



Eileen Huntington
Co-founder, Huntington Learning Centers

IN 1977, Eileen Huntington was working as a high-school teacher. She was troubled when she saw students struggling, in need of more structure and assistance in reading and math. At the time, there was no real tutoring industry. She and her husband, Raymond, who was working for AT&T, decided to create a business that would help children learn, and they tested the idea in the summer so she could decide whether to quit her job at New Jersey's Bound Brook High School.

"There was no model to follow. We said, 'What do we have to lose?' Of course, my parents thought I was crazy to give up such a secure job," Huntington recalls.

The couple placed ads in the local newspaper, and people called. The tutoring services kicked off in June, and by summer's end, the results with students and the positive word-of-mouth from parents convinced them that they were on to something. They refined the curricula, focusing on teaching basic skills to help students develop the foundations on which to build their educations.

After seeing their business grow to eight locations, the couple aimed to take Huntington Learning Centers nationwide. But if they maintained control of each location, their resources would likely limit them to opening one to two locations each year, they believed. So they turned to franchising. Today, Oradell, N.J.-based Huntington Learning Centers has 260 U.S. units.

Huntington says her leadership style focuses on positivity and high

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FRANCHISING'S WOMEN TO WATCH

By Gwen Moran

It takes strong leadership to run a franchise network of hundreds or thousands of independent businesses. These executives are up to the task.

expectations. She consistently compliments good work and isn't afraid to retrain people when there are areas that need improvement. She and her husband believe that has been instrumental to their success from the beginning.

"We had a challenge finding really great people," Huntington says. "Once you find those people [the challenge] is working with them and also understanding that you have to change."

Those changes have included embracing technology. Huntington Learning Centers is rolling out a new system for franchisees called the "eCenter," which integrates administrative functions, including scheduling, as well as computerbased curricula. Huntington claims this provides franchisees with a competitive advantage in the industry.

The company has also recently changed its franchise model, cutting overall costs including franchise fees; reducing the size of its stores to bring down real-estate costs; and offering online training so franchisees don't need to travel to the company headquarters in New Jersey. This lets more people have a shot at owning a Huntington Learning Centers franchise. And those franchisees are dedicated and enthusiastic.

"Everybody gets excited about it, because we're not making ribbons," Huntington says. "We're working with children. When a child calls up and says, 'I got on the honor roll for the first time,' you are just over the moon for that."

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