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Art Bartlett 1933 - 2009

Real-Estate Innovator Took Franchising to a New Level

By [STEPHEN MILLER](#)

Art Bartlett wasn't the first to apply to home sales a franchise model more often associated with selling hamburgers, but he was the most successful.

As co-founder of Century 21 Real Estate Corp., Mr. Bartlett, who died Dec. 31 at age 76, sought to make his company "the McDonald's of real estate."

By 1979, when Mr. Bartlett sold his interest in the company, Century 21 had grown to more than 7,000 offices in 50 states and Canada. Today the company's 120,000 gold-jacketed staff sell homes in 67 countries.

"His concept was imitated by everybody, and it became spectacular," says Dave Liniger, chairman of RE/Max International Inc., another big real-estate franchisor.

The son of a Glens Falls, N.Y., truck driver, Mr. Bartlett moved to Long Beach, Calif., in the 1940s to care for a sick relative. After working as a salesman for Campbell Soup Co., he took up real estate. He founded his own agency, then formed Comps Inc., an Orange, Calif.-based firm that was one of the earliest to use computers to track comparable home sales.

In 1971, he teamed with a former employee, Marsh Fisher, to form Century 21. Others had tried real-estate sales franchising, including Red Carpet Corp., another California-based company founded in 1966. But Century 21 became franchising on steroids, growing to 2,600 offices within five years of its founding.

Rather than build up a network from scratch, Mr. Bartlett signed up thousands of independent real-estate brokers across the nation in a process that came to be known as "conversion franchising." To spur growth, he sold regional licenses, and the licensees sold individual franchises. At one point in the mid-1970s, Century 21 was opening over 100 new offices per month.

In exchange for an annual fee and a percentage of sales, Century 21 offered its brokers a range of services from training to purchasing, a referral network, and national advertising, an innovation in residential real estate.

"You can't overstate the challenge of getting this off the ground," says Matt Shay, president of the International Franchise Association in Washington.

"We've lost a true pioneer. He was up there with Ray Kroc of McDonald's and Kemmons Wilson of Holiday Inn."

Century 21 went public in 1978, then was acquired by Trans World Corp. in 1979 in a stock and cash deal valued at \$89 million. Mr. Bartlett sold his shares and retired, but found retirement uncomfortable.

"When you're on a fast track of building a company you can't just turn it off and slow down," Mr. Bartlett told a reporter in 1982. He tried to apply his franchising expertise at Mr. Build, a home-remodeling chain he hoped to take national. But Mr. Build stalled, and Mr. Bartlett turned to real-estate investments.

Mr. Bartlett lived in an exclusive section of Orange County, then built what his family calls his "dream home" overlooking San Diego Bay. He collected classic cars, from Packards and Fords of the 1930s to Corvettes and Thunderbirds of the 1950s.

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