

Flame

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL FRANCHISEE ASSOCIATION, INC.
www.nfabk.org

NFA National Franchisee Association
2026 Issue 1

HONORING
Mitch Laird

Former chair of NFA, Mitch Laird, lived a life filled with love, dedication and passion for business.

PAGE 10

A YEAR AFTER C.A.R.E.

An update on BURGER KING's C.A.R.E. Initiative after one year of new campaigns, refined operations and amplified connection from the fans to the brand.

PAGE 30



Dancing in the Rain:

Why 2026 Demands Bold Franchise Leadership

The year 2026 isn't waiting for anyone to catch up. If you're a franchise owner hoping things will "get back to normal," I have uncomfortable news: normal isn't coming back. What we're experiencing isn't a temporary storm, it's a fundamental shift in how business works.

After decades of studying exponential change and working with organizations worldwide, I can tell you this: the franchise owners who will thrive aren't the ones hiding from the rain. They're the ones learning to dance in it.

THE NEW RULES OF THE GAME

Three massive forces are reshaping the franchise landscape right now.

The first is regulatory change. The American Franchise Act has redrawn the lines between franchisors and franchisees, particularly around employment. Corporate headquarters used to provide deep HR support, helping with hiring, wages, and personnel management. Not anymore. To avoid legal liability, franchisors are stepping back from these functions. That means you, the franchise owner, are now running your own ship when it comes to managing your team.

The second force is capital. The era of cheap money is definitively over. With interest rates hovering around 4%, every expansion decision carries more weight. The days of borrowing freely to grow at all costs have ended. Today's lenders want to see profitability and cash flow, not just ambitious growth projections. Meanwhile, private equity firms are aggressively buying up franchise territories, creating "super-franchisees" with hundreds of locations and deep pockets for technology investments.

The third force is psychological. Franchise owners are exhausted. Decision fatigue has reached epidemic levels. Every day brings new questions: Should I invest in AI? Raise prices? Hire now or wait? The constant pressure to make high-stakes choices without clear answers is wearing people down. And when leaders get overwhelmed, they often freeze, what I call "aggressive indecision." They wait for clarity that never arrives.



by JIM **CARROLL**

Where the growth actually is

Despite these headwinds, enormous opportunities exist for those willing to see them. The skilled trades are experiencing a renaissance I call "Blue Collar 2.0." Decades of pushing everyone toward four-year degrees created a massive shortage of plumbers, electricians, and HVAC technicians. Now these trades offer high margins and growing demand. The twist? Many new franchise owners in this space aren't tradespeople themselves, they're corporate refugees who manage through systems and KPIs while hiring licensed technicians to do the actual work.

Artificial intelligence isn't replacing franchise workers, it's making them more effective. Early adopters are seeing 40% reductions in administrative workload. AI handles the boring stuff: scheduling, inventory management, customer follow-ups. This frees your team to focus on what matters most, the human connection with customers. And here's the counterintuitive part: as AI-generated content floods the internet, consumers increasingly value authentic human interaction. The local franchise owner who's visible in the community and whose staff offers genuine service has a competitive advantage that algorithms can't replicate.

Climate volatility has created a booming market in disaster restoration and resilience services, projected to approach $20 billion in 2026. Smart operators aren't just chasing storms anymore, they're securing priority response contracts with homeowner associations and commercial landlords, locking in revenue before disasters even strike.

THE ACTION ANTIDOTE

When organizations face this kind of volatility, they often cycle through what I call the stages of economic grief: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, hopefully, acceptance and action. The franchise owners succeeding in 2026 are those who've moved quickly through these stages. They've stopped arguing about

whether the new regulations are fair or waiting for interest rates to drop. They've accepted the current reality as the rules of the game and started playing to win.

Here's what I tell every leader I work with: action is the antidote to anxiety. Clarity doesn't arrive on a golden platter.

Clarity is created through action. Instead of trying to solve your entire year's strategy at once, break the paralysis with what I call "Action Sprints," 30-day experiments that generate real data.

Wondering if TikTok marketing works for your plumbing franchise? Spend $500 and 30 days testing it. The result, win or lose, provides the clarity you were waiting for. Every failed experiment isn't a loss; it's "experiential capital." You're building knowledge your competitors lack because they're still debating instead of doing.

Speed matters enormously. The recovery doesn't reward the cautious; it rewards the fast. If you have an open position, don't wait for the perfect candidate. Hire for potential and train for skill using your AI-enhanced training tools. While competitors pull back on marketing to save cash, the bold leader doubles down to capture market share at lower customer acquisition costs. History consistently shows that those who market through the storm own the sunshine.

EMBRACING AMBIGUITY

The final skill every franchise leader needs in 2026 is ambiguity tolerance. The linear, predictable path is gone. You won't know exactly how new regulations will be enforced next month. You won't know if interest rates will tick up or down. And that's okay.

Build a culture where pivoting isn't seen as a failure of planning but as a feature of your operating system. The ability to shift resources quickly, from one marketing channel to another, from new installations to repair services, is what separates resilient franchises from fragile ones.

As I often say: we don't know exactly where we're going, but we're making great time.

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE BOLD

The storm of 2026 isn't going to blow over. Regulatory change, capital constraints, and technological disruption are the environment in which we now live and work. But for franchise owners willing to dance in the rain, the opportunities are immense.

Stop waiting for rates to drop or regulations to loosen. Create your own clarity through action. Build your experiential capital by testing new technologies and models today. Adopt the mindset that volatility is an advantage. While your competitors remain frozen in shock and denial, you have the opportunity to race ahead, capture market share, and build a business that doesn't just survive disruption, it grows stronger because of it.

The future doesn't belong to those who wait for the storm to pass. It belongs to those who learn to dance in the rain. ■

Futurist **JIM CARROLL***'s latest book, Dancing in the Rain: How Bold Leaders Grow Stronger in Stormy Times, provides a path forward for leaders eager to escape a world of relentless volatility. Learn more at dancing.jimcarroll.com*

