies?

Most pool service companies are ma-and-pa operations and have been for 30-odd years. They work in their own local geography. We are one of only four companies in the U.S.A. that is franchised in the service and retail sector. That's what makes us different.

What that means we can do is that we can bring all the benefits of being large, but bring it to the local community. We have the benefits of national marketing and national buying and training to make sure that we get the best delivery. You've got all the benefits of being global and the support of a large company, but a local franchise partner can deliver locally to the client.

Why are you partial to this franchise model?

It's about entrepreneurship. This country is most famous for encouraging and supporting entrepreneurship more than any other country in the world. This is the home of franchising, the USA, the birthplace of it.

What I love about franchising is that it allows small business owners to get into their own business without having to make all the mistakes that start-up small businesses do. They have the support of the franchise brand behind them. That helps them with marketing and supply and training and profitability. It allows small entrepreneurs – people with a desire to own their own business to get into business – with a greater chance of success.

Why did you choose to headquarter your U.S. operations in Dallas?

You look at Texas, and it's a big state. It's a growing state. It's business friendly. It has franchise friendly laws more than most states. It's very pro small business.

To be honest, of all the American states, Texas feels the most like Australia. It's still got that pioneering spirit, that growth spirit, that entrepreneurial spirit, that anybody can be successful.

Apart from all of those fantastic things, it's in the middle of the country. As a franchise company, we have operations from coast to coast and it's easy to get everywhere.

Do revenue trends support this idea that your growth goals are viable?

We've had double-digit same-store growth, which is quite incredible, for all but one of our 25 years since we've been operating. Our growth in the U.S. year-on-year is nearly 30 percent up the first six months of last year, nearly 30 percent out. I think that, yes, that's incredible in any market.

Same-store growth in Australia and New Zealand is 11 percent up year-on-year, and that's in a very mature market. Australia and New Zealand is about 70 percent sold out. We'll build that out over the next few years.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

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