

PAST LIVES

From Food Science to Pool Service: Kirk Bradley of On-Time Pool Service Credits His Background in Chemistry and Marketing for Industry Success

Before he founded one of Sarasota, Fla.'s leading pool-service firms, Kirk Bradley sported a lab coat and concocted new recipes as a food scientist. His career in food spanned more than a decade before he decided to be his own boss at On-Time Pool Service. By [Kirk Bradley](#), [Nate Traylor](#)



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The reason I'm a successful pool professional today is because I used to work in the food manufacturing industry.

Let me explain. Growing up, I had two major interests: Food and science. Fortunately, I didn't have to make the agonizing decision between becoming a chef or a scientist because I discovered the perfect intersection of both professions: Food science.

Food science applies chemistry, physics, engineering and microbiology to food manufacturing. I earned my bachelor's and master's degrees from Penn State University and the University of Georgia, respectively, and landed my first job heading up the orange juice division of Thomas J. Lipton Co., the giant food conglomerate known for its teas and soups. This was the late 1980s, when fiber was all the rage. To capitalize on the movement, I was tasked with creating fiber-enhanced OJ. (It didn't taste good.)

As my career progressed, I graduated from the lab and into technical sales and marketing at another large food corporation, which required that I relocate from New Jersey to Sarasota, Fla. In that role, I frequently traveled from Mexico south to Argentina as the company's liaison to Latin America. The company then moved me to Chicago, where I got involved in market development, helping fast-food giants create new products with our ingredients. We seasoned KFC's coleslaw and gave McDonald's sausage patties a kick with our spices. Eventually, the company allowed its sales department to work remotely from home offices. At that point, I decided that my home office should be in Sarasota. My family and I moved back to the Sunshine State in 2000.

A taste for a new business

Several years later, the company decided to consolidate its workforce in Indiana. Not wanting to move back to the cold North, we decided to stay put.

I couldn't find a suitable job in the food industry, especially one that paid me the money I was used to earning.

Months went by. Our reserves were dwindling. Out of sheer curiosity (and a bit of desperation), I decided to ride along with a friend of mine who was in pool service. That

was the eureka moment: Here was a profession that involved chemistry, sales and marketing — everything that I excelled at in my food career.

I bought an old Dodge pickup and pool supplies and began the hard work of finding customers for my new business: On-Time Pool Service, Inc., serving the greater Sarasota area.

Drawing upon my marketing experience selling food additives, I devised a couple of clever tactics. Rather than offer the first month's service free, as so many firms do, I decided to stand out from the pack with a different kind of incentive. After three months' service, I would give customers a \$129 gift card, good for an auto detailing or spa visit.

And I got these gift cards for a deal. Business owners agreed to sell them for only \$50, because I'd be bringing them more potential clients.

I was a big believer in direct mail at the time. To ensure my generous offer wasn't going to get lost in the junk mail, my promotion was delivered in a wedding envelope. That way, homeowners would assume they were getting an invitation.

Another thing that separated me from the pack? My appearance. This, too, was carried over from my food career. Even when I was working in the lab, I wore a lab coat over a suit and tie. As a pool pro, I was well groomed, wore a uniform and kept my truck tidy.

Business steadily grew.

By the end of my first full year, I had 83 customers. Four years later, I was cleaning 155 pools.

Today, On-Time Pool Service has 600 accounts, making it one of the largest service providers in Sarasota.

I'm proud of the distinctions I've earned, especially being recognized as a Service Professional of the Year by the Florida Swimming Pool Association.

As strange as it may sound, I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for all the experience I gained making corn-dog coatings, experimenting with spices and flavoring Ritz crackers.

Speaking of which, the next time you bite into that crisp, multilayered biscuit, consider all the hard work that went into crafting that cracker.

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Nate Traylor joined Hanley Wood in 2013 as a senior editor of *Pool & Spa News* and *Aquatics International*. He's written about [Elvis Presley's pool](#), [underwater hockey](#) and how [skateboarders may be the pool industry's last best hope](#). He lives in Los Angeles. Follow him on Twitter [@n8traylor](#).