

# Pool-cleaning franchise thrives

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When Jef Flournoy saw parking lots full of chrysanthemums on sale across Augusta last month, he got an idea.



Zach Boyden-Holmes/Staff

Jef Flournoy, 36, has become one of America's Swimming Pool Co.'s most successful franchisees since he started it in 2008. He boosted sales 30 percent in 2010.

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He bought 85 plants, piled them in his truck and hand-delivered them to the doorsteps of 85 of his most loyal customers.

When his customers found them, they saw a note saying, "Thank you for your business. From -- the pool guy."

Flournoy launched his Augusta-based franchise of America's Swimming Pool Co. in 2008 based on the premise of connecting with his customers. Since then he has become one of the company's most successful franchisees.

"It's not just about cleaning their pools," said Flournoy, 36. "It's about

building relationships."

After his first year in Augusta, Flournoy doubled overall sales and continued the streak by increasing sales 30 percent in 2010.

He started as a one-man truck but expanded in 2009 by hiring two employees, who now serve more than 100 customers within a 40-mile radius.

Fixing pool filters and pouring chemicals wasn't always in the game plan.

Nine years ago, Flournoy was standing in front of a classroom teaching sixth- and eighth-grade social studies, history and economics at Monroe Academy in Forsyth, Ga.

He admits he was the cool teacher back then.

Flournoy was the kind of teacher to fish a crumpled-up, failed exam out of the garbage, smooth out the edges and hand it back to the student who had ditched it.

"I liked to take the students who had a disinterest for school and try to bring them along and motivate them," Flournoy said.

That perspective won him Teacher of the Year at Monroe Academy twice, in 2001 and 2006.

Later, Flournoy and his wife, Megan, wanted to start a family -- a decision a teaching salary could not accommodate.

Flournoy switched from teacher to banker in 2006 when he took a job at Security Bank in Forsyth.

As the economy went sour, he saw his bank account begin to wither and contemplated another career change -- one that would let him be independent and raise his family.

"When I started there, the bank was at 19 (market share), peaked at 23, and when I left it was at six. The writing was on the wall," he said.

At that point, Flournoy noticed how his friend Stewart Vernon had built a small empire from a simple business venture he started in 2001.

Vernon opened the first location of America's Swimming Pool in Macon, Ga., in 2001, when he had an itch for self-employment.

"I saw the fact that most of the swimming pool companies were mom and pop companies or one-truck operations, and I found there appeared not to be, as a whole, a lot of professionalism in the swimming pool industry," Vernon said.

Vernon set to change that and launched ASP from one truck and one idea.

By 2005, Vernon had grown his Macon market to \$1 million in sales through ASP's services of repairing, renovating and maintaining swimming pools.

When Flournoy approached him about opening a franchise in Augusta in 2008, Vernon already had 20 franchises in the Southeast.

All of Vernon's franchisees begin with a start-up cost of \$60,000 and pay 6 percent of each month's gross sales to the company.

Turns out Augusta was a prime market for pool maintenance, Flournoy said. He moved to the area when his wife entered dental school at the Medical College of Georgia and has since watched his business venture bloom.

"Jef entered a good market, but he entered it with a business model he follows very well," Vernon said.

Despite opening a business in the midst of a recession, Flournoy still managed to build his customer base and win ASP's Best New Franchise award in 2008.

The secret, he said, comes from treating customers as friends and becoming someone people welcome into their living rooms.

Flournoy and his employees pull up to customers' homes in shiny, professional trucks that are washed every other week and dress in crisp, collared shirts. Always.

"We're coming into people's homes, walking in their backyards. There's a huge trust factor there," he said.

Pool maintenance is also something few are willing to sacrifice, even in a down economy, Flournoy said. Swimming pools, like a car, must be maintained and well kept.

"When your car goes bad, you can either find the bus or fix your car. Same thing with pools. Every person who owns a pool needs a pool company," Flournoy said.

"You need chemicals; you need pumps. Anyone can get (parts) off the Internet, but can they put it in? What if something goes wrong?"

He's seen it all since he started cleaning pools in Augusta.

Those who let their pool maintenance drag on for too long end up with green waters or unwanted guests.

He pulled an 8-inch rat from a swimming pool this month and regularly takes care of snakes and rodents, especially as the seasons change.

Flournoy starts his days setting his guys on their routes, then reviews the assignments from the day before, goes out to his own sites and calls it a day after his workers arrive back.

Along with spending time with his two children, Flournoy has focused on working with the Columbia County Youth Leadership Committee and serving on the board of directors of Aldersgate United Methodist Church.

"To me, starting this was a no-brainer," he said. "At the beginning, you get the cell phone, you get the numbers and wonder, 'OK, is it going to ring off the hook or is no one going to call?'"

"Now we've built a brand, but more importantly we've built relationships."

## Jef Flournoy

America's Swimming Pool Co.

**AGE:** 36

**BORN:** Macon, Ga.

**HOBBIES:** Golf, playing with kids

**FAMILY:** Wife, Megan; children Wes, 3, and Brady, 6 months

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