

A master in the making

Too many nights away from his family drove Dave Williams from the corporate world into the franchising one. First he and wife Kim looked at independent business options. Then buying a franchise. And finally they became the master franchisor for A Buyer's Choice Home Inspection. Only franchising since 2007, A Buyer's Choice already has 120 franchises across Canada – a success story Dave and Kim want to keep writing

By Christina Newberry

When Dave Williams first approached A Buyer's Choice, a national home inspection franchise, about buying a franchise in BC, they said they couldn't sell him one. It wasn't because Williams was under-qualified, or because the territories were full. It was because A Buyer's Choice works on a regional model, where master franchisors manage a territory, selling individual franchises and mentoring the franchisees. And, in the summer of 2008, BC didn't have a master franchisor. But Williams saw A Buyer's Choice as too good an opportunity to pass up. So, instead of buying a single franchise, as he'd planned, he became the master franchisor for BC, opening up the province for individual franchises.

When he made that first call, Williams was living a hectic life, selling power systems for large capital

projects. There's no question he was successful – in his best year, Williams sold over \$100 million worth of capital equipment. But, with two teenaged sons at home and a lot of travel involved in his work, he decided that, despite the financial rewards, he no longer wanted to be a "part-time papa."

So, Williams started thinking about starting his own business.

Like many people looking for ideas, Williams's search for business opportunities and information took him to the Internet. He wasn't even thinking about a franchise business until he stumbled on the

website for A Buyer's Choice (www.abuyerschoice.com). Understanding that his sales and marketing skills gave him the perfect foundation for success within a franchise model, Williams started to dig deeper into the opportunity. By the time he made that call to the A Buyer's Choice corporate office, he was sure the company was the right fit. It took only one meeting with Arne Tjerno, A Buyer's Choice president, who's in charge of international franchise development, to convince Williams that becoming the master franchisor for BC was the right move. By November 2008, he was officially in business, and after extensive training on both home inspections and marketing

and selling franchises, Williams sold the first BC franchise in March 2009.

Twenty months later, Williams has 11 franchisees in BC, and plans to add 30 more. Instead of travelling for business and being a part-time dad, his office is two minutes away from his home in Port Coquitlam. His wife Kim is working with him in his business, and by fall it will be her full-time job.

So what was it about A Buyer's Choice that convinced Williams it was the right opportunity for him and his family, even when no franchises were available in BC?

"It's the largest network of home inspectors in the country," Williams says. "I did an analysis on starting your own home-inspection company versus a franchise. There are so many things you get that you don't have to figure out or pay for, like hands-on training, customer service training, a logo – everything is figured out for you. It means our franchisees can get up and running faster than through any other method."

According to Williams, it usually takes about three to four months from the day a new franchisee signs their final paperwork to the day they do their first home inspection. During that time, they under-



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HOWDY PARTNER: Rob Bridge (centre) is one of 11 A Buyer's Choice franchisees in BC. Master franchisor Dave Williams and wife Kim are aiming for another 30 across the province



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Low costs, high margins attract franchisees

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go rigorous training, including 10 binders of home study materials, and an intensive two-week boot camp in Halifax.

After the boot camp is over, the new franchisee is ready to become a licensed home inspector – a must in BC.

"They can walk back into their business after boot camp, do an inspection on day one, and put a cheque straight into the bank," Williams says.

Once they're up to speed, A Buyer's Choice franchisee can do 600 inspections per year at about \$450 per inspection – creating a gross income of \$270,000 per year.

Rob Bridge, who bought his franchise in Port Coquitlam in August 2009, is following the path that Williams describes almost to a T. Bridge became a licensed home inspector in November 2009, three months after signing his paperwork. In May, his busiest month yet, he did an inspection every other day. And his goal is to do 300 inspections a year.

