

Flashy Ames entrepreneur adds polish to an old business idea

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Hang on to your shoes.

Jack Barringer, Ames inventor, entrepreneur and promoter extraordinaire, has jumped with both feet into the shoeshine business.

Anybody who knows Barringer, a flashy, fast-talking, enthusiast of just about everything, knows that a shoeshine stand graced — or clobbered — by his touch is not going to be ordinary. No worn vinyl chairs in a hotel or airport corner, with chubby older men polishing loafers and wingtips.

Barringer's version of the shoeshine stand is a Disneyland for people with scuffed shoes. His Cactus Jack Shoe Shine Co. stands are designed as horse-drawn buggies, kingly thrones or 6-foot-high football helmets customized to a specific team.

In the design stage are the "Express Shine" booth, designed as a mailbox; the "Wings Shine" stand, an airplane cabin using real plane seats and offering both first-class and coach shines; and an as-yet unnamed stand featuring a lifeguard chair sitting atop lobster traps.

For the clincher, Barringer, 47, hires young women to do the polishing and dresses them, conservatively, like cowboys and cheerleaders or referees. The mailbox valets will be dressed as mail carriers; the airplane valets like flight attendants or pilots; and the lifeguard chair valets like sailors.

"It's a combination of taking an old idea and polishing it up," said Barringer.

Untapped Market

Barringer found a market no one had touched yet. "Most people, when they think of shoeshines, think of hotels," he said. "We discovered an untapped market in, of all places, truck travel plazas. . . . It's incredible the business we do in them."

Cactus Jack Shoe Shine Co. was founded early this year and stands are now located at the Bar-B Plaza and the Flying J Travel Plaza in the Des Moines area, the Iowa 80 Truck Stop near Davenport, a Sapp Brothers truck stop in Omaha and a Union 76 truck stop near Council Bluffs. One will open next week at another Davenport-area truck stop.

In the next few months, Barringer said, he will open two more stands in Des Moines, one in Ames and one in Dubuque.

A stand opened about a week ago at Valley West Mall in West Des Moines.

The stands are also used as promotional gimmicks at car dealerships, banks and restaurants. Barringer is trying to land some hotel contracts.

Barringer wants to pursue the shopping mall market further. Dennis Gilliam, gen-



"Cactus" Jack Barringer pulls his shoe-shine brush from its holster on his waist.

eral manager of Valley West Mall, said he had been considering a shoeshine stand for the mall but wasn't impressed with two proposals he had received.

"When Cactus Jack came in, it was a breath of fresh air," said Gilliam, who described his introduction to Barringer as a "mutual nut-case collision. We wanted something different, something unique, and he certainly fills that."

Barringer also has sold two licenses, one covering eastern Nebraska and one covering the Denver area. The licenses sell for

\$5,000 each and include training, uniforms, supplies and a marketing video. Barringer leases the stand to the licensee and collects a monthly royalty.

The Denver licensee plans to open five stands in Denver in the next three months, featuring Denver Bronco football helmets. Barringer is pursuing three or four licensees for the St. Louis area next. He expects to

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CHARLES SCHLOSSER/The Register

Colorful Ames entrepreneur polishes up an old business idea

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start franchising the business in six months and hopes to have 1,000 locations nationwide in three to five years.

"I just love making things happen, taking something that's never been done before and breathing life into it," he said.

How, exactly, does someone land on the shoeshine business for his next entrepreneurial venture?

The idea came to him when he was traveling the nation and the world promoting his last venture, a bar-room arm-wrestling machine that he marketed in all 50 states and seven other countries. In every airport, he'd get his shoes shined at a dull, traditional shoeshine stand.

"What if someone with marketing experience got ahold of the shoeshine business?" he asked himself.

Unusual Goal

At the time, his hobby was restoring old horse-drawn carriages and he

hit on the idea of combining the two. His goal, he said, was "to build very unusual, attention-getting shoeshine stands."

"Maybe someone would be walking by and wasn't planning to get a shoeshine, but they'd see the stand and say, 'I have to sit in that,'" he said.

Although he wouldn't disclose financial figures, Barringer said he is "extremely pleased" with business so far. "The numbers are coming out real well," he said.

He predicts the shoeshine stands will far outdo the arm-wrestling machine. "I see the market in this as just being incredible. . . . It'll be 10 times larger in half the time," he said.

Promotional Success

Barringer is a promotion missionary. Business success is "10 percent having the proper product and 90 percent marketing and promotion," he said.

Much of the success of the Cactus Jack Shoe Shine Co. will depend on

how well the Cactus Jack character is promoted, he said. That's why Barringer parades around in all-black cowboy garb, reciting a several-verse poem he wrote and twirling a shoe brush like a pistol.

