

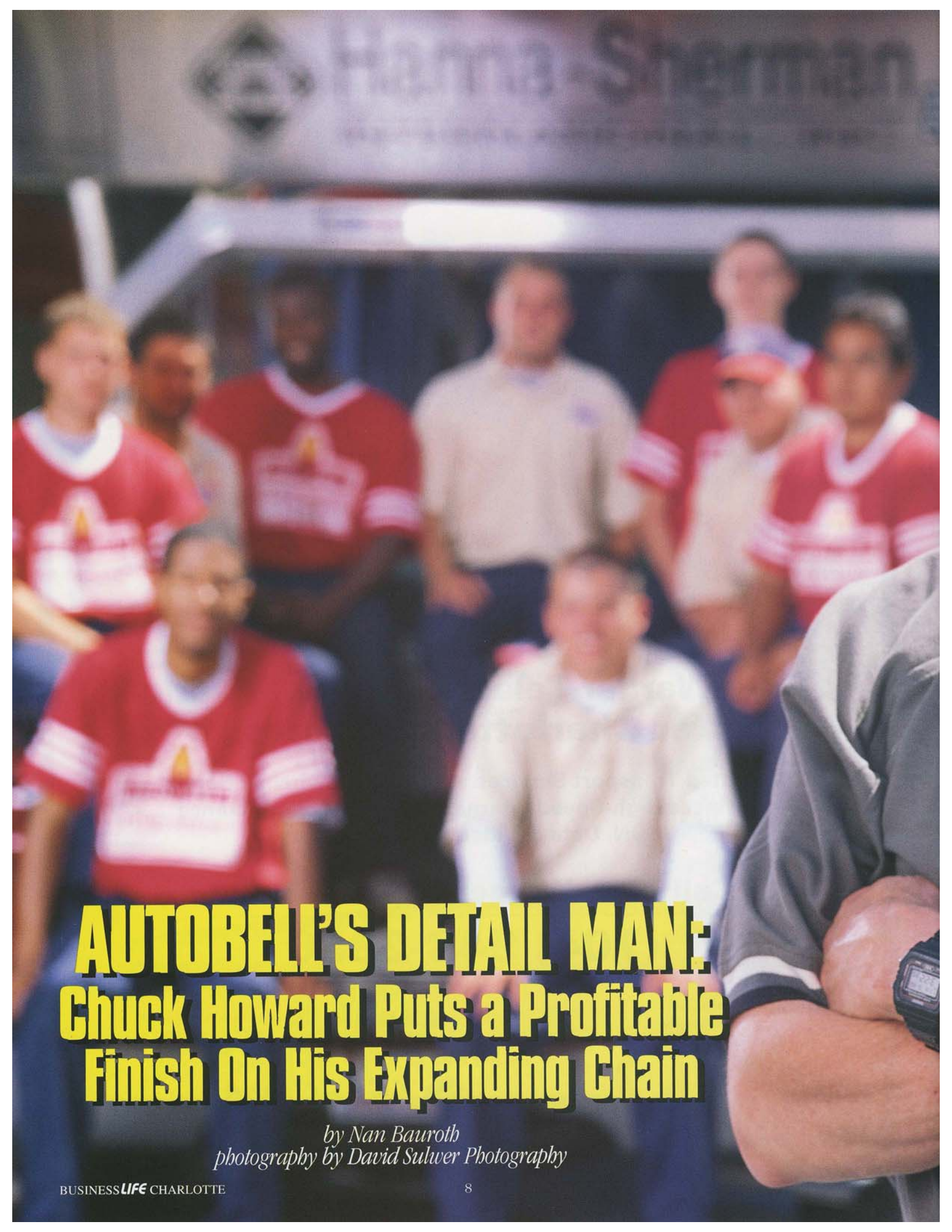
# BUSINESS LIFE

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## AUTOBELL'S DETAIL MAN: Chuck Howard Puts a Profitable Finish On His Expanding Chain

