



Entrepreneur develops 'delicacy' popcorn

By Bill Hendrick
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Steve Dale believes he's developed a better mouse trap — specifically, a better kind of popcorn — and that it's just a matter of time before the world beats a path to his door for more.

Many retailers, boutiques, novelty shops and coffee houses already are selling Bentley's Premier Popcorn, he says. After just a few years in business, the 59-year-old Peachtree City man says he's shipping up to 10,000 bags of corn daily, at \$2 to \$3 a pop, from his distribution plant in Fayetteville, which employs eight people full-time.

Biltmore Estates in Asheville is a customer. So is Opryland. And [Bentley's Premier Popcorn](#) can be found in Smoothie Kings and Paradies Gift Shop stores, in Toffee Caramel and Butter Pecan flavors, in small bags and large tins.

The popcorn was sold first online. He says the company donates a portion of revenues to the Home Pets Foundation, an Atlanta-based non-profit that provides foster care to homeless animals.

A serial entrepreneur who made a fortune selling fancy cars to sheiks in the Middle East before striking gold in the garbage business in Georgia, Dale is convinced he's found just the right recipes to turn Bentley's into a household name.

The company was one of eight finalists in the 18th annual MAX Awards competition Feb. 26 at the Georgia Aquarium. MAX is an acronym for Marketing Awards for Excellence.

Q: If the family name is Dale, how did you come up with Bentley?

A: My daughters, Jackie and Katharine, had a wire-haired Fox Terrier named Bentley. After he died they suggested that we use his name, so we did.

Q: It takes money to be an entrepreneur and start a business like this. How did you do it?

A: I worked for Ford's drag [racing] teams, but then we had the big gas crunch in '73, and Ford dropped the program. I'd always had Corvettes, so I decided to buy and sell cars. I started buying things for a family from Lebanon, had an office in Beirut. I sold custom vehicles all over the Middle East. Then the Lebanese civil war broke out, and that was that.

Q: What happened?

A: Like all entrepreneurs, I went through several misfires. My wife was with Delta Air Lines, so we moved to Atlanta, and I came looking for my next adventure.

Q: What was that?

A: I got a job marketing 114 different tracts of land scattered around Georgia. I knew two people in Michigan who were in the solid waste business. I chose a tract of land in Butts County to develop a solid waste facility. They became partners with me. We treated household waste like hazardous waste before people started to think about it. It ended up being very successful. We sold it, Pine Ridge Recycling, in 1996, for in excess of \$40 million.

Q: So you never had to work again?

A: Honestly, life was pretty doggone good. We had a home in Florida. I played a lot of golf, did a bunch of things. I bought into a stock car racing business, and lost a lot of money. So I sold. I didn't want to be involved in things that would consume my money.

Q: How did you get into popcorn?

A: I wanted a business that wouldn't make me reliant on others. I wanted to create something I could manage and control. [He notes that popcorn is the No. 1 snack food in the world, and Americans eat 1 billion pounds a year. Ready-to-eat popcorn has become a multibillion-dollar market worldwide.]

Q: How did you decide?

A: My wife and I were in Chicago the weekend prior to Thanksgiving 2004. We were coming home, and I told my wife I wanted to run down and grab some popcorn for the trip. [He said he went to three different shops that sold gourmet popcorn, and had to stand in line at each one.] My daughters later said, 'Dad, you should investigate that industry,' and I did.

Q: OK, so what next?

A: We studied the industry, everything about it. Knowledge is power. It didn't take long to decide it would be a fun business. We made arrangements with a popcorn manufacturing plant in Lexington, S.C., to use its facility. I studied formulas and recipes. I spent tens of thousands of dollars running sample productions. I read about flavor profiles. It was trial and error until I came up with some I liked. I had a test kitchen in 2005.

Q: You make it sound easy.

A: It wasn't. I didn't like the taste at first. But every time I manufactured a new batch [with different ingredients], I saved some of it, dated it, wrote down the formula. Nothing. Then one day I went into the warehouse, opened a bag, and noticed it had a wonderful aroma. I took a kernel or two, and it was wonderful. I didn't know why,

until I learned that what I'd tasted was 30 days old. It takes that long to develop its flavor profile. It's like a fine wine. It gets better with age.

Q: So it sounds like you've accomplished your goal.

A: Yes, I'm having fun. Money is not always the scoreboard. I do all the recipes, like a chef developing new sauces. We don't just pour on the ingredients and stir, we put the ingredients in at specific times. The product is a delicacy. It goes really well with coffee, with beer and wine. We are catching traction.

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