

# Opportunity Comes Knocking

By Michael J. McDermott

Most prospective franchisees invest considerable amounts of time and energy conducting a franchise search, seeking out just the right opportunity that matches up with their wants and needs. Every once in a while, however, the process gets turned on its head. A franchise opportunity just seems to pop up in someone's life that is so right for them that they almost have no choice but to seize it. Sue Orischak, owner of the Foot Solutions franchise in Scottsdale, AZ, is one of those lucky people.

Orischak is an artist who had her own interior design business for about 10 years. She happens to be married to a man who suffers from a bad back and bad feet, a situation that is at least partially responsible for her serendipitous transformation into a franchise business owner.

"We were living in the Denver area and went into a Foot Solutions store there looking for shoes for my husband. That's when we saw the Foot Solutions computerized orthotic machine for the first time. We both had the same vision that we could take this business, tap my background as an artist to bring more fashion to the function, and be successful providing people with orthotics that were both attractive and effective.

"We thought we could put together a real winning combination, and the store hours were conducive to maintaining a good family life," she adds. "We weren't really looking for a business. It just sort of

found us."

The timing was right for the Orischaks in another sense. They had been thinking of relocating to Arizona to be closer to Sue's aging parents, but they hadn't yet taken any concrete steps in that direction. Sue contacted the Foot Solutions home office and began making plans to move to Arizona the very same day she and her husband first set foot in the Denver outlet.

They did everything very quickly, she admits. "We called corporate and started talking, and they said there was a fellow who had the rights to Arizona and we needed to talk to him," she recalls. "We did, and it turned out he was looking to sell the store in Scottsdale. We agreed to his price, no questions asked, and moved to Arizona. We kind of went into it totally backward."

Orischak moved to Scottsdale in December of 2003 and started the small business loan application process and other paperwork she would need to take over the business. She worked at the store, for no pay, while the sale was pending, taking over the operation on March 1, 2004. She is the family's sole on-site presence at Scottsdale Foot Solutions, but her husband does the

business's accounting work from home.

Despite Orischak's unorthodox entry into the world of franchising, she has been very successful in her venture. The Scottsdale Foot Solutions is consistently the top performer in the chain. And she has plenty of good advice to offer prospective franchisees who may be taking a more conventional path to franchise business ownership.

"In my opinion, this works best if you approach it from the standpoint that you are going to own and operate your business—and operate is the key word," she says. "You have to bring a passion and a vision to what you are going to do. There are very few turnkey businesses that are just going to run themselves. It has to start with the vision and passion of the owner."



Sue Orischak brings her personal passion and vision to her business, and she expects those who work for her to embrace it wholeheartedly.

When she first laid eyes on the Denver Foot Solutions outlet, Orischak was struck by the realization that this business was in an industry that was going to experience tremendous growth. "The baby boomers are aging, and you tend to have more foot problems as you get older," she points out. "And the pre-baby boomers and post-baby boomers also have plenty of foot problems."

Orischak is very serious about what she does, but she brings a combination of humor and compassion to her work. "We feel that somehow inside of every sixty-something-year-old is a 39-year-old saying, 'How the heck did I get here?' If you don't acknowledge and understand that, you're in trouble," she says. "Too often our seniors are treated as if they were invisible. If we did that, we'd be looking to fail."

According to research compiled by Foot Solutions, which has more than 240 stores in 13 countries and bills itself as "the world's largest health and wellness franchise dedicated to foot care," one in six people in the U.S.—a total of more than 41 million people—have foot problems. Twenty percent of Americans suffer from more than one foot health problem per year, and 36% regard their foot problems as serious enough to warrant medical attention.

The problem is particularly acute among women, probably because 90% of women wear shoes that are too small, according to the company's research, and 80% of women say their shoes are painful. Women are nine times more likely to develop a foot problem because of improperly fitted shoes than men; more than 80% of women have developed a bunion, hammertoe or other painful foot deformity; and nine out of 10 women's foot deformities can be attributed to tight shoes.

One common source of foot problems is sports injuries. A runner's feet impact the ground 800 to 2,000 times per mile—50 to 70 times per minute for each foot—at a force of three to eight times the runner's body weight. It's not surprising, then, that more than 60% of runners sustain an injury at one time or another. Common foot injuries for runners include plantar fasciitis, forefoot strain, stress fractures, Achilles tendonitis and ankle sprains.

Several widespread health issues also contribute to foot problems, especially diabetes and obesity. Between 60% and 70% of people with diabetes, which affects about 24 million people in the U.S., have mild to severe forms of nervous system damage which can result in impaired sensation or pain in the feet or hands. Obese people often suffer from pain in the tendons and ligaments of the foot and ankle.

As a Foot Solutions franchisee, Orischak finds great fulfillment in tending to the needs of the people who visit her busy store. She describes her ultimate goal in business as being "almost spiritual" in nature.

"The care and treatment of feet is honored and considered a sign of respect in almost every religion and culture," she says. "We felt that if we could incorporate that approach into our business philosophy with every client who came into the store, we wouldn't really need to worry about the cash register. We would be able to solve problems, do it with love and compassion—and fashion—and create a pair of walking billboards, if you will, that would be willing to market our business for us."

There's no doubt that approach is working well for Orischak. Her Foot Solutions is now in its sixth consecutive year of being ranked as the top-performing store in the chain. "I think if you're overly

worried about your register, that gets reflected in the customer experience," she explains. "If you're too worried about selling something, your client will sense that immediately, and it leads to a disconnect. Whereas if you're putting their best interests first whether or not it culminates in an immediate sale, then you're building long-term goodwill that definitely results in lots of sales."

Orischak has approached the topic of growth carefully. She opened a second store for awhile, but it failed to thrive in a tough location, so she pulled it back into her flagship location, which continues to do very well, she says. In fact, despite the challenging economy, she plans to expand the store over the coming months, almost doubling it in size.

One of the key drivers of Orischak's success as a franchisee is the quality of the employees she's been able to attract. "I have a phenomenal staff," she says. "They all share and incorporate my vision for what we are trying to do here. If an employee is not able to embrace my vision of putting the customer first, then they don't last here very long. It becomes apparent in a short period of time. I'm kind of tough that way, but if they can go along with my vision of putting the customer's needs first, then they do very well here."

While Orischak's route to franchise ownership was an unconventional one, the lessons she's learned running her business—and the success she has achieved—bear noting by all franchisees, both current and prospective.

As Orischak's experience demonstrates, franchising can provide a special path to business ownership, one that marries the unique talents and capabilities of the individual franchisee with the experience and support of an established business organization.