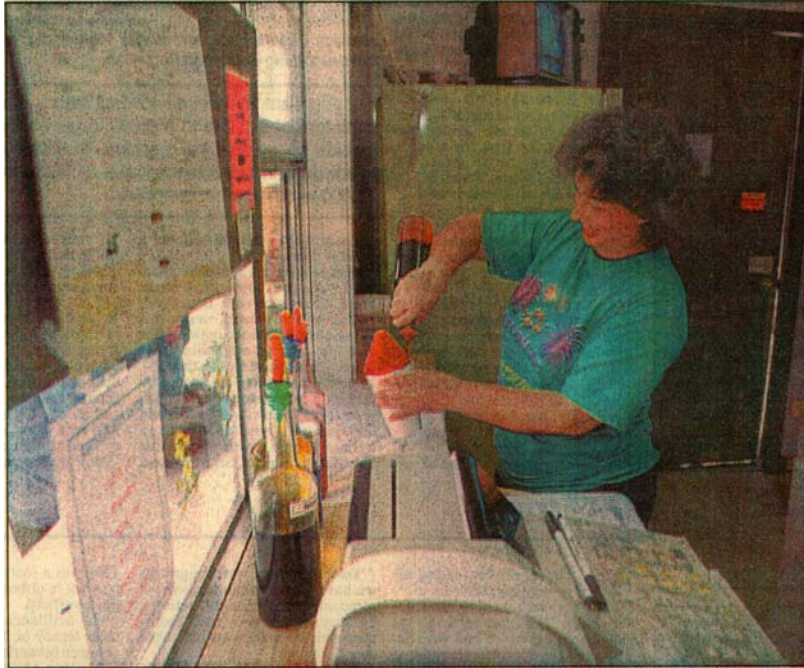


Cold, fluffy cash

By Randy McClain

South Louisiana snowball treats a solid sideline



Sandra Bourgoyne, who has been in the business for 16 years, mixes a snowball for a customer at her Big B Snowballs stand in Port Allen.

Sandra Bourgoyne, 45-year-old owner of Big B Snowballs in Port Allen, knows a thing or two about the icy confections she serves from March until the end of September.

You've got to let block ice sit awhile before shaving it, otherwise you end up with a snowball that's crunchy rather than powdery.

If it rains, sales fall off dramatically. Snowballs sell best in hot, sunny weather.

Bourgoyne has run Big B Snowballs for the past 16 years, watching a parade of customers grow to adulthood before her eyes, nourished in part by snowballs with imaginative names like "Tiger's Blood," "Swiss Almond Coco," and "Cherry Bounce."

It's a popular type of business these days. The number of snowball outlets in Baton Rouge has grown in the past five years, but no one keeps an exact count, said Ronnie Sciortino, owner of SnoWizard Holdings Inc., a snowball supply house in New Orleans. Stands come and go from summer to summer, but a few (like Bourgoyne's) are there every year.

While she's hesitant to disclose annual revenues, Bourgoyne points out that sales from Big B Snowballs have helped put her oldest child, 24-year-old Lisa, through college and kept clothes on the backs of her two sons, 23-year-old Brian and 15-year-old Michael.

"Find a good location, work the shop yourself, and you can make really good money," Bourgoyne said. You can also expect to work 50 hours a week during the summer when snowballs become a south Louisiana staple, as much a part of the culture as jambalaya, LSU football, 90-degree heat and 80 percent humidity.

"Some people feel like snowballs must be an easy way to make money," Bourgoyne said. "But any time you make money at something, there's work behind it."

Still, she said, snowball stands can be a surprisingly profitable business.

Officials with the SnoWizard supply house in New Orleans project that a well-run snowball stand can bring in \$250 per day in sales. The best locations can gross \$500 a day.

A stand's profit margin can range as high as 45 percent of sales, depending on how many part-time helpers an owner hires to staff the business, said Sciortino, SnoWizard's owner. Typical hours are 1 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. daily at the height of summer and 2 p.m. until 7 p.m. once school starts.

Profits at a single snowball stand can top \$20,000 in a busy summer, officials with SnoWizard said. Such numbers rank the snowball business as a solid choice for someone searching for a second income for their family.

Bourgoyne runs a beauty shop in addition to her Port Allen snowball stand.

Sciortino, who took over SnoWizard a few years ago from his late uncle, said his firm has sold ice-shaving machines in 49 states. The company also supplies 96 flavored extracts and other supplies that snowball entrepreneurs need to get started.

Sciortino's late uncle, George Ortolano, is widely credited with popularizing the snowball in Depression-era New Orleans.

Snowballs made with pulverized ice had been around a long time by the late 1930s, but Ortolano designed a newfangled machine in 1937 that made the concoctions much more of a delicacy. Instead of producing chunky bits of ice like older ice-crushing methods did, Ortolano's new machine used three stainless steel blades to shave block ice into a fine powder.

Ortolano's basic design is still used today, and many of his older machines are still in operation. Bourgoyne uses a 16-year-old SnoWizard machine in her shop.

