

BREAKFAST WITH D CEO

CATHERINE MONSON

CEO, Fastsigns International Inc.

BY JASON HEID

CAFÉ BRAZIL IN ADDISON ISN'T A popular power-breakfast spot. That much is clear as I stand in the empty restaurant at 8 a.m. on a Monday. The lack of customers makes the pop music that's being pumped into the dining room seem disproportionately loud and off-putting. I'm hoping that my breakfast companion turns out to be quite the opposite.

I'm here to meet Catherine Monson of Fastsigns International Inc., and I assume that she chose this spot because it's near the franchise sign and graphics company's corporate headquarters in Carrollton.

When she arrives, we choose a booth along the far wall. I'm not surprised to learn that dining here—or dining anywhere for breakfast—isn't part of her normal morning routine. Usually she chugs down a protein shake at home. "Doesn't that sound horribly boring?" she says as we settle in and take a look at the menu.

The waiter arrives, and Monson orders the vegetarian omelet and a cup of hot tea. "I live a low-carbohydrate lifestyle, so I don't want any bread, any toast, no potatoes, just that beautiful egg and stuff," she tells him.

I ask for the French toast and a glass of orange juice. "I don't live a low-carb lifestyle," I feel the need to explain.

Monson, 53, was recruited to come to North Texas from Southern California to take the top post at Fastsigns in early 2009. Until then, she had spent her career in business-services franchising with the company behind Sir Speedy printing centers, working her way up to become president of the PIP Printing division. Roark Capital, the Atlanta-based private equity firm that owns Fastsigns, asked if she'd be interested in taking over for founder Gary Solomon, who had decided to retire. She asked where the job was, and they told her Dallas.

"Don't take this the wrong way—I don't want you to be offended — but I laughed," she tells me. "I said, 'I would never leave South-



ern California. For Dallas? There's no ocean. It's only hot there." But the recruiter was persuasive, and the opportunity to serve as the ultimate decision-maker proved irresistible.

Unfortunately, it wasn't just the Texas heat that tested Monson during her first year in charge. A fight with sepsis, a serious blood infection, put her in the hospital just as she was supposed to start her new gig. And when she took the reins, the 25-year-old company was beginning to face its most difficult year. Same-store sales fell 17 percent in 2009, with 18 local franchise closures—more than in the previous five years combined.

"I really marshaled the troops. [In the] middle of March, beginning of April 2009, I said, 'Guys, our franchisees are hurting. We need to put to-

gether a concerted effort to help them.' "

Monson spent a lot of time traveling, meeting with franchise owners who run Fastsigns' 530 worldwide locations. Despite the recent economic bumps, she continues to have big goals for growth. The company has identified 300 U.S. markets as perfect for expansion. Monson expects that someday Fastsigns will double its current \$267 million in annual sales worldwide and boast well more than 1,200 stores.

For now, she explains as she finishes her omelet and barely touches the small cup of fruit that accompanied it, Monson is pushing to help franchisees trim costs and increase sales.

I'm pleased to be distracted from the extremely disappointing piece of French toast I've been served—which tastes as though it has been frozen and defrosted before it landed on my plate—by her delightful account of how she ended up buying legendary sales-

man Zig Ziglar's former home in Plano.

Monson speaks in an open, friendly manner, with an energy that helps fill the dining room, which remains empty, except for a pair of young women who wander in and seat themselves in the booth directly next to ours. She clearly has the talent possessed by all great salespeople—the ability to establish a sense of intimacy, however fleeting, that makes you wish her the best in her cause, as it feels in that moment like it's your cause as well.

It's only at the end of our interview, when Monson pleasantly inquires whether she can see my article before it's published, that I retreat from that sense of camaraderie and remember that I am the journalist, she is my subject, and "No, I'm afraid that's not something we do."

No bother, we return quickly to our smiles as we head back out into the harsh Texas sun.

MONSON EXPECTS THAT SOMEDAY FASTSIGNS WILL DOUBLE ITS CURRENT \$267 MILLION IN ANNUAL SALES AND BOAST WELL MORE THAN 1,200 STORES.

Café Brazil	
4930 Belt Line Road, Ste. 100, Addison	
Hot tea	\$1.99
Veggie omelet (no toast)	\$7.59
French toast	\$5.49
Orange juice (small)	\$1.99
Total (including tax and tip)	\$22.30

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CEO

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