

"We are, we are Cold Stone," chant the employees at the latest US ice cream import to the tune of Queen's "We Will Rock You" as they personalise your very own ice cream experience to order.

Walk into Dubai Festival City's Cold Stone Creamery, choose your ice cream flavour and mix-ins, and then watch as a member of the team prepares a feast in a cone, while they sing and dance for you.

"We actually call our interviews auditions in our training manuals, rather than interviews. We ask potential crew members to sing to us or tell a joke, dance, juggle or maybe do a magic trick," Lee Knowlton, president, international, Cold Stone Creamery tells *Arabian Business*. "We want employees who are naturally comfortable in front of customers and want to have fun, it's part of the culture at Cold Stone Creamery."

Part of the culture and having fun is something Knowlton constantly refers to during our interview, so as I hear yet another tuneless burst of song from behind the counter, I ask him if he would mind giving me an example of what he would do in a Cold Stone audition. Surprisingly, given that entertainment is so embedded in the culture and I have already seen Knowlton behind the counter mixing and serving up ice cream to customers, he laughs and tries to change the subject. When pushed he admits he is a terrible singer, "And I don't know any magic tricks," he adds. He tries to make up for it when the next customer comes in but forgets the lyrics, "Now you've put me on the spot I have forgotten it," he says shyly. Not quite the Cold Stone attitude I expected.

Annoying to some it may be, but it is this entertainment aspect of Cold Stone that differentiates it from its competitors, including Marble Slab, which has already been in the region for nearly two years and also uses the mix-in concept.

A search on the internet reveals just how popular the entertainment has become. YouTube features one Cold Stone employee doing to ice cream what Tom Cruise did to mixers in *Cocktail*, as well as another crew member filming herself at work as her audition to star in the remake of the hit film *Hairspray*. The girl, Nicky Blonsky, is now starring beside John



SWEET SUCCESS Lee Knowlton, president of Stone Cold Creamery, is confident the stores will prove a hit in the Middle East.

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Travolta having won the role with her tape. "I think there are actually three things that set Cold Stone apart from its competitors. Unlike most brands, our ice cream is made fresh in-store, which gives it a smoother texture. So many parlours stock hard-packed ice cream which has been standing there for up to six months or even a year," says Knowlton. "The personalisation aspect is also important, as is the entertainment factor. We do try to hire staff members that have outgoing

personalities," he continues. Last week's store opening may have been the first in the Middle East but Knowlton's assertiveness, coupled with Cold Stone's aggressive marketing strategy, means this is just the tip of the iceberg for the company that has been dubbed the Starbucks of the ice cream world.

"I am not going to say we're as big as Haagen-Dazs but I think the brand certainly has the potential. In Dubai we will have Cold Stone stores in Lamcy Plaza, Arabian Plaza, Dubai Outlet Mall, Atlantis and Stargate and we'll also open in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. We want to open between 30 to 40 stores across the GCC next year." Not bad for a company which just 13 years ago didn't exist.

Founded by Donald and Susan Sutherland in Temple, Arizona, Cold Stone Creamery has grown from a small town brand into a multimillion dollar international company with almost 1500 stores in nine countries. The Sutherlands haven't