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# Basics Track: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions\*

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\*Note: This paper merely reflects minor updates to the paper of the same title from the 2024 IFA 57<sup>th</sup> Annual Legal Symposium, Kendal Tyre, Tiffany McMillan-McWaters, Grant Marcks, *Basics: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions*, 2023 IFA Legal Symposium, JoyAnn Kenny-Charlton, Farheen Ibrahim, and Jimmy Veazey, *Basics: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions*, IFA 56th Annual Legal Symposium (2023), 2022 IFA Legal Symposium, Breton H. Permesly, Lizzy Westrope, and Allison Scaduto, *Basics Track: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions*, IFA 55th Annual Legal Symposium (2022) and the 2021 IFA Legal Symposium, Michael R. Daigle, Lucie Guyot, and Carl Hurwitz, *Basics: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions*, IFA 54th Annual Legal Symposium (2021).

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Exhibit A: Sample Franchise Due Diligence Checklist

Exhibit B: Sample Franchise Representations and Warranties

Exhibit C: Sample Virtual Data Room Organization Chart

ESG Supplement

A. Introduction. This paper will focus on the sale and acquisition of franchise systems, whether through an asset sale or through an acquisition of the ownership interest of the franchisor and its affiliated entities. This paper covers the entire process—from the preparatory steps franchise companies should take to “get their house in order” to post-closing onboarding and franchise relations issues. It includes an overview of the deal process: the metrics investment bankers and sophisticated buyers use to assess valuation; the due diligence process; purchase agreement negotiations, including key components of the agreement and what the buyer and seller can expect; franchise disclosure and sales compliance considerations during the pre-acquisition and post-acquisition phases; as well as, issues related to post-closing onboarding and franchisee relations. For additional information on this topic, there have been several IFA articles and presentations during the past several years,<sup>1</sup> and they have been excellent sources in developing this paper.

B. Preparing to Sell a Franchise Company. The heightened interest in the market regarding the franchise sector has sparked interest in selling. This Section highlights the proactive steps the seller can take to position the brand for acquisition, improve the franchise system’s purchase price, minimize the strains of populating the due diligence data room, simplify the time-consuming schedule preparation process, and minimize the escrow or holdback requirements in the purchase agreement.

1. Assess the Franchise Agreements.<sup>2</sup> The seller’s franchise agreements are contract rights that often represent, along with its trademarks, the franchise company’s most valuable assets. Savvy buyers will review the franchise agreements in depth to determine the quality and reliability of the royalty stream they are purchasing. To prepare for this review, a seller should track the various versions of the franchise agreements in use in the system and make note of any significant variations among them. The seller should create a log of each version of the franchise agreement, noting key changes among versions, especially in royalty and other fees and rights granted or reserved.

In addition, legal counsel should review whether the franchise agreements give the franchisor flexibility in responding to dynamic changes in the marketplace. Can the franchisor update the system, add new product or service lines, change suppliers, and add products or services that could not have been anticipated when the franchise system was first developed? Can the franchisor add similar or identical products or services as their franchisees under a different brand or are there limitations? Does the franchisor have a right of first refusal? Can the franchisor

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<sup>1</sup> See Sandra Bodeau and Meg Montague, *Basics: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions*, in IFA 49TH ANNUAL LEGAL SYMPOSIUM, (2016); Gaylen Knack, Grayson Brown, and Jeremy Holland, *Looking Under the Hood: Conducting Due Diligence in Franchise Transactions*, in IFA 47TH ANNUAL LEGAL SYMPOSIUM, W14 (2014); P. Thao Le, Reeves McGee, and Breton Permesly, *Basics: Franchise-Related Mergers and Acquisitions*; in IFA 47TH ANNUAL LEGAL SYMPOSIUM (2014); Mark Kirsch, Scott Pressley, and Patrick Walls, *A Seller’s Guide to Preparing to Sell the Franchise System*, in IFA 42ND ANNUAL LEGAL SYMPOSIUM (2009); Victoria Blackwell and Kevin P. Hein, *The Fundamentals of an M & A Transaction in a Franchise System*, in ABA 33RD ANNUAL FORUM ON FRANCHISING, Tab W18 (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Bodeau, John Brower, and Gaylen Knack, *Selling the Franchise System: Laying the Legal Groundwork to Optimize Value*, FRANCHISING WORLD, April 2013 at 66-68.

change the trademark? If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” then the franchisor will need to consider modifying its franchise agreement form going forward and addressing these concerns under its existing franchise agreements. Are there franchise agreements where the territory granted is too large, creating an impediment to future expansion? If so, the franchisor may want to negotiate with the franchisee to reduce or split up the territory.

