

Thank you for smoking

Tobacco franchise rolls out future

Mark Tucci was talking to a prospective franchisee in the back room of his 7 Valleys Custom Blends Farm Fresh Tobacco store when the man signaled him to be quiet so he could hear the sales pitch going on out front. When the sale had been rung up, the prospect turned to Tucci and asked who the man doing such a good job of selling roll-your-own tobacco was, since he had only seen a saleswoman working.

"I told him it was one of our customers," Tucci says, puffing out his chest with pride. The only thing better than a customer selling your product for you is a customer looking to open a retail store just like yours. Tucci has both, which is why he has started offering franchises.

According to the Office on Smoking and Health, more than 44 million adults in the U.S. smoke—almost one in four—even though the health industry is spending millions trying to get people to quit.

Seven Valley's motto is: "If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, smoke smart." "Smoking smart" means rolling your own cigarettes with farm-fresh tobacco that doesn't contain the addictive chemicals and additives traditional cigarettes do, Tucci claims.

"What we've seen from our 12,000 customers is they cough less and (have) no swelling and side effects from cigarettes," Tucci says, admitting it's not a scientific study, just the observations from their customers.

In addition to tasting better—7 Valleys carries 49 custom blends from menthol to hazelnut to peach—the cigarettes also burn longer, which means people smoke fewer, Tucci points out. And since bulk tobacco isn't privy to the same laws and taxes as the brands that come rolled 20 to a pack, they're cheaper (about \$1.20 a pack versus \$3.90 or more). The only equipment needed is a small machine that injects tobacco into tubes that look like the real thing.

Tucci, who opened his first store in York, Pa., in 1973, came up with the idea when he was stationed

with the Army in Germany during the early '80s. Cigarettes were expensive and he discovered a huge market of products not available in the U.S. When he finished his tour, he continued rolling his own cigarettes, despite the stigma associated with the habit. "I'd go into a store to buy papers and people concluded I was doing drugs," he says. Plus, the available tobacco blends were limited and unimaginative.

"We decided to take it to the next level," he says. In addition to bulk tobacco and accessories, he also sells coffee blends that are paired with all 47 tobacco flavors.

The next level also includes a surveillance system that allows Tucci to monitor his Pennsylvania stores from his home in Hilton Head, S.C.

The stores are profitable, but they take the right kind of person to man them. "You need someone who loves people," he says. The job is "almost like a bartender. People become connected to you—same time, same place."

Tucci isn't just blowing smoke. He admits this isn't a franchise for everyone. Everything has to be "tidy and above board," he says. "You can't have someone claiming this is good for you." The cigarettes, that is, not the economics of the business.



Mark Tucci wants to see his farm-fresh tobacco stores papering the country, coast to coast.