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Making an impression with Instant Imprints

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Photos courtesy Instant Imprints

By Gagan Bhathal

After I joined Instant Imprints as a franchisee in 2008, I went on to operate multiple locations in and near Vancouver. I became the area developer for all of British Columbia and, on the other side of the border, the state of Washington. The key to my success has been teaching other franchisees how to get their business up and running.

<http://www.franchiseinfo.ca/features/making-an-impression-with-instant-imprints/>

Formative years

I was born in Punjab, India, in 1981 and moved to Canada in 1989 when I was adopted by my uncle Harry, who lived in Richmond, B.C. So, I came over here all by myself. It was only later, when I was 18, that my parents and siblings also migrated here. I have one older brother and one older sister.

As a child, I was quiet, shy and not very outgoing. I preferred to stay at home, where I could happily play with a toy for hours, rather than go out anywhere. I particularly loved playing with magnets. I was definitely a homebody.

Moving from Punjab to Richmond may seem like a big change for an eight-year-old, but it was okay because my cousin Devan was already here. We became best friends and remain so today. At 12, I got my first job when I started to help out my uncle as a janitor with his company.

In high school, I was good at science and took a keen interest in electronics. When I moved on to earn my bachelor of science (B.Sc.) degree at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, B.C., however, I switched my focus to math and minored in statistics and economics.

Outside of school, my hobby was tinkering with cars. My friends and I would soup up our engines and add speakers.

While I was at university, I got my real estate agent licence and worked in that field for a while. After I got my science degree, I worked in the parts department for Heli-One, a helicopter company with an office in Delta, B.C., for about one-and-a-half years between 2006 and 2008. In the helicopter business, all parts have to be tracked by their serial numbers, so that's what I handled. During my time there, I met my future wife Joti at a young professionals night at a local club. She is a social worker with Fraser Health.

Unfortunately, during my short tenure at Heli-One, the CEO passed away. When his son took over the business, he started to make cuts everywhere. It seemed like just a matter of time before I would be out of a job.

An instant's impression

While I was browsing an online job site, I noticed an ad for Instant Imprints, looking for new franchisees. I clicked on it and noticed they were applying embellishment to all kinds of products, from T-shirts and posters to keychains and pens to embroidery and banners. If your business were about to exhibit at a

trade show, for example, here was a one-stop shop for all of the specialty merchandise you would need. The company had successfully merged several complementary industries into a 'single source' provider.

I felt I had to look into it more, so I submitted an online request for more information to the franchisor. A sales rep at their Canadian headquarters (HQ) in Oakville, Ont., called me back right away and was very helpful.



Customized T-shirts are among the best-selling items for many Instant Imprints franchises.

There was an existing franchise in Burnaby, so I went to visit the franchisee and he seemed quite happy. The money was good and he enjoyed the work. Most Instant Imprints stores are about 1,200 square feet and with today's technology, you can create a lot of different products within that space. He had primarily found his niche with T-shirts.

As I became more serious about the opportunity, I flew to Oakville to see a corporate-run store in action. I was in town for about two days, during which I spent a few hours at the store and a few more with a sales rep at the head office. I got to see the professional side of the business and a lot more of what an Instant Imprints store could do, like signs and other 'big-ticket' items. I realized nearly every type of business or organization needs one or more of the services Instant Imprints offers.

As I observed the workflow, I also realized they didn't have much competition, as there aren't a lot of companies that offer all of those services under one roof. In-house production helped them not only guarantee fast turnaround, but also ensure quality control. It was perfect.

I bought my first Instant Imprints franchise in Surrey, B.C. The franchisor's sales reps helped me look for a location and I found one in a really small strip mall. It was a retail building with eight or nine stores on street level and residential units upstairs.

Before opening, I also had to fly to San Diego, Calif., for two weeks of training in an existing store. And while support from the franchisor was good when I joined the system, it's even better now. The two weeks' training I had would be six weeks for a new franchisee today, including two weeks in an existing store, two weeks at the corporate HQ in San Diego and two

weeks in your own store after opening. There's also a lot of ongoing training.



My wife Joti and I have a son, Jovan, and daughter, Samaya.

Ramping up

I opened my Surrey franchise in the summer of 2008 and everything went very smoothly. I knew early on I would want to open a second location at some point, but wanted to make sure my original one really worked well first.