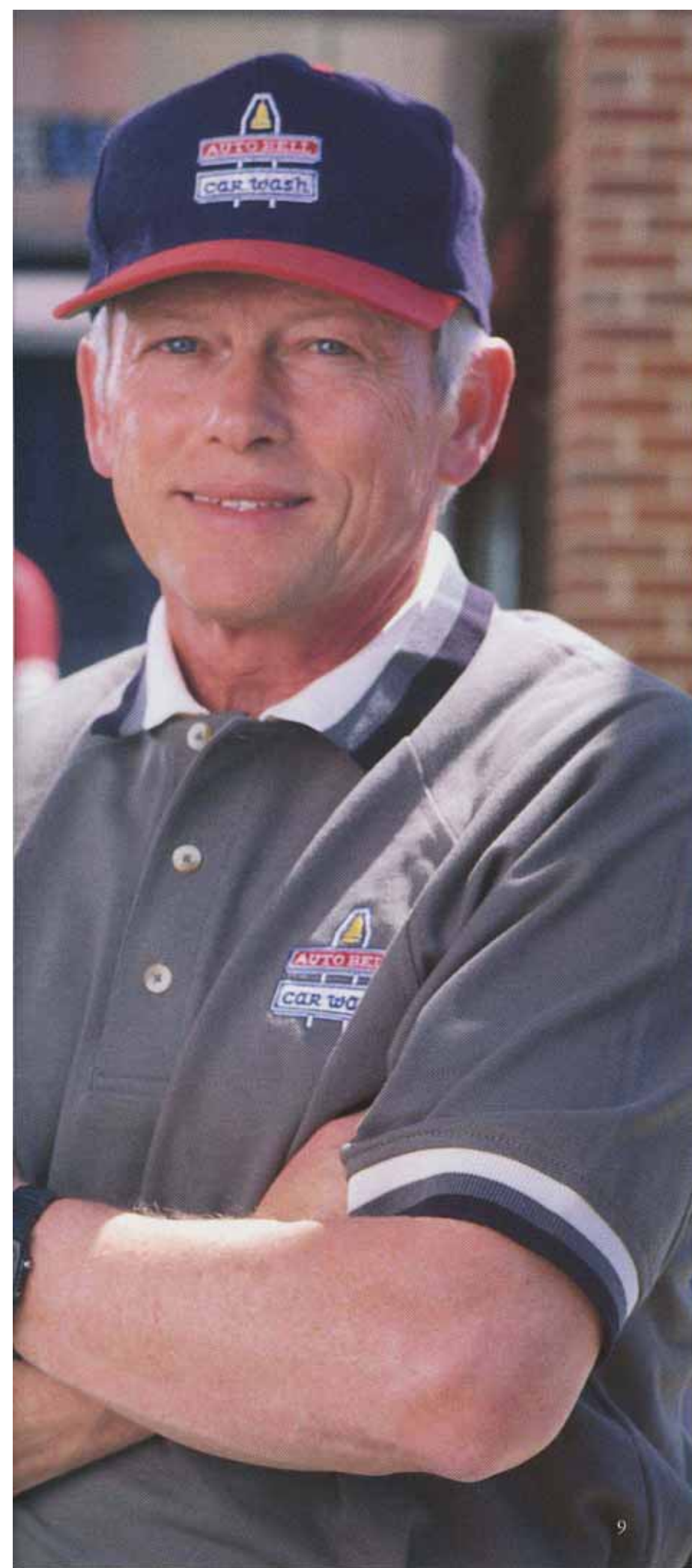
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# **AUTOBELL'S DETAIL MAN: Chuck Howard Puts a Profitable Finish On His Expanding Chain**

*by Nan Bauroth  
photography by David Sulwer Photography*



Charles "Chuck" Howard is the ultimate detail man. As President and CEO of Autobell Car Wash Inc.,<sup>®</sup> he's meticulously grown his family business from one "wash 'n wax" pit stop into the nation's number one regional car wash chain,

according to a J. D. Powers survey published in February. This year, Howard's 26 North Carolina Autobells will get "up close and personal" with 1.25 million sets of Tar Heel wheels. At an average price of \$12, you might say he's cleaning up on the bottom line.

But like his father Charles Howard Sr., who founded Autobell<sup>®</sup>, the son focuses more on the human net net. "We have a lot of folks dependent on us for their livelihood, and in order to keep them moving ahead to enrich their lives, we have to grow," Howard observes with characteristic thoughtfulness.

