

BUSINESS

MARKET REPORT | ▼ DOW 11,370.06 -2.42 | ▲ S&P 500 1,233.00 +4.72 | ▲ NASDAQ 2,616.67 +7.51 | ▲ RUSSELL 2000 767.63 +3.59
 ▲ ALABAMA BLOOMBERG 343.41 +3.66 | ▼ 10-YEAR BOND YIELD 3.22% -0.01 | ▼ CRUDE OIL \$88.08 -\$0.20 | ▼ GOLD \$1,383.20 -\$25.80

ENTREPRENEUR

Marsh Flatau, America's Swimming Pool Co.

'The great thing about owning your own business is you get to see the direct results of the work you put into it.'

By ROY L. WILLIAMS
News staff writer

A year ago, Marsh Flatau was working as a waiter at J. Christopher's restaurant in his hometown of Macon, Ga.

Frustrated about not being able to find a better job in a difficult labor market, the 26-year-old decided to quit his waiter position and pursue a business franchise. After months of researching different companies and cities, Flatau bought the Birmingham franchise rights of America's Swimming Pool Co., a Macon-based pool maintenance and repair company.

Launched in March 2010, Flatau was recognized this month as Best New Franchise of America's Swimming Pool Co., called ASP



NEWS STAFF/LINDA STELTER

Marsh Flatau quit his waiter job to become a franchise owner of ASP-America's Swimming Pool Company.

for short. In his first nine months, Flatau achieved more than \$100,000 in revenue, the highest sales of any franchise opening this year.

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DETAILS

- ▶ **Company:** America's Swimming Pool Co.
- ▶ **Founder:** Marsh Flatau
- ▶ **Contact:** 205-807-4703
- ▶ **Web:** ASPpoolco.com

THE ENTREPRENEUR

Flatau received a degree in risk management and insurance from the University of Georgia in 2008. After college, he began working as a waiter at J. Christopher's, a position he quit last year to open the Birmingham area America's Swimming Pool Co. franchise.

THE IDEA

Flatau says the decision to become a franchisee of America's Swimming Pool Co. was easy because he knows the company's founder, Stewart Vernon. The swimming pool maintenance and repair business, established in 2001, now has 56 franchises that service 100 cities across the country.

Flatau said the low start-up franchise costs (\$22,000) enticed him. His other expenses were for swimming pool chemicals, equipment and a truck.

Flatau said he considered a half-dozen cities across the Southeast before choosing to locate his franchise in Birmingham. "I broke the cities down by the number of pools in each city and the demographics," he said. "Birmingham was the perfect city for me."

THE CHALLENGES

Building name recognition. Flatau said it helps that ASP has built its business to the point where

its franchises manage pools with a combined 40 million gallons of water per week, and renovates or remodels more than 250 pools a year.

Though he is 10 to 15 years younger than the typical America's Swimming Pool Co. franchisee, Flatau says he has overcome initial skepticism about experience by proving to be a hard worker. He underwent six months of training before launching on his own.

He avoided the high start-up costs of traditional franchises by being in a business with low overhead costs.

THE PLAN

Flatau said he has built his business largely by word of mouth.

He has been advertising his swimming pool maintenance and repair business through direct mail, Internet marketing and networking.

"Established pool maintenance businesses can take 40 years or more to get their name out, but a local pool company can take time," Flatau said. "The great thing about owning your own business is you get to see the direct results of the work you put into it. Every week is different. Some weeks I put in over 60 hours while others is like a regular 9-to-5 job." Flatau said he has high standards and does most of the work himself. He hires friends part-time for big jobs.