

POWER PLAYERS

FRANCHISING'S HEAVY HITTERS

CINDY WATSON AND DAN PACE

Anyone who has attended an IFPG event likely knows Cindy Watson and Dan Pace. This dynamic and gracious couple is known for their funding expertise, passion for helping others and willingness to share their knowledge. They're also known for their beloved Yorkies (right), who are honorary members of the IFPG family.

Together, they run First Financial, a company they founded 27 years ago with a mission to simplify the funding process for aspiring entrepreneurs. "We started small, handling equipment leases for the fitness industry," Watson explains. "Over the years, we've grown into SBA financing experts, helping franchisees secure the capital they need to turn their dreams into reality."

First Financial offers a range of funding solutions and a system that makes the process as smooth as possible. "Our goal is to remove the stress from financing so our clients can focus on what matters —

building their business," Cindy says.

As the business grew, Pace and Watson brought their nephews, Mike Allen and Tim Fitzpatrick, on board to contribute their expertise and take on key leadership positions. "Mike has nearly 20 years of experience in accounting and excels at cash flow analysis and packaging large loans," Pace explains. "Tim, with his 25 years at JPMorgan Chase, brings leadership and innovation that have taken us to the next level. Together, they've helped First Financial grow in ways we never imagined."



CLIENT FOCUS

The couple's passion for helping clients has driven their success. "This is one of the biggest decisions of their lives," Watson says. "It impacts their finances, future and even relationships. We're here to guide them every step of the way, to coach and advocate for them. If we can take the worry out of financing, they can focus on being successful."

With over 700 five-star Google reviews, First Financial's impact is clear. "One client told us they'd been turned down by several banks, but we made their dream possible," Watson recalls.

Her advice to franchise consultants is simple: "If you're not introducing First Financial to your clients, you're missing out. We're here to help you and your clients succeed."

—Jill Abrahamsen



At the 2024 IFPG Retreat, Watson and Pace hosted a raffle and awarded prizes to several lucky attendees.



“ Our goal is to remove the stress from financing.”



First Financial is truly a family affair, with the leadership team including Watson and Pace's nephews: Tim Fitzpatrick, who serves as CEO (far left), and Mike Allen, the CFO (right).

Q&A

Q: WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP MEAN TO YOU?

A: Empowering a team to use their abilities to excel in all areas of our business. Whether it's relationship building, providing in-depth knowledge of the SBA loan process, client communication, or simply delivering exceptional customer service, I want the team to have the freedom and support to be the best at what they do.

Q: WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE MANTRA OR MOTTO?

A: "Only as good as the last loan funded"

Q: WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST CAREER ACCOMPLISHMENT?

A: While we are obviously very proud of what we have built, we're not sure we can call out a single career accomplishment that stands far-and-away above the rest. If we had to name one thing it would be changing the perception of what an SBA loan means to our clients. Most don't understand it isn't something to be loathed but rather it should be viewed as something that can enable a life-altering pursuit.

Q: WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT FRANCHISING?

A: THE PEOPLE!!!

WHO DO YOU ADMIRE IN FRANCHISING?

A: Brandon Haire, formerly with Neighborly and now at Princeton Equity Group, challenged the status quo of SBA financing. He insisted that the SBA needed to become more efficient and process loans faster than was typical at the time, warning that franchising would have no choice but to seek alternative financing solutions. He said a franchisor cannot afford to wait 60 to 120 days for funding for their clients and if we wanted to be a serious player, we had to find a better and faster way, period.

He advocated for leveraging knowledge, thinking outside the box, and rejecting the norm. His determination brought First Financial to the table at Dwyer Group, now known as Neighborly, where the team focused on creating systems and practices to deliver faster, more efficient financing solutions.