Like Williams, Bridge had a background in sales – 17 years – but wanted to have his own business. As a carpenter by trade, home inspection seemed a natural fit, so when he met Williams through a friend at a networking event, he knew he'd found the right opportunity. After three meetings with Williams over the course of about four weeks, Bridge was ready to buy his franchise.

Bridge's wife Carol took the most convincing. As an accountant, she wanted to be sure the numbers all made sense. She attended the meetings with Williams, too, and in the end realized that both the math and Bridge's passion for the business made A Buyer's Choice the right opportunity. Now, she helps Bridge by doing his books.

Creating a model that really did make sense, and that produced professional, reliable home inspectors, was the reason A Buyer's Choice CEO Bill Redfern started the company in the first place. After a 20-year career in real estate, Redfern came to see



BRIDGE TO A BETTER LIFE: Rob Bridge – who had a 17-year background in sales – bought his A Buyer's Choice franchise in November 2009, and is aiming for \$135,000 in revenues in the next 12 months.

home inspections as the "weak link" in the home buying process. Ninety-five percent of real estate transactions in Canada require a home inspection, but there was no real industry standard for customer service, training, and so on.

"We raised the level of professionalism in the industry a great deal," Redfern says.

Since the goal was national consistency, A Buyer's Choice was envisioned as a franchise business right from the start. That meant Redfern focused on making the business easy to duplicate. He started doing research and development in 2004-2005, and finalized the legal process of getting ready to franchise in fall 2007. A Buyer's Choice had franchise sales that very first month.

"We did the market research," Redfern says. "We had a team in place to deal with the innumerable challenges, and we had the financing in place."

A Buyer's Choice now has about 120 franchises in Canada (the number is hard to pin down, since new franchises are sold almost every other

day), and eight active regions in the United States, with pending sales in the international market. Within a year, Redfern plans to have the first overseas office open, and within five years he says that A Buyer's Choice will be "the largest in the industry, bar none."

They're already making good progress toward that goal, being the fastest-growing home inspection franchise in North America. In fact, A Buyer's Choice has just opened their first overseas office in Sao Paulo, Brazil. This growth is a result of both the solid name and reputation A Buyer's Choice has established, and the work of master franchisors like Dave and Kim Williams.

The Williamses' growth strategy for BC is based on target marketing for the franchise opportunity. Currently focusing on the Lower Mainland of BC, they are working their way westward, with the most recent sale of the Sea-to-Sky Whistler franchise.

The need to focus on specific areas rather than using a scatter-gun ap-

proach was one of the tough early lessons for Williams as he began to grow his business.

"Early on, I placed a display ad in every community newspaper in the province," Williams says. "That was the worst money I ever spent. I could have just thrown that money in the shredder."

Now, in addition to focusing on one specific geographic area at a time, the Williamses are also working on recruiting franchisees who can help serve the needs of BC's multicultural population. They have one franchisee who speaks Mandarin and Cantonese, and another who speaks Punjabi. They are advertising in local Chinese and Punjabi newspapers to attract more franchisees who can help serve these two important local markets.

Along the way, Williams has learned never to pre-judge a franchise prospect. BC's oldest franchisee – who's 75 – is on track to become one of the most successful. With the tools and resources of the franchise behind them, just about anyone can create a successful business – if they're motivated and passionate about what they're doing.

For Williams, that passion is evident in the way he speaks about his business, and about running it with his wife Kim. Selling franchises presents different challenges than selling power equipment ("You can touch a steam turbine, but you can't touch a franchise," William says), as does working as an entrepreneur rather than an employee. But, according to Williams, the rewards are worth it.

"Running this business has helped me to grow in terms of facing a bigger challenge," Williams says. "I'm meeting the challenge of being an entrepreneur with the assistance of my beautiful wife. It's a multi-functional role, and I'm happy to step up to the plate."

Rob Bridge, Williams's Port Coquitlam franchisee, agrees.

"It's not like going to work and sitting at a desk," Bridge says. "It's more in your face. But it allows you to be what you want to be." ■