Port Allen devotees look for Bourgoyne's electric sign to light up every spring right after Easter. She illuminates the sign for a week before opening to let passersby know snowball season is coming.

Most stands stay open from mid-March until Sept. 30.

Once the first cold snap hits, though, many snowball stands close. The weather has to be hot for customers to be attracted to the product.

The same factors that make running a home-based business popular lure would-be entrepreneurs to snowballs, Bourgoyne said. They see it as a way to be their own boss, work flexible hours and make a good bit of money, she said.

"Frankly, word of mouth helps build the snowball business," Sciortino said. "People see lots of shops around or they worked at one once, and they decide to start a stand of their own."

What people don't see is how much hard work goes into even a small stand, Bourgoyne said. Bourgoyne puts in seven-day work weeks during snowball season, making her own ice daily in a machine that freezes 20 blocks of ice at a time.



Mandy Miller stops for a refreshing snowball recently in the summer heat.

Snowball pros say ice should be kept at 10 degrees to produce a finely powdered "snow." Any colder and ice shavings are too dry. Any warmer and the ice tends to "clump together" in the cup, Sciortino said. "If your snow isn't real fine and fluffy, customers won't come back."

If you want to open a snowball stand, expect to spend a minimum of \$12,000 to \$15,000 to get started. Major items include an ice shaving machine, \$1,500; another machine to freeze and store block ice, a \$4,500 cost; and roughly \$3,000 worth of other supplies, including cups, spoons, funnels, mixing containers and several dozen flavored syrups. Add rent, labor, and utilities to that, and you have an idea of the expense.

Most quality snowball shops have at least 50 flavors and a variety of toppings, including soft-serve ice cream and condensed milk, Sciortino said. Some roadside stands get by with as few as a dozen flavors, but those stands don't really take the business seriously, he said.

"Some people think they can throw up a little shack, hire a couple of high school kids and start rolling in the dough," he said. It doesn't work that way. "The best method is to have an owner/operator who spends a lot of time at the store themselves," he said.

The more hours an owner works, the bigger the potential profits.

"Labor is your single biggest expense," Sciortino said. "If you can work a stand yourself, you can make as much as 50 percent profit after paying the rent and other expenses."

The best months for snowball sales are April, May and June. The most popular flavor is strawberry.

"You don't do as well in August and September," Bourgoyne said. "In the early part of the year, people are just ready for 'em." Late summer also brings more rainy days, she said, and rain melts sales.

Another bit of advice from Bourgoyne is: Don't cut corners. Don't water down bottled flavors too much or cut condensed milk to make supplies last longer.

“I’d rather have more expenses and keep my steady customers,” she said.

After 16 years in the business, though, Bourgoyne knows she can’t please everyone. Many local customers appreciate powdery snow and rich flavors, but others insist on too much syrup, she said.

“There’s a difference between a good snowball and slush,” she said. “You’re not supposed to drink a snowball. If you want a slush drink, go somewhere else.”



Marissa Laporte, left, and Shelly Hernandez wait to get snowballs at the Big B stand in Port Allen.

Getting Started

So, you’d like to tell your boss to take a hike and set up a little business of your own. You could work whenever you wanted and keep all the profits. Think ice—snowballs, that is. Projections from SnoWizard, a New Orleans-based firm that sells snowball supplies, suggests a smartly run snowball stand can net \$20,000 to \$30,000 in profits over six months. It’s not enough to retire on, certainly, but it’s a solid second income for a family.

Here’s a closer look at income and expenses you could expect with a successful stand. All figures are for six months:

- **Sales:** \$86,700 (\$500 per day)
- **Total Expenses (including salaries, rent, utilities):** \$62,300
- **Profits:** \$24,400

The example assumes an owner is running a stand with very little extra staff. Profits can surpass 30 percent of sales in such cases, according to a SnoWizard financial prospectus.

Tips

As in any retail business, choosing the right location plays a major role in whether a snowball stand makes money. The best spots include strip shopping centers, supermarket parking lots or busy streets with lots of other shops.

That’s the advice from officials with New Orleans-based SnoWizard Holdings, Inc., a company that sells supplies and custom-designed ice shaving machines.

Here are a few other tips:

- Sometimes it’s possible to negotiate an inexpensive lease for a temporary building in the parking lot of a bigger business or on the grounds of a water park, miniature golf course or sandwich shop.
- Another good location is anywhere near a school, which guarantees a steady stream of hungry kids.
- If you get real adventurous, consider investing in a mobile snowball stand that can be trucked from site to site during the summer. Such stands can be used at music festivals, baseball games, or school fairs.

- One way to save on operating expenses is to make your own ice. Buying block ice from outside suppliers is more expensive, advisers say. The alternative is to invest in a small refrigeration system that can make 20 to 40 blocks of ice at a time and store it until needed.
- Keep regular hours. Don't open and close on a whim. Post a schedule and stick with it.

McClain, Randy. "Cold, fluffy cash." *Sunday Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA). September 8, 1996. 1J, 2J.

Photo credit: John H. Williams.