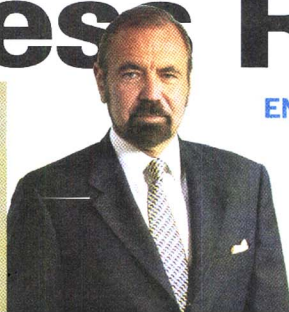


# Business Review



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## Economy Fertilizer

Florida's economic gardening program is getting high marks from businesses.

# Powerful Success

Steve Cooper and Matt Steigenga discovered their recession survival sweet spot in an unlikely place: Batteries.

The pair owns seven Batteries Plus franchise stores on the Gulf Coast, including three in Pinellas County, two in Manatee County and one each in Hillsborough and Sarasota counties. They even recently expanded, opening two stores in the last year, one in Largo and one in Ellenton. The Ellenton store, in north Manatee County, opened Sept. 23.

"We continue to grow," says Cooper. "We are seeing double-digit growth in our more mature stores."

Cooper declines to release specific store revenue figures, only to say three of the stores reach or surpass the chain's nationwide average, which is about \$1 million a year in sales.

One key to the growth, says Steigenga, is the franchise's ability to capitalize on consumers' newfound frugal habits. For example, people are replacing a battery instead of buying new tools or household products. Cost-conscious customers have also been buying cell phone batteries in higher volume, Steigenga says.

Batteries Plus was founded in 1988 in Green Bay, Wis. The chain has since grown to 420 stores in 44 states that sell more than 32,000 types of batteries. The list ranges from tiny hearing aid batteries to super-sized generator batteries.

Cooper and Steigenga, meanwhile, are confident their newest store will eventually match the success of their first one. They believe they scored a great location, just outside the Ellenton outlet mall. They also got a break on rent, given the dearth of new retail tenants. Cooper hasn't ruled out further expansion, possibly to Port Charlotte or Venice someday. The franchise startup costs

Even after 13 years and seven stores, two franchised-based business partners still learn on the job. Some lessons are even relearned.



Steve Cooper, left, and Matt Steigenga opened their first Batteries Plus store in 1997 in Bradenton. They now run seven Batteries Plus stores on the Gulf Coast.

are relatively economical, says Cooper. Costs include a \$37,500 entry fee, according to Batteries Plus.

Still, Cooper and Steigenga owe their success to more than lots of batteries and a low entry fee. The pair — Steigenga is married to Cooper's sister — has learned on the job since they opened their first Batteries Plus in Bradenton in 1997. They moved

to the region with their wives after they sold a family-run office products business in the Milwaukee area.

One lesson the partners have repeatedly learned is to constantly cultivate a work environment where employees want to be. That's especially true in their business, since they seek people who are experts in a variety of batteries, not just stock boys

and cashiers. Says Steigenga: "The challenge for us is we really have to get people who know what we do."

Another lesson Cooper and Steigenga learned early on is that in franchising it's a good idea to let the parent company do the big-picture things, like marketing and branding. That provides the entrepreneurs time to focus on the stores.

For example, Steigenga recalls the time several years ago when he spent a lot of time and money designing and redesigning uniform shirts. He soon figured out the ones the company supplied were better and cost less. "When you are one guy running one store you think you have to do it all," Steigenga says. "But you don't."

— Mark Gordon