

## A dream on three wheels: Selling ice cream from motorcycle sidecars

Fife entrepreneur prepares to launch Cool Cycles Ice Cream Co.

**C.R. ROBERTS; C.R.ROBERTS@THENEWSTRIBUNE.COM**

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What happened to John Gibson's first young customer, a little girl, could have meant the end of his dreams about ice cream.

Gibson drove to Willow Green Village in Fife to test his plan to sell frozen treats from a freezer configured into a motorcycle sidecar. The girl bought a Cherry-Pineapple Big Stick, something akin to a Popsicle, and the only problem was Gibson had stored the thing directly beneath a block of dry ice.

Which means 40 degrees below zero.

It was too cold.

"It stuck to her tongue," Gibson remembers. "Kids tried to pull it. The girl starts to cry."

Eventually, the Big Stick warmed and the girl's tongue was released no worse for the trauma.

And 15 years later – after four generations of motorcycle and sidecar configurations, after a thousand details have been addressed – Gibson is ready to launch his idea into the marketplace.

He calls his company Cool Cycles Ice Cream, and advertising begins Monday seeking people who might be interested in buying a franchise.

### THE IDEA

At 60, Gibson is a builder, developer, general contractor and owner – his current enterprise is the Metropolitan Apartments project near downtown Tacoma – and he has grown wealthy for his efforts.

He emphasizes that his ice cream dream is not about money, at least not for himself.

A Wisconsin native, he was married to a Puyallup sweetheart three weeks after returning from service in Vietnam. He worked as a TV repairman back in the early days of warm and dusty glowing tubes, and he says he "wanted to have to the lifestyle my boss had, Jaguar, Cadillac, Chris Craft."

He studied business and management at Pierce College. He managed a 450-unit apartment complex. He made money and grew into middle age still restless, still trying.

A brief foray into the motorcycle business – with the Russian-made, sidecar-attached Ural brand – lost money.

Motorcycles and sidecars soon met ice cream.

One sunny day, Gibson was jogging along the Ruston Way waterfront. The idea fully and simply appeared as he listened to a tape by motivational guru Tony Robbins.

"Your mind is working. You're being creative," he says. "I went home to tell my wife."

Her reaction?



PETER HALEY/The News Tribune

Cool Cycles Ice Cream Co. was founded by John Gibson (right) and Joel Semanko is co-founder. From their Fife location they provide decorated motorcycles, sidecars and motorcycle trailers from which franchisees can sell ice cream products (which they also provide). March 30, 2009 Peter Haley / The News Tribune



PETER HALEY/The News Tribune

This is Good Humor's "Sundae Cone" reflected in the transmission cover one of Cool Cycles' water-cooled Hondas. Cool Cycles Ice Cream Co. was founded by John Gibson and Joel Semanko is co-founder. From their Fife location they provide decorated motorcycles, sidecars and motorcycle trailers from which franchisees can sell ice cream products (which they also provide). March 30, 2009 Peter Haley / The News Tribune

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"She laughed at me," he says. "I had tears in my eyes when I told her this. I really thought I had something."

The Urals, it turned out, didn't fit the business model. They overheated. Gibson approached a Honda dealer.

He found a manufacturer who could fashion a fiberglass freezer box that could be affixed to a wheeled base.

"There were a thousand hurdles in front of me. I just went over them," he says. "How do I get the music to project? How do I keep the cassette tape from skipping?"

How does he find a piston – that doesn't freeze – to guide the lid of the freezer? And what about making more room between the bike and the box? He'll need a built-in safe for the money. A thousand details.

He hired a composer to develop a musical theme that says "ice cream" but won't drive people nuts. He contacted ice cream distributors and settled on premium brands.

And he found something that motivated him beyond money and beyond the motivational calisthenics of Tony Robbins.

This time, it was a story told by Brad Pitt.

That's what drives John Gibson.

### A PARTNER

Joel Semanko of Mount Vernon, Skagit County, was employed by a firm that markets properties for rent. He was thinking of something else.

He met Gibson at a celebration hosted by his employer, where employees gathered to talk and to drink. Neither Gibson nor Semanko are big drinkers, and they found themselves together in a corner of the party.

Gibson showed Semanko a photograph of one of the ice-cream sidecar motorcycles.

"I took the picture out of my wallet," he says.

"I saw it," says Semanko. "I thought, 'That is cool.' When we talk, I see something here. I ask, 'What are your plans?'"

Gibson says, "You're going to think I'm crazy."

Semanko answers, "Crazy has worked for me."

Gibson then told the story about the story that Brad Pitt told. It's about a TV show, with Pitt in Africa, and there's a hungry little boy.

But Gibson needed a partner.

"I needed somebody to live the dream with me," he says.



PETER HALEY/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Cool Cycles Ice Cream Co. was founded by John Gibson, right, with the help of business partner Joel Semanko. From their Fife location, they provide decorated motorcycles, sidecars and trailers from which franchisees can sell big-name brand ice cream treats.

