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A franchise that floats your boat

The day his first ad hit, Christian Smith handled 30 to 50 calls a day from the deck of one boat, while his wife cleaned a second and his two kids played pirates aboard the third boat. The call volume became so unruly, he had to cut back on advertising.

“It’s a dream job—just sit back and let the phone ring,” Smith says.

Perhaps what Smith was selling explains the ringing phone: memberships to the Freedom Boat Club, a premier club that offers its members an affordable and hassle-free alternative to owning a boat.

Smith now has three locations, 30 boats and plans to expand his Florida market to seven locations and circle the lake in Michigan. Instead of seeing his kids for 15 minutes in the morning and at night, as he did while climbing the corporate ladder, he now drops them off at school in the morning and has lunch with them every day.

Is there a down side to be a franchisee of Freedom Boat Club? “I don’t boat as often as I used to,” he says.

The Sarasota, Fla., concept, that started franchising in 2000, has grown to 38 locations, 11 of which are company owned. While most are in Florida and the East Coast, the concept also has legs in inland areas, as long as there are lakes and rivers. In fact, Michigan has more registered boats than Florida, Smith says. An added perk for those with a short boating season is their membership is reciprocal with all the other Freedom Boat Clubs. Memberships run between \$15,000 and \$20,000 for unlimited boat use, according to Ray Kubik, president of Freedom Franchise Sales.

The club, which was founded in 1989, is now up to 2,400 members, 75 percent of whom were former boat owners. After making a reservation, members just show up at the dock and the boat is ready—no cleaning it once the fun is over, nor transporting it home. And, with marina space at a premium, the concept is environmentally sound—akin to asking commuters to take advantage of mass transportation.

The franchise fee is \$25,000 with a 6 percent royalty fee. Most franchisees office at the marina, and with a minimum of four boats to start, the startup investment is right round \$150,000 to \$200,000, Kubik says.

Why go with a franchise instead of on your own? The club’s longevity, stability and proven system, Kubik says. “This business is so sound,” Smith adds, “you can make back your investment in a year or two.”



Freedom Boat Club gives boat-lovers all the luxuries of owning a boat, without the hassle of cleaning, maintaining or housing one. All members have to do is make a reservation and pay for gas.