

GREATER NEW YORK

METRO MONEY | By Anne Kadet

Chasing His Delivery Empire Dream



Last December, Steve Evangelista took a gamble and paid \$59,000 for a

beverage-delivery route. Contents: One used, refrigerated box truck and the exclusive right to sell Coca-Cola's Simply Beverages line, including orange juice and lemonade, to stores in five Queens ZIP Codes.

It's a big change from the desk job he left behind. "I've lost 30 pounds since I started," he says.

Unknown to most New Yorkers, most of the people delivering snacks and drinks to bodegas around town aren't working for the food makers. They're independent business owners who work as grocery middlemen.

In a typical example, a route owner might buy 100 cases of ice tea from a regional wholesaler for 75 cents a bottle and resell them to groceries for \$1. Retail customers would pay about \$2 a bottle.

It starts with buying a truck route. Most routes include dozens of established accounts. But Mr. Evangelista, who is 39 years old and engaged to be married, chose to buy a new route. It's riskier but cheaper, and offers more upside. Each new store he adds increases both his weekly profit and the value of his route.

"I wanted to bet on myself," he says.

Mr. Evangelista spent the winter walking the streets of Queens, asking bodegas and pizzerias to stock his beverage lines, which also include Minute Maid and Odwalla. Now, he says he has nearly 60 regular accounts; his take-home averages \$900 to \$1,000 a week.

He's hoping to triple the business on his route. Last week, he surveyed the soda coolers at a Latino bodega in



SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)

Steve Evangelista paid \$59,000 for a Queens beverage-delivery route. Recently, he made a delivery, above, and reviewed orders.

Sunnyside. The Simply drinks weren't moving, the owner reported. "Think we could move it into another slot?" asks Mr. Evangelista. "Slip it into the juice cooler, or maybe here by the eggs?"

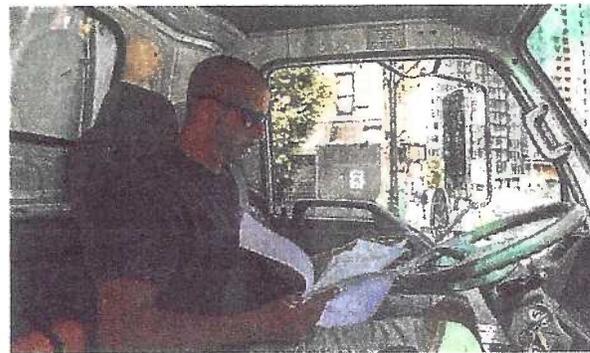
He offers to come back and reorganize the display. He also introduces a new bottle size: "32 ounces. It's a new package. It's really cool!"

His enthusiasm pays off—the shopkeeper places a big order. "Eighteen cases!" Mr. Evangelista exclaims, leaving the store. "That's awesome!"

Mr. Evangelista, who plays the sax and bass guitar, majored in music education and performance at Five Towns College on Long Island. He had planned to teach music, but things worked out for the best, he says.

"Sales are addictive," he notes. "You get one sale and then you don't stop."

There are about 7,500 truck routes in the New York metro



area, estimates Kenneth Sussman, owner and president of Route Brokers. He and his team sell about 150 routes a year.

The average truck route costs about \$150,000, says Mr. Sussman. A Pepsi route in Queens netting \$1,600 a week just hit the market for \$439,000, he says. An Utz snack route netting \$1,300 a week is available for \$124,000.

Routes typically sell for

two to four times their annual net, says Mr. Sussman. Routes featuring big brands such as Boar's Head and Tropicana fetch a higher multiple, as do routes with low mileage and a shorter work week.

It's an ideal small business for an outgoing, "ordinary guy," says Mr. Sussman. "But if you don't like being outside, if you don't like to work hard, this is not the right business."

I'll say. When I meet Mr.

Evangelista again later in the week, he's sweating through his logo shirt.

"Going crazy," he says. "When I deliver, I'm frantic!" Thanks to the week's sales push, it's his biggest delivery day ever: 335 cases.

He can manage about four stops an hour. It takes forever to assemble the orders on his tightly packed truck. "Raspberry, one fruit punch," he mutters. "Where are you, cranberry?"

He's working 80 hours a week. But the first year typically is the toughest. Soon he can hire help, then buy another route. And then who knows? Some of the area's largest distribution outfits started as one-man routes.

"The goal is for me to be sitting at the diner while my salesman and driver are out," he says, "and we're talking about my empire!"

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