



It is the singing that hits you first on nearing the Cold Stone Creamery store in Dubai's Festival City mall. The brightly-uniformed staff are in a group behind the till chanting (slightly off-key) personalised lyrics to the tune of a popular rock song and banging in time on the countertop. Meanwhile, the man I am here to meet, Lee Knowlton, President of holding company Kahala-Cold Stone, taps along on the edge of the table – he, for one, is making the most of the “Cold Stone Experience”.

It is this interactive experience that Knowlton claims stands the company apart from its retail dairy competition and has been responsible for the mass proliferation of the brand's franchise stores. Originally founded in 1988 in Arizona by Donald and Susan Sutherland the brand was originally a ‘mom & pop’ specialist ice cream parlour until 1994, when current CEO Doug Ducey came on board. The first franchise was opened the following year, the 100th five years later, the 500th by 2003 – when Knowlton took up his post – and the 1,000th store in 2005. With the growth continuing exponentially and doubling every other year, 2007 saw the group overseeing 2,250 stores and opening up in the potentially highly lucrative Middle Eastern market this year with an initial investment of US\$8.2m. And the financial growth echoes the brand's global spread; Cold Stone's 2006 turnover was a colossal US\$1.2bn.

“You have to have at least a taste before the



interview so you can understand,” laughs Knowlton, leading me to the counter so that I can watch my selection being prepared. “If you want a second bite, I won't blame you.”

To begin at the beginning; what is it that Knowlton believes will make Cold Stone stand out in what is a crowded market with well-established global brands such as Haagen Dazs and Baskin Robbins already in situ? To the untrained palate surely one premium ice cream is much the same as another, so how does Cold Stone explain and support its prodigious growth rate – and what makes customers want that ‘second bite’?

“It goes back to the founders, Don and Susan. They couldn't find a premium ice cream that was fresh and

