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# Everything but the ants

## This franchise really is a picnic

### At a glance

**Picnic People**

**Franchise Fee:**  
\$25,000 (six-year agreement)

**Initial Investment:**  
\$24,000-\$50,000

**Royalty:** 6 percent

**Ad Fund:** no fund

By: Kelly Jo Mitchell

**T**wenty-four years ago, Lisa Richards decided picnics were business. She formed Picnic People, a catering and special events franchise that helps companies ranging from small businesses to Fortune 500 companies run their corporate picnics and other events.

The idea is to outsource the stress and minimize the time staff would otherwise spend in preparation for a four-hour company event. Simply put, Richards' franchise is the ultimate "wedding-planner" of the picnic-planning industry.

Richards was less focused on schoolwork and more intrigued by the idea of working outside while attending the University of San Diego in the early 1980s. She bought the local business directory and began to pitch the idea of running corporate picnics to potential clients. Without a business card, and no prior history, Richards tested her concept.

"You mean all I have to do is give you a list of things I need, and what I want and you will do the work?" asked Richards' first client in 1984. "If you can make it here in an hour, you got the job."

Now, 25 years later, there are six franchised locations spread across the U.S.

The company progressed in the beginning through word-of-mouth and Richards' self-marketing strategy—calling the human resource departments within companies. Though it costs more to hire a picnic planner, Richards' hook is that it saves time. With a full-time staff of 100 people and anywhere from 50 to 600 seasonal workers, Picnic People has catered more than 8,000 events since it began.

A corporate picnic requires three phases of planning—



**Never one for** being inside, Lisa Richards decided to help businesses run their company picnics. She started only with a telephone and a local business directory.

pre-picnic, the actual day and post-picnic. The beginning is all about promotion, making announcements and online Web flyers for the company Web site and getting people excited.

Preparation depends on the anticipated number of attendees. Richards said she begins planning eight months in advance for larger events hosting 10,000-plus people. She collaborates with her clients to figure out the design, a theme, what props to use and different activities to incorporate.

"We do as much or as little as they ask us to do," said Richards. "Sometimes we are just behind the tables serving food, and other times we are running the karaoke talent show and dunk tanks."

Aside from possible weather conflicts, there is another obstacle to overcome—it is seasonal. Areas like California and Texas have a 10-month picnic season. St. Louis is limited to a five-month period. And Boston's peak season is only three to four months. Richards insisted that it

all works out.

That's because franchisees are typically companies that already operate an existing business, like a catering service, a restaurant or a delivery service. They buy into Picnic People to add a new, seasonal element to their business and offset their own slow periods. So franchisees often already have an industrial kitchen and at least 500 square feet of extra storage space.

Richards said Picnic People has a high client repeat base. Companies usually host three events a year—a company picnic, a holiday party and a sports-related event, and most of the time they come to Picnic People for help.

"I don't think it is any harder than it was the very first day," said Richards. "And now there is more competition to drive the industry. With only one, there is less value. But, we are able to separate ourselves from our competitors." **ET**