

ENTERPRISE | By Raymond Flandez

## Nostalgia Helps Put Old Kiddie Rides Back in Play

### Firm Revamps and Sells Units to Individuals And Array of Businesses

Keith DeWitt was looking for a unique present for his new granddaughter when he stumbled upon a Web site, [kiddieridesusa.com](http://kiddieridesusa.com), selling a lion kiddie ride for \$2,000.

As a big-game hunter, Mr. DeWitt thought the ride would make a nice addition to his trophy room above the garage. And it would be something his grandchildren would enjoy using when they visited. The 53-year-old Mr. DeWitt, who is semi-retired from the poultry industry, says he has fond memories of going on such rides each week outside the grocery store when he was young. "That was a fun time," he says.

That's the kind of sentiment Damon Carson, the president of Denver-based Kiddie Rides USA, counts on.

Kiddie Rides buys old units from the companies that operate the rides, then it refurbishes and sells them, at a fraction of their original cost, directly to individuals and businesses—ice-cream shops, pediatricians' offices, hair salons, museums—that traditionally wouldn't house them.

Kiddie Rides has been able to breathe new life into these old rides by playing on the nostalgia factor. The idea is that people who have sentimental memories of the product from their youth will purchase or use it to introduce it to their own children or grandchildren. Many of the businesses Mr. Carson sells to cater to children, who, of course, come accompanied by parents or grandparents. And, just as important, the rides have been a hit with the kids directly.

Bridging the generations is a challenge for any company trying to revive a blast from the past. A product needs to remain authentic enough to pull on the heartstrings and wallets of adults, yet it must have elements that appeal to the tastes of today's youth as well.

Authenticity and uniqueness of the product needs to be a part of the appeal of the nostalgia market, says Denver D'Rozario, a marketing professor at Howard University in Washington. But "you've got to show me how it's different today" as well. "Some products have to be "restaged or redesigned," he says, "to appeal to a different generation—the children or grandchildren of the baby boomers. They have to strike a balance."

#### Drawing In Customers

The refurbished rides range from \$2,000 to \$6,000, depending on the age and theme of the piece. That can be as much as 60% less than the cost of a new ride, Mr. Carson says. The units can remain coin-operated or be retrofitted to run at the push of a button. Colors and lettering can be customized. Mr. Carson, 36, says many times ride operators call Kiddie Rides when they have old pieces that they want to dispose of. He also finds them through auctions or by word-of-mouth.

To market the rides, Mr. Carson created the Kiddie Rides Web site. He also makes cold calls to companies and movie studios and tries to get on interior decorators' suppliers lists.

Last year, the three-employee company generated revenue of about \$500,000. It sells about 100 rides a year. And its customers run the gamut. In-



A Flintstones ride at a Scoop 'N Doo's ice-cream parlor in Louisiana

dividuals like Mr. DeWitt buy rides—including animals, airplanes, bucking broncos and motorcycles—for play areas or themed rooms in their homes. Companies buy them, Mr. Carson says, to add a unique feature to a business and to drum up more revenue. Yet while the rides charge a quarter or fifty cents per turn these days, their real earning power is in the goodwill they engender with both kids and their parents.

Take Scoop 'N Doo's. When Scott Innes was looking to design the Hollywood-themed ice-cream parlor chain in the Baton Rouge, La., area in 2004, he wanted something that brought back warm memories of his childhood and reflected his career. Mr. Innes has been the voice of Scooby Doo for the past 10 years on the Cartoon Network and has also been the voice of Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble. So, he bought four rides—a Jetson car, a Flintstones car, a Batmobile and a tusked razorback—from Kiddie Rides.

He says the rides have increased traffic to the ice-cream parlor. And he quadrupled his investment of \$8,000 in about two years.

"They're an instant throwback from your older days," says Mr. Innes, who sold the chain but is still building some stores. "I couldn't keep the adults out of them."

#### History Lesson

Some larger companies are using the rides as a marketing tool as well.

About four years ago, Mr. Carson

called Beverly Smith, the head of historical services at Wells Fargo & Co., to see if the San Francisco-based banking company would be interested in stagecoach rides with the company name on them.

Ms. Smith ended up ordering five for the company's corporate museums, which explore Wells Fargo's role in the shaping of the American West and are free to the public.

Mr. Carson customized the stagecoaches to Wells Fargo's specifications—deep red for the body, yellow for the undercarriage, and a green treasure box on top with the W.F. & Co. lettering, echoing the 1850s stagecoaches.

A Wells Fargo spokeswoman says the stagecoach rides are another way for customers and museum visitors to connect with and experience the Wells Fargo brand. Adults remember the rides from when they were young, she says, so it's a fun way that they can share some of their past with their kids as well.

#### BLAST FROM THE PAST

- **What's Happening:** A small firm is breathing new life into old coin-operated kiddie rides by refurbishing and selling them to individuals and businesses that don't traditionally house them.

- **The Pitch:** Kiddie Rides USA plays on the idea that people with fond memories of the product from their youth will purchase or use it to introduce it to their own children or grandchildren.

- **The Caveat:** Playing up nostalgia isn't enough. The products must have elements that appeal to a younger audience's current tastes as well.

#### New Market

Coin-operated kiddie rides were once ubiquitous in supermarkets, shopping malls and outside the corner store. Fewer of the brightly colored fiberglass contraptions exist in such places these days, however, as the cost of rental space has gone up and the companies that operate the rides say it's getting harder to make a profit.

But thanks to Kiddie Rides USA, some of these pieces of Americana are finding their way to a new market. Kid-

#### SMALL TALK

### Kelly Spors answers questions from readers about entrepreneurship

**Q:** I would like to sell some of my client base to another professional. Since my business is built on very personal relationships with my clients, I know I would have to make the introductions, and ease the way for the buyer. But how might I find a buyer?

—F.G.

**A:** How you go about advertising your clients to other professionals depends on your industry and how locked your business is to a particular geographic area.

Many professionals, such as dentists or accountants, need to sell to other professionals in their immediate area, since most clients won't travel beyond a 10-mile radius of home. If that's the case, you're probably best off directly approaching competitors in your area who are actively soliciting new clients, says Gary Ware, a professional-practice consultant and broker in Danville,

Calif. You might check out local advertisements, Yellow Pages or online directories to identify professionals with similar practices to yours. Networking through professional business groups in your area also can generate leads on possible buyers.

It also might be possible to find a large professional practice hoping to scoop up more clients or a practice in a neighboring town looking to expand their business into your town.

You'll improve your chances of finding a buyer if you promise to offer help with the transition, because there's always the risk many clients will flee after the sale. Some sellers offer to send clients a letter with a glowing recommendation of the buyer's practice or even give face-to-face introductions, Mr. Ware says.

If location is less important, your industry's national or state trade groups can be a good way to advertise, since most have online

classifieds and newsletters that allow members to advertise.

Another option: Web sites that offer paid classifieds.

BizBuySell.com, for instance, charges \$59.95 a month for a standard ad and as much as \$99.95 a month for a "showcase" ad, which can include a photo and better placement in search results. The site offers other features, such as help with valuations and ads from buyers.

Professional-practice brokers who specialize in your industry can be helpful as well, since they work with both prospective buyers and sellers and have a good grasp on how to value and market a business. Most brokers charge fees ranging from 8% to 12% of the sale price.

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