Ironically, this unusual familial orientation at Autobell has enabled Howard to not only withstand competition, but expand. "I like to call it family-style management," he explains. "Our employees are like family. We have that kind of respect for each other. We're not big on titles or strict regimen. Everybody knows what is expected and they move to the area where work needs to be done. I don't know how large you can get before that doesn't work. I hope I never find out because I like the system."

#### **A Chip Off the Old Engine Block**

This Queen City native's success story began when his father, a Polkville farm boy, came to Charlotte to make a living. Charles, as associates fondly refer to him, eventually landed a distributorship for car wash equipment, then in 1969 launched his first car wash on South Boulevard.

Howard vividly remembers building the first few Autobells with his late father. "We constructed them with our own two hands, doing the plumbing and electrical work," he says. Like many sons of entrepreneurs, Howard did not initially see himself joining his father's business. But upon graduation in 1971 from UNCC, a recession was in full force. So the business major decided to take a second look.

#### **Re-evaluating the Possibilities**

That second look was all Howard needed in order to see his future. From that moment on,

Howard was sold on Autobell, and to this day, credits his father with instilling values that have served the company well. "My father was a self-made man. He had not even a high school degree, but educated himself through the GI Bill. He was very focused, very determined to be successful," Howard muses. "He was a practical individual with a way of simplifying things. He left us a process that will endure, a system anyone can operate."

Well, maybe not anyone. Just Chuck Howard. In the beginning, certainly, he and his father had stylistic differences. Process-driven, Howard fought to implement more procedural documentation. Always close, however, father and son soon found their individual strengths served as a complement.

In retrospect, Howard believes the critical turning point for Autobell came during the 1973 oil embargo. Back then they sold gasoline at their locations, intending to build high volume with an exterior car wash. OPEC's stranglehold changed all that.

"The whole gas industry was turned upside down," he recalls, particularly dealer margins. "The self-service convenience store was the consequence. We had to decide whether to market gas or become a full-service car wash. We opted to convert."

Good decision. Today Autobell ranks as North Carolina's premiere car wash company, no doubt due to Howard's textbook product extension line. Clean-car freaks can purchase mobile TLC that includes vacuuming and Armor All multi-purpose protectant treatments, plus Rain-X protection and Autobell's exclusive

Double PolyProcess clear coat finish.

A sunny optimist, Howard prays for good weather, dismissing that canard about washing your car if it's going to rain. "We fight that attitude," he insists with a smile. If the weatherman says there's a 50% chance of rain, there's also a 50% chance of sun, so why not wash your car?"

### Environmentally Friendly

Rain or shine, sleet or snow, Autobell is open. Not quite 24/7, but almost. And always on Sunday. To meet demand, today's Autobells employ state-of-the-art technology based on robotics and software that controls everything from water temperature to the precise mix of solutions.

According to Howard, chemistry today is much friendlier to the car's finish, employee and environment. And while Howard loves dirty cars, he is equally passionate about doing his part to ensure a clean environment.

"We're really in the water management business," he declares, adeptly reversing a negative. "All waste water from every Autobell goes

only into approved sewer systems, keeping water in the system during droughts. Pollutants like road grime, detergents and wax residue rinsed off by home car washers go untreated into the city storm drain, polluting rivers and streams."

As if to seal his case, Howard adds, "Studies show driveway washers use up to 150 gallons of water, all of which is wasted." Compare that to 100 gallons per car at Autobell, 80% of which is recycled. Howard easily rattles off stats like this, including the average number of inclement days per month in Mecklenburg County (13, in case you're wondering).

### The Quintessential CEO

The quintessential CEO, Howard manages by driving through, and according to long-term customers, nothing escapes his eye. "Autobell doesn't cut corners," nods Craig Mundy, Senior Account Manager for Infinity Broadcasting, whose stations run Autobell's catchy ads. "Chuck's always updating facilities and equipment. If there's a maintenance problem, they shut down until it's fixed."

Chet Snow, Jr., Owner of Snow & Associates Realtors, who has known Howard since their days at UNCC, agrees. "I get the same personal service today that I did 15 years ago. I think that's truly a tribute to Chuck's attention to detail."

According to Kurt Rawald, General Manager of Gaston Screen Printing, which provides Autobell's uniforms, "Chuck is always 100% business. He never lets his guard down on cost."

