

Up close

'If you can't have fun at something, then it's not worth doing.'



PHOTO BY TANYA LUNDINE

Jim Brandt estimates that he owns between 250 and 300 Pez dispensers.

BY KRISTEN STIEFFEL | NEWS ASSISTANT

What was your first job? When I was 7, I began spending summers on my grandparents' farm in Ohio. My grandfather let my sisters and me pick raspberries and sell them at his produce stand. We earned 25 cents per pint. It was probably the toughest job I have ever had, and it was nearly impossible to keep from eating the profits.

What was the worst job you ever had? During college one summer, I worked the graveyard shift in the freezer at the Winn-Dixie warehouse in New Orleans, loading 50-pound cartons of orange juice and other frozen foods into cargo containers. I quickly learned not to put the orange juice on top of the decorated cakes.

How did you get into the business you're in? A friend heard about a job as an insurance adjuster and suggested I apply for it. His family owned an insurance agency, so he knew it was a good field. My degree was in speech, so I didn't have any specific career plans.

What's the biggest challenge in your industry right now? For insurance

agents, the challenges are the diminishing availability of products to sell and shrinking profit margins. It's becoming more and more difficult to find insurance companies willing to do business in Florida, and those that do pay smaller commissions and require the agents to take more responsibility for the workload. Insurance agencies are only profitable in the long run, so retaining customers through great service is extremely important.

What is the most common question customers ask you? "Do you have anything cheaper?" A lot of our customers are new to Florida and are shocked when they hear what their homeowner's premiums will be. Also, the Internet has made people more price-conscious about everything, insurance included.

What accomplishment are you most proud of? There are two things. First, after being in business only a few weeks, I was contacted by GMAC Mortgage and asked to provide an insurance solution for their new loan customers statewide. It was a tremendous act of faith for a national financial institution to put their trust in a brand-new company, and I'm very proud of that.

Second, when I established this agency a year ago, I was able to get contracts with insurance carriers right away, based on the reputation I've built over the past 13 years in Orlando.

What was the most important lesson you learned as a child? If you can't have fun at something, then it's not worth doing. In my previous life, I always told new employees during orientation that I was a believer in having fun at work, and when it quit being fun for me, they would come to work and discover my lights were turned off. It was a little over a year ago that I turned those lights off, and I am again having fun every day in our new venture.

What part of the job do you take home? All of it. I have quickly learned that a start-up operation is all-consuming.

What is the last thing you do before leaving the office? I go over the first few things I'll need to do the next morning, so when I walk in the door, I'm ready to roll.

Jim Brandt

Company: Sun Insurance Services Inc.

Title: President

Company info: Sun Insurance Services offers home, auto and life insurance throughout the state of Florida.

Background: Brandt moved to Orlando 13 years ago from Baton Rouge, La., and worked in various capacities in the insurance industry. For seven years, he ran the East Coast division of Countrywide Insurance Services, a subsidiary of Countrywide Home Loans.

Education: Bachelor's degree, Louisiana State University

Residence: Dr. Phillips