Sure enough, the more I ran the store, the more I learned I could do. It was really limitless and every day was different. Most of our customers were small businesses, but we also had people customizing Halloween costumes and sports teams ordering jerseys. We even printed panties for an escort agency! You can certainly do a lot of unique things with this business.

I also spoke to other franchisees for hints and help. With all of the opportunities available, my store performed really well and we ramped up the business very quickly. Within six or seven months, my franchise was ranked number one in Canada.

This certainly caught the franchisor's attention. About nine months after I opened, the CEO offered me an area development franchise, which would make me responsible for selling other franchises within the province.

At first, I said no, I wasn't interested, as I was too busy implementing new systems that hadn't been tried before. For example, we were printing T-shirts using a signage printer, which gave

us a big advantage because it meant we could affordably produce a one-off branded shirt for a customer, instead of the typical minimum of 30 or 40 at a time.

The key was building awareness. Mine was only the second Instant Imprints franchise in the province and there was a lot of work to do in spreading the word. Customers might come in for only one item, so you had to make sure to show and tell them everything else you could do for them.

Developing markets

The CEO approached me again a few months later with the same offer of the British Columbia area development franchise. This time, even though I was still learning a lot, I said yes. I had noticed more and more how valuable this business really was and I saw where its potential could take it in the future. I didn't want to miss that opportunity.

The deal was announced in September 2009. The area development franchise was officially awarded to Darpan Developments, of which I am principal officer.

At first, becoming an area developer didn't feel like much of a change, but as the process moved forward, I got to develop a whole new set of skills. Previous to this role, I'd not really had a lot of leadership experience. I remember I used to go into meetings and just listen quietly. Now that my leadership skills have grown in the last few years, when I'm in a meeting I really voice all of my concerns and they feel valued by others.

In 2010, the same year as Joti and I got married, I sold my Instant Imprints location in Surrey and bought the one in Burnaby that I had visited before joining the company. In 2011, when our son Jovan was born, I sold a new franchise in Langley and opened another myself in Vancouver. And in 2013, when our daughter Samaya was born, I sold five franchises.

I had also signed my agreement to expand the Instant Imprints brand throughout Washington



It has been very important for me to build awareness of Instant Imprints' services in British Columbia. A customer may come in for only one item, so you need to tell them about everything else you can do for them, as well.

in 2012. I saw a lot of potential there and it would be easy to get to, but it's not as easy to get a visa to work in the U.S. You might invest a lot of money before establishing a bricks-and-mortar location, only to find it very hard to get a permit to open that location.



In March 2015, I won an 'area franchisee of the year' award, presented by Instant Imprints CEO Ralph Ascar at our annual conference in San Diego, Calif.

So, Washington is still a work-in-progress at this point. I haven't opened any new stores there yet, but I'm supporting the one that was already there, in Vancouver, Wash. You could say I'm in twoVancouver!

As for British Columbia, where I was opening locations by myself before the market really jumped on board, those last five locations all opened at pretty much the same time, which was very hectic. I had to put on the brakes and make sure I was really supporting them. Now that they've been operating for about one-and-a-half years, I'm starting to sell again.

I want to have a minimum of five more new locations this year. I'm working on Victoria, Richmond, North Vancouver, Kamloops, Kelowna and other parts of the Lower Mainland.

I'm still taking things one step at a time, but I know I'll still be with Instant Imprints five years in the future, maybe with an area development franchises in Alberta or some of the U.S. states or even a national master license for Canada.

The reason I can see a lot of major growth will happen is the whole system of how organizations brand themselves. People within those organizations are too busy to go get different quotes from different places for each type of branded item.

Taking the earlier example of preparing to exhibit at a trade show, imagine you have to go to a sign shop for your banner, a garment vendor for your uniforms and another store for pens. Business-to-business (B2B) customers want to be able to work with just one company to supply all of that. Indeed, they demand it.

Gagan Bhathal is an Instant Imprints franchisee and area developer for British Columbia and Washington. For more information, contact him via e-mail at gbhathal@instantimprints.com.

Instant Imprints

Established: 2002

Date of first franchise: 2003

Franchise/corporate units: 50

Investment range: \$200,000 – \$250,000

Initial franchise fee: \$39,950

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