

# **BANNER PILOTS GET A LIFT; AFTER LOSING BUSINESS DUE TO ANTITERROR RULES, FIRMS DRAW NATIONAL ADVERTISERS**

*7/30/2005 by Peter J. Howe, Globe Staff*

BEVERLY - For a heart-stopping moment, it looks certain that Steve LeBel and his wobbling, weather-beaten airplane are about to slam into the tall grass at the end of the runway.

But then, barely 6 feet off the ground, LeBel banks the 1959 Piper Pawnee upward. A cord flapping off the tail of the one-seater propeller plane snaps taut. And a few seconds later, a banner the breadth of a two-story house has been hooked by LeBel's plane and whips in the breeze, inviting anyone who wants a "1 percent mortgage" to call a toll-free number.

This may be the age of the Internet banner ad. But the old-fashioned banner ad long a fixture of summer weekends at New England beaches is drawing some new attention from advertisers looking to break through marketing clutter, especially national brands that typically focus on television and mass-media publications.

For pilots like LeBel, restrictions on flying near professional sports venues imposed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks have severely crimped their overall volume of business.

But a big trend that's helped them is the growing interest in banner ads from deep-pocketed regional and national brands, not just local clam shacks and night clubs commissioning the occasional sign.

"Two-for-one lobster specials are dying," said Michael Arnold, whose Arnold Aerial Advertising Inc. agency in New York places banner flights with a network of 300 pilots up and down the East Coast. "The business is absolutely shifting toward the corporate big boys."

Aerial advertising remains a small enough niche that reliable overall spending numbers are hard to come by.

Arnold estimates that in the last decade, his work has flipped from a 75/25 local/national split to 75 percent national brands now.

At a typical rate of about \$600 per flight-hour or \$1,500 for a three-hour tow, plus the \$1,000-plus cost of a banner, big advertisers have found aerial advertising is a very cheap and very eye-catching option for keeping their brands in front of millions of people.

Byron Hoover, marketing director for Jose Cuervo tequila, whose banners are frequently seen over Cape Cod and North Shore beaches, said, "With aerial, we are not competing with all of the clutter of the more traditional mediums. We know the consumers will see it."

Next month, Comcast Corp., the cable television and high-speed Internet service provider, plans for the third year in a row to hire a plane to fly a "Get Comcast cable" message over Boston-area colleges and universities as students return to campus.

Comcast spokeswoman Shawn Feddeman said the once-a-year use of aerial is only "one aspect of a larger effort we use to reach out to our customers." But, she said, "Anecdotally, we've heard from our customers that the banners are a big hit."

For the roughly two dozen New England banner pilots, their growing business with national advertisers is a rare bright spot in a business that, in the past four years, has gone from business to a labor of love.

A year after the 2001 terrorist attacks, owners of major-league football and baseball stadiums lobbied Congress to ban airplanes trailing banner ads from flying within 3 miles horizontally or 3,000 feet vertically. The ban lasts from an hour before game time until an hour after.

Losing the business of pulling ads around 80 Red Sox home games at Fenway Park or a half-dozen Patriots games at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough has been economically devastating for many.

Harry Nikitas, a Fitchburg landlord who also flies as Aerial Super Signs there, estimated his banner business plunged 80 percent in 2002 and 2003 before rebounding slightly since.

"We're losing \$50,000 a year," said Murray Randall, owner of Aero Ads, which he runs in Berkley as an adjunct to working as a nuclear power plant consulting engineer. For LeBel, the post-Sept. 11 curbs turned his Ads In Flight from a full-time business into a part-time job. LeBel wound up taking a weekday job writing mortgage loans. The silver lining has been that the mortgage banner he tows many weekends helps generate sales leads.

What irks banner pilots is how political clout, not homeland security, seems to have driven the restriction. Because a determined terrorist at the controls of a banner flight could still fly through the 3-mile restriction zone in barely a minute, or drop a chemical or biological weapon from 3,000 feet, pilots argue that the ban doesn't really protect anyone.

Rather, they say, it only ensures that no one at Fenway or Gillette Stadium can read their banners, which eliminates competition and increases profits for in-stadium advertising.

"We can't go over a 50,000-person Red Sox game, but we can fly over 500,000 people on the Esplanade," Nikitas scoffed. "The sports owners had been trying to do this for years. They used the terrorism to get us out of there."

But Ann Davis, a spokeswoman for the Transportation Security Administration, which enforces the ban with the Federal Aviation Administration, said "the decision is strictly security driven" and required by Congress.

"Any large gathering could be construed as a target," Davis said, but the presence of live television at sporting events could make them "more of an interesting target" for terrorists.

For all the financial headaches he's suffered from losing his former "bread and butter jobs" flying over Red Sox and Patriots games, LeBel still can't imagine ending his 17-year banner-flying career.

The airborne-rodeo maneuver for lassoing the banner isn't just an adrenaline rush for pilots like LeBel. It's the only way to get a banner aloft.

Banners create so much drag a plane could never get off the ground pulling it from a dead start, but needs the 50 or 60-mile-per-head start.

"We barely make a profit in this business, let alone a week's pay," LeBel said, back on the ground after dropping a banner to the airstrip on a recent Saturday.

But then he smiles: "It's still fun enough to do, and people like it. If you see a banner flying in the sky, you can't not look at it."