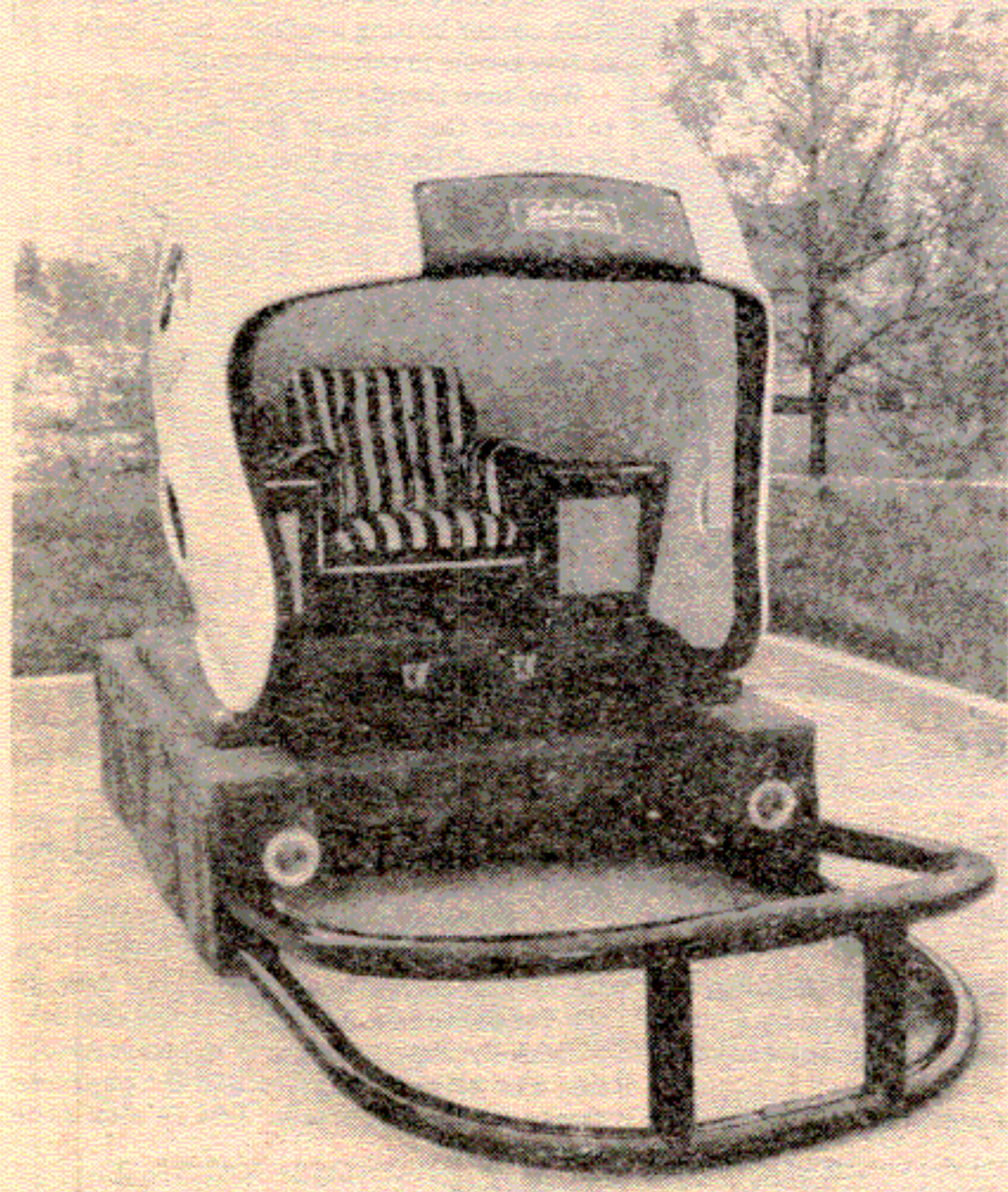
In his holster he carries the shoe brush, shoe polish and rags. He wears a cactus bolo tie, a big black cowboy hat, a "Cactus Jack" belt buckle and silver-tipped cowboy boots.

Barringer hopes to install high-tech stereo systems in the shoeshine stands. Cassette tapes could play a mixture of music and commercials. He also wants to build display shelves into some of the stands that would sell items such as fashion watches.

"The shine is the traffic builder to do other things," he said.

Barringer expects to stick with the shoeshine business for three to five years. Then, he said, he hopes to sell it or turn it over to new management.

"I always have to be doing something creative, something that can't be done," Barringer said.



Cactus Jack's shoeshine helmets can be customized with a favorite team.