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"My stomach turned – in a good way," says Semanko. "Butterflies. I knew I was looking at something big. I thought I had just seen Starbucks, and met Howard Schultz in 1981. We talked for two hours. John didn't like handling details. Details is what I do. I probably asked him a hundred questions."

Driving home, Semanko called his wife, his high school sweetheart, and said, "I know what I'm going to do for the rest of my life – ice cream, baby."

Semanko was born in Albuquerque, N.M., and raised in northern Idaho. His first management position was behind the counter at a Taco Time. He arrived in Seattle in 1985 thinking, "This is a great place to be 23 and broke."

A position in cable TV led to fiber optics, which led to the rental magazine, which led Semanko to the conclusion that "I fell in love with business. It made sense to me.

"I'd been looking for 22 years," he says. In Cool Cycles he found "a business I could get involved with."

Semanko called Gibson the day after the meeting. He soon drove with his wife and two sons to the firm's Fife headquarters, a small warehouse in an industrial park down a narrow road off the main highway.

"I was looking at two teenagers ready to go to college. I was 42 years old. I was looking for something that would work," Semanko says.

"I offered him 15 percent," says Gibson.

They met twice a week at a Tacoma restaurant, after business hours, after Semanko finished his day with the rental publication and after Gibson had completed his daily real estate dealings.

They formed four corporations that would control manufacturing, franchise and other operations. They hired a franchise attorney and an accountant. They secured a distribution network for the frozen treats and they secured company trademarks.

They tested their product at fairs and other events.

Gibson realized of Semanko, "He's smarter than me."

Today, as they prepare to open, Semanko owns 40 percent of the operation.

And Gibson says any profit he makes for himself will go to hungry children.

### A SCOOTER

Cool Cycles launches this week, offering franchises to people who will operate within a 100-mile radius of Fife. The Los Angeles area will follow, then Las Vegas, Gibson says.

The motorcycle, attached sidecar, portable storage "depot" and "kiosk" cost \$32,000. Add \$7,000 for the franchise fee. There's a 10-year agreement, and franchisees will receive training, marketing assistance and the license to use the trademarks. There's a spiffy uniform, and all successful applicants will be subject to a background check, what with this being a business that appeals to children.

You can tell something about that appeal by the brightly and primary-colored graphics – featuring ice cream products, cartoon characters and balloons – that surround the motorcycles and the freezers.

There's a depiction of the company mascot, Scooter, invented by one of Semanko's sons. It's a saber-tooth kitten wearing sunglasses.

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And on the back of the bikes, Scooter holds a nickel, ready to make a deposit into a little round bank painted to resemble planet Earth.

It won't be part of the initial marketing campaign and it won't be a major part of the early message to franchise clients or ice-cream customers, but this is why John Gibson is doing what he's doing.

Scooter and that nickel. Brad Pitt in Africa. A tour in Vietnam.

"It's a symbol of the charity work I want to do," Gibson says.

A few years back, sitting alone one night, he saw a TV news show featuring Brad Pitt. At one point, the movie star asks a little boy, "When you get up in the morning, what do you think about?"

The boy answered, "I just hope I have enough to eat."

"I was very much affected by that," Gibson says. "There was something that happened to me in Vietnam. I was trained to kill people I didn't know. At one point, I wanted to end it all. I was drafted eight months out of high school. I finished my tour and nobody was helping me."

He wants to help children wake without worry.

It's not part of the marketing campaign and Gibson has yet to register a charity, but he says he will.

That's good enough for Brian Sonntag.

"I've known John for about 25 years," says the state auditor. "He's a great guy. He is absolutely legit on everything he does. I don't know anybody whose word is better than his."

Sonntag notes that Gibson stands in for Santa Claus at both the Tacoma Rescue Mission and an orphanage in California.

And there's one more thing, he says.

"John loves to spread the joy of ice cream."

### **Cool Cycles Ice Cream Co.**

**Model:** Franchises

**Idea:** Sell ice cream in neighborhoods and at public and private events from a motorcycle sidecar

**Principles:** John Gibson, 60; Joel Semanko, 46

**Headquarters:** Fife

**Business launch:** This week

**Frozen treats:** Unilever and Wells Blue Bunny brands; includes Breyer's, Ben & Jerry's and Starbucks

**Motorcycles:** 750-cc Honda Shadow, Harley 883 Sportster

**Sidecar capacity:** 600 bars

**Gibson's investment so far:** \$1 million-plus

**Gibson's goal:** His profits go to charity.

**Semanko's goal:** Company recognized as one of the best franchising opportunities in the world.

**Franchise cost:** \$39,000 includes a \$7,000 franchise fee (company will finance up to \$16,000); 10-year agreement; fixed monthly royalty.

**Details:** Franchisee receives motorcycle, freezer units, training, trademark licenses, uniform; no territories; mandatory criminal background check.

**Web site:** [www.coolcyclesicecream.com](http://www.coolcyclesicecream.com)