Seems those who do business with Howard do it forever. Hugo Heidenreich, now



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retired from the Heidenreich Agency, sold father and son property and casualty insurance. "His Dad was one great fella," says Heidenreich. "Chuck must have a lot of his genes. They were one of the most loyal customers I ever had. One thing," he adds. "Chuck doesn't watch any clocks. He works until the job is done."

### An Ongoing Family Affair

Thus far Howard has avoided IPO madness, and has refused numerous buy-out offers, preferring to keep Autobell all in the family. "I'd probably get top dollar because there's a feeding frenzy going on with these rollups in our industry," he confesses. "But very often buyers get rid of everybody. To me, the business is more valuable as an ongoing operation, and anyway, I'm having too much fun."

At present, Howard's son Carl serves as Vice President, directing car wash operations. Daughter Leigh handles audit and accountability, with daughter Kelley running public relations. Joyce Draper, Executive Vice President of Autobell, might as well be family. "I came with the building," she quips, noting she began as a part-time bookkeeper for Charles, and today oversees all financial and human resources responsibilities for the growing chain.

In Draper's eye, Howard is a

visionary. "Chuck is more analytic than his father. He has an ability to see the big picture, to look more into the future. Charles took things one step at a time. Chuck is more willing to venture out and that has helped,

"Chuck has a knack of selecting locations within a marketplace," asserts Thomas Mussoni, Certified Commercial Investment Manager with the Crosland Group. "His intuition regarding growth patterns, area

development, demographic shifts and highway issues enables him to narrow it down to the optimal locations. He is one of my preferred clients."

Don Outen, Vice President and Commercial Banking Officer at BB&T, has worked with Howard and his father since 1969. "There's never been a surprise with Chuck. He always discusses his plans, and as a banker I like that. Chuck evaluates things closely. He won't grow just for growth sake."

One thing you can bet your mag wheels on: Chuck Howard will finish first no matter what his endeavor. Everyone who knows him

waxes eloquent about the man, personally and professionally. As Heidenrich sums it up, "If I ever did anything, Chuck made me feel more than appreciated. You don't mind doing the best you can for someone like that. Autobell has a permanency about its organization. Every year since Chuck took over, they've expanded their business. That says a lot about his leadership." ◀◀

*Nan Bauroth is a freelance journalist and marketing consultant in Charlotte.*

## COULD AUTOBELL BE THE NEXT MCDONALD'S?

Is Chuck Howard the Ray Kroc of the car wash business? Very possibly, says Mark Thornsby, Executive Director of the International Car Wash Association (ICA). "It's a very fragmented industry, primarily because of the low barrier to entry. Conveyor car washes start about \$2 million. We've still got a mom-and-pop mentality, which is why McDonald's is a great model for this industry."

As Thornsby points out, prior to the golden arches, you had your basic family hamburger joint. "Ask why we're 40 to 50 years behind the fast food business and they cite the same reasons -- you can't control labor, can't control quality, but Ray Kroc figured out how to do it. I think it's a matter of time in this industry as well."

Ben Alford, President of the ICA, agrees. "It's typically been a family-held enterprise, but with the stock market boom, we're seeing consolidators. The oil companies are strong right now, building multiple profit centers on a single piece of real estate." One reason may be that unlike the maturing fast food market, the car wash industry has plenty of legroom for growth: 40% of car owners still do the driveway routine.

And why all bets on Howard? For one, he's already developed a profitable concept that could easily be franchised. Second, he knows the territory.

Craig Mundy of Infinity Broadcasting believes Howard also possesses rare marketing smarts: "They got a musical image to differentiate their commercials and keep the image consistent. That sounds easy, but some companies spend billions and never achieve that."

Howard himself believes the timing may be right. "Our industry appears ripe for some consolidator to roll up a bunch of car washes, and in fact, there are companies trying to do just that."

The big question is whether Howard will get into the game. For now he's not saying. But a big clue might be the sudden appearance of a tote board at all his Autobells flashing, "17 million cars washed..."

especially in the last few years with our extensive growth."

With family and trusted associates like Draper tending to daily operations, Howard increasingly focuses on expansion (see sidebar). For starters, he's pursuing co-branding opportunities. Potential partners include oil change shops, tire stores or an alliance with the right food or oil company. Howard's strategy is partly driven by skyrocketing commercial real estate prices for locations with high traffic, visibility and easy access.