



# GOING STRONG

Instant Imprints' Ralph Askar's idea of an active 'retirement' is building a thriving global business

*By Roma Ihnatowycz*

**There are those who dream of a lazy retirement, full of golf, travel, and casual living. But not Ralph Askar.**

**The young-at-heart septuagenarian is too busy these days building the Instant Imprints franchise chain – one of a long line of businesses he's been involved in over his lengthy career. Staying active, he says, is the key to a long, happy and healthy life, and Askar has no plans of slowing down.**

"If I wanted to, I could retire," says the successful 70-year-old. "But I enjoy working, being productive, and being part of the community. People who keep working and who stay active after 65 stay healthy. People who retire early, die early."

So when an opportunity opened up to buy Instant Imprints in 2011, Askar jumped at the chance. He had already purchased the Canadian master license of the U.S.-based company six years earlier, and he relished the idea of turning into a franchisor/owner of the business.

"I thought it was a good final career move for me – an opportunity to become a franchisor," says Askar, now the president and CEO of the company. "I realized it had tremendous appeal and potential."

## **BACKGROUND**

Like many entrepreneurs, Askar's lengthy business career took a rather circuitous route. He started off with a degree in civil engineering and worked in the field at a managerial level for 16 years, helping build everything



Askar recently introduced a new Partnership Promise Program, which offers shares in the company to franchisees.



Ralph Askar with an award-winning franchisee.

from bridges to highways. He then started up a chain of restaurants in San Diego County, where he was living at the time.

Sensing new opportunities in the property market, Askar soon moved on, getting his real estate license and focusing on commercial brokerage. It was in this capacity that he first collaborated with Mail Boxes Etc., the predecessor of The UPS Store. He sold four of the company's franchises, and in no time was working for the company full-time in increasingly senior positions.

"I've done it all over the last 28 years," chuckles Askar. "I've been a multiple franchisee, a multiple area franchise developer, a multiple international master licensee in four continents... Being a corporate officer in the franchise industry has provided me with hands-on experience as well as important leadership skills."

Askar continues to operate 163 UPS Stores in

Canada as a multiple area developer, which has proven a good fit for his growing Instant Imprints business. Some of his UPS franchisees have signed on to franchise the Instant Imprint concept, often running the shops side by side. This creates a synergy that works well with the two brands, which regularly share the same small-business customer base.

The UPS Store services printing, mailing and packaging needs, while Instant Imprints delivers embroidery, screen printing and imprinting services, on virtually any material. "Anything and everything that you want to put your brand visibility on, we can do it," explains Askar. "Essentially, we're three to four different franchise concepts under one roof. You have a sign franchise, you have an embroidery franchise, and you have a printing franchise – we combine everything."



## FATBURGER

Canada's Premier Burger Brand

If you're looking to own a successful business franchise in partnership with a company that is experiencing significant growth, Fatburger may be the premium quick casual choice for you. Prime ownership opportunities are now available across Canada. We provide:

- 
- Highly Recognized Trademarked Brand
- Extensive Initial Training
- Ongoing Operation & Training Support
- Marketing/Advertising Support
- Excellent Return on Investment Capital
- 

For more information contact us at  
1-888-597-7272 or  
franchise@fatburgercanada.com  
fatburgercanada.com





## Ambitious plans

Instant Imprints currently has 45 stores in operation, with four new ones in the process of being built. Eighteen stores are in Canada, and the balance are in the U.S. The focus for the future is aggressive global expansion and what Askar dubs the “5-5-5” plan: growing the brand to about 500 units over five years, with each doing \$500,000 in business annually. Moving beyond the North American borders is also on the horizon. “Our next international move will be the U.K. and Australia – hopefully by the end of this year,” says Askar.

It’s an ambitious plan, all the more so because things were not always easy to start. When Askar bought the company, he inherited a group of Instant Imprints franchisees who were somewhat disenchanted. The company had not been, as Askar describes it, focusing on relationship building.

As the company’s new owner, Askar’s first priority was to build a solid connection with existing Instant Imprints franchisees, providing them with the training and much-needed support to build

their business. “The first thing we did was we looked at where we could improve the business and relationship with the franchisees,” he reflects. “Because to me, franchisees are gold. Franchisees are what make you, the franchisor, successful. Their success is our success, and if you have franchisees who are not doing well, you cannot take the company to the next level.”

Under Askar’s tutelage, the company introduced state-of-the-art training – six weeks in total, two in San Diego – to new franchisees and offered retraining to existing ones at no cost. The company also opened up lines of communication, developing a strong ongoing support structure and integrating more technology into their system.

*“Because to me, franchisees are gold. Franchisees are what make you, the franchisor, successful.”*



The results of all these efforts have been nothing less than extraordinary: same store sales are up 20 per cent over two years ago and 18 per cent over last year. “We’ve done an amazing job of turning the company around,” notes Askar proudly.

The company has also gone one step further. With its new Partnership Promise Program, it is offering 10,000 common shares of Instant Imprints to every existing and new franchisee, at no additional cost. It is, essentially, making them partners in the company. The shares are gifted over a four-year period – 25 per cent per year – to all franchisees complying with basic guidelines.

This may well be the first time a franchise brand has offered ownership to its franchisees, in a manner similar to that of companies like WestJet, says Askar. Now, he adds, “Everyone in the company feels that the company is owned by all of us, and not just ‘Ralph and his management team.’”

Developing a close and collaborative relationship with franchisees has always been top of mind for Askar, and together with his management team he dedicates a lot of energy to this. Equally important has been getting the right people on board, and heading that list are applicants with a “can-do” attitude and those exhibiting

good team-playing skills. The start-up investment for an Instant Imprints franchise operation is around \$175,000, and this includes all the equipment and technology needed to run the business.

Professional experience of franchisees can vary. Today, they run the gamut from MBA grads to accountants to individuals that were downsized from their previous job and were looking for a fresh, new opportunity that they could tackle at just about any age. Askar himself recounts once meeting an energetic 87-year-old UPS Store franchisee who ran his location with his wife – a business he purchased when he was 72 years of age.

In fact, it was this franchisee that inspired Askar to take his own plunge into a new business at a time when colleagues and friends were packing it in and calling it a day. “He was a great inspiration,” recounts Askar. “It was wonderful to see a person start a franchise at 72, and to still be working at 87.”

So, if you do the math, there’s a good chance Askar has a solid couple of decades ahead of him – or more – to reach his ‘5-5-5’ dream for Instant Imprints. And based on his stellar professional record so far, it’s a solid bet that he will achieve it. 🍀



If this looks good to you,  
you look good to us!

We’re looking for people who are passionate about serving great food to friendly guests. We’ve been dedicated to deli since 1976 and we have prime locations available right now!



**DRUXY'S**  
*Famous Deli*  
since 1976

Find out more at  
[druxys.com/franchising](http://druxys.com/franchising)

## DrivenBrands<sup>SM</sup>

As the parent company to Moaco Paint & Body and Meineke Car Care Centers, we are completely driven to enable the success of our franchisees as well as the growth and development of our brands.

When you join the Moaco and Meineke families, you will benefit from exceptional brand awareness, protected territories, excellent earning potential, and most important, a franchisor that cares about its franchisees.

As the nation's largest and most diversified franchise holding company, we are 100% dedicated to your success.

THE OPPORTUNITIES ARE ENDLESS. AS THERE ARE EXCELLENT MARKETS AVAILABLE NEAR YOU.



CONTACT US TODAY

(866) 614-0479 | [www.drivenbrands.com](http://www.drivenbrands.com)



MEMBER

