

Serial founder: Bob Slattery has launched more than 40 companies and he's far from finished



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CINCINNATI — The best way to help Bob Slattery succeed in business is to doubt him.

“There’s nothing he wants more in this world than to have everybody tell him he can’t do something and then make it happen,” said Bobby Slattery, who watched his dad prove plenty of people wrong in a prolific entrepreneurial career.

The senior Slattery is best known as the publisher of [Reach](#) magazine, but he’s founded more than 40 companies in a 37-year career that started with a [Valpak](#) coupon franchise in 1978.

He's still in the coupon business with Reach, Valpak and [Housetrends](#) magazine. But he's also in the event-planning business, with the [AVP Beach Volleyball](#) tournament and [Cincinnati Wedding Showcase](#). Restaurant investments include [Slatts Pub](#) in Blue Ash and [Pizzelii](#) brick oven pizza on Wooster Pike.

Got a pet? He's got you covered with [Wags Park](#) in Newtown, a recreation area for dogs that offers grooming, training and "dog spa" services. Another company, [Perimeter Technologies](#), sells electronic pet fencing. Need a vacation? [Cruise800](#) specializes in ocean and river cruises, along with specialty weddings.

Slattery is in the real estate business too. His partnerships own the office buildings in six cities where Valpak and Reach are based. Since 2009, he's been acquiring land in the Newtown area, where he expects a new bike path and Route 32 road improvements will lead to new development.

If it all sounds chaotic, you're right about that. If it doesn't sound profitable, you're wrong. It's a \$74 million enterprise that generates ample cash flow to cover debt and expenses, a stat Slattery checks daily. Every business feeds off the others, with Bob Slattery in the middle, juggling commitments and curing skeptics.

"Every time someone thinks he's crazy, he proves them wrong," Bobby Slattery said. "It's not necessarily a spiteful thing. It's more that he enjoys the challenge."

Just like his dad, Bobby is branching out in ways that feed the family business. Fifty Fest, a Sept. 19 beer festival featuring breweries and 11 bands on three stages, is expected to draw up to 7,000 people to the Fifty West property at 7668 Wooster Pike.

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Second Among Rivals

It's a joy that flows from sibling rivalry.

Slattery grew up in Cleveland, the second oldest of 10 children in an Irish Catholic family. His father owned a big insurance agency and liked the idea of putting his kids to work. So, he bought a small resort and two Dairy Queen Brazier franchises near Lake George, New York.



Bob Slattery in the driver's seat at his family-owned Dairy Queen, circa 1970.

“My older brother, Jim, got the good store,” Slattery recalled. “I got the all the weaker family members. He got all the better family members. And we’d compete to see who could do more business. I was 18. He was 19. It was a frickin’ fiasco.”

But it taught him “hard lessons” that have helped him ever since. In college — all 10 kids went to Miami University, by the way — Slattery started a bar-cleaning business to pay room and board, then a company that painted addresses on curbs.

Slattery and his roommate, Bob Wolfe, talked incessantly about new business ideas, before and after graduation. It was Wolfe who found the idea that stuck.

“He calls me. ‘Hey Slatts. I found this thing called Valpak. They’re selling coupons in the mail,’” Slattery said. “I said, ‘Wolfie, that’s the dumbest one ever. What are you thinking?’”

A Florida entrepreneur was selling the Cincinnati franchise rights after three prior owners failed to make it work. Slattery had his doubts, but agreed to help his friend set it up. It was a good decision for the entire Slattery family. Younger siblings worked their way through college in the Oxford office, then moved on to run offices in Toledo, Pittsburgh, Louisville, Lexington and Indianapolis. As the company grew, Slattery and Wolfe kept buying new territories.

“There isn’t anybody in my family, including my mother and father, that haven’t been in the Valpak coupon business,” Slattery said.

But the sibling rivalry hasn’t abated.

“We compare W-2s at the end of the year,” he said. “Every Thanksgiving. Who made more? Who’s making less?”

FACT CHECK: Ok, that’s a bit of hyperbole. Both Slattery and his younger brother, Tim, say the Slatterys don’t (always) bring tax records to Thanksgiving. But they definitely compare notes. “The one word I think that describes him is tenacious,” said Rich Uncle Tim, as Bob calls the fourth-youngest Slattery. “That’s just how he approached so many things. In fact, you can tell him I’m going to put that on his tombstone.”

Making Their Mark

Slattery and Wolfe amicably parted ways in 2001. But first, they succeeded where others failed at Valpak by innovating.

They developed a computer system to track production and accounting. They developed partnerships with radio stations, trading ads for promotional exposure. And they bought every sales rep a pair of Florsheim Imperial wingtip shoes as a message that they were expected to do what the founders did: Find a business district and cold call every company there.

Perhaps most importantly, they used Valpak as a foot in the door to other ventures. Not all of them worked. A secret shopping company and the acquisition of a printing company were among the failures. But they were far outnumbered by successes.

“He has the ability to get people excited about ideas,” said Bobby Slattery, the 33-year-old owner of [Fifty West Brewing Company](#) on Wooster Pike. The brewery operates in the old Heritage restaurant, which the elder Slattery purchased in 2009. Bobby was working in California for Verizon at the time, with no plans to join the family business. But dad needed a restaurant manager in Blue Ash.

“I thought he was crazy,” Bobby Slattery said. “Outside of washing dishes, I had no experience. He said, ‘You’ll figure it out. Don’t worry about it.’”

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What Lies Ahead

The 63-year-old Slattery is showing no signs of retirement. In fact, he’s still cooking up new ventures.

For example, Slattery thinks there is great potential in connecting the targeted-marketing tactics of Reach and Valpak with TV stations. WCPO Insider product is a sponsor of the Fifty Fest event.



Map of Slattery-owned companies on Wooster Pike

Another example is Mariemont Crossing, Slattery's name for a cluster of businesses that operate on Wooster Pike near the Newtown bridge. The companies could get a boost soon from a privately-funded extension of the Little Miami Scenic Trail. Slattery hopes to be under construction by November on the \$26,000 extension that would link the 75-mile bike trail to land Slattery acquired in 2013.

He signed a lease to relocate Oakley Cyclery to the 7700 block of Wooster Pike, taking advantage of the planned Wasson Way extension of the Little Miami trail. The [Wasson Way](#) project would link the Newtown bridge to Victory Parkway near Xavier University.

It's a big reason Slattery has spent nearly \$1.2 million since 2003 to acquire land on both sides of Wooster Pike. Those six acres now house a whole family of Slattery companies, including Heritage Tastings, Fifty West, Pizzelii, Hahana Beach and Mariemont Livery.

“His idea, everybody thinks is crazy,” Bobby Slattery said. “Nobody believes that he’s really going to do it. Ten years from now, they’ll look back and say, ‘I can’t believe he pulled that off.’”

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