As franchises come up for renewal, if permitted under the existing franchise agreements, the franchisor should require that the franchisees renew on the franchisor’s then-current form of franchise agreement. If older versions are not soon up for renewal and have little flexibility, lower fee structures, or other troublesome provisions or omissions, the franchisor should consider embarking on an incentive program (e.g., a royalty reduction for a limited time frame, reduced initial franchisee fee for expansion) to encourage franchisees to enter into the newest version of the franchise agreement. These steps bring flexibility and standardization to the system and make the franchisor more attractive as an acquisition target.

2. Secure Intellectual Property Rights.<sup>3</sup> Buyers will closely scrutinize the strength of the seller’s trademark and other intellectual property rights in assessing valuation and determining whether to proceed with the merger or acquisition transaction. Is the trademark entitled to a high degree of protection? Is the franchisor able to prevent competitors from adopting confusingly similar marks in a franchisee’s market? Trademarks that are not federally registered or are weak, whether by their nature or due to the lack of policing by the franchisor-seller, will, in most cases, negatively impact valuation.

In preparing for a potential transaction (and as a measure of good housekeeping), the seller should audit its intellectual property. In certain cases, the trademarks and other intellectual property are owned by an affiliate of the franchisor and licensed to the franchisor for use in connection with developing, administering, and expanding the franchise system. Franchisors should ensure the proper agreements and documentation memorializing ownership and licensing (including sublicensing) arrangements, such as trademark assignments and trademark license agreements, are properly in place. Further, seller may need to update its records with the United States Patent and Trademark Office (“USPTO”) to record any events that may have transpired in its intellectual property history. To the extent that the seller has international filings and/or registrations, the same assessment should be undertaken with respect to the relevant jurisdictions.

The seller should create a list of all intellectual property it uses or licenses and evaluate the strength, validity, and status of its intellectual property, including trade secrets and intellectual property subject to registration in various jurisdictions. The

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 66.

seller should determine if there are any infringement or enforcement concerns and then establish a game plan to address those concerns.

With respect to infringement activity, whether the franchisor follows up with cease-and-desist letters or takes a more conciliatory approach with a third-party who may hold conflicting rights to the trademark, the franchisor should attempt to resolve as many of these conflicts as possible before going to market. A franchisor should document (and be prepared to share as part of the deal process) any action taken to protect its trademarks.

3. Resolve Litigation and Arbitration Matters; Reduce Potential Claims.<sup>4</sup> Significant ongoing or threatened litigation or arbitration can cast a cloud over the value of a company. Because a buyer often evaluates such litigation (or arbitration) on a worst-case basis, ongoing proceedings or threats against the franchisor can disproportionately reduce the valuation given to the franchise system. Moreover, a buyer may insist on being indemnified for any liability that arises out of the proceeding in the purchase agreement, and such liability may be outside of any liability cap or basket. When this occurs, the seller will be put in the undesirable position of having significant liability exposure post-closing, often without the ability to fully control the litigation. Because of these factors, a seller who is a party to significant litigation/arbitration against it should maximize efforts to get the matters resolved before embarking on the sale of its business.

Sellers should take steps to reduce the risk of future lawsuits from franchisees and other third parties. Implementing internal dispute resolution measures and mediation, as a first step, provides sellers with the opportunity to address and resolve claims before they advance to litigation or arbitration. Franchisors should consider including these dispute resolution measures and a limitation of claims provision in their franchise agreements, requiring the franchisees to raise a dispute within a designated time period from the date the particular claim arises. While some states limit the enforceability of such provisions, they serve as a measure to flesh-out and resolve disputes early in the process, rather than allowing a party to hold a claim in its pocket for the duration of the statutory limitation of claims period. Sellers should also consider establishing a proactive, comprehensive release program. A release of liability signed by a franchisee for the benefit of the franchisor frees the franchisor from most franchisee claims for damages resulting from a breach of the franchisor's duties and from other claims the franchisee may pursue against the franchisor. Eliminating potential claims at every opportunity will reduce buyer concerns about exposure to franchisee claims and limit the seller's exposure if the seller provides indemnification against such claims in the purchase agreement. One note of caution, however—franchise laws in some jurisdictions prohibit the release of claims under those laws. Most notably, states that have promulgated franchise disclosure and registration laws will often prohibit franchisors from releasing franchisors from any claims that a franchisee may have

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 67.

in connection with a franchisor's offer and sale of a franchise without furnishing the proper disclosure and/or filing the requisite registration filing.

As is emphasized in greater detail below, when preparing for or conducting an international transaction, it is essential to obtain the advice of local counsel to help determine the risks inherent in the proposed transaction and determine what can and cannot be done to minimize those risks.

4. Purchase and Supply Arrangements. Purchase and supply arrangements can sometimes be foundational to the success of a franchise system, as they can significantly impact franchisee profitability and overall system efficiency. The seller should audit existing supply and distribution agreements to assess terms related to assignability, change of control, term and renewal provisions, minimum purchase requirements, and rebate or commission structures. The audit should also examine any informal arrangements that may exist outside formal contracts, and assess what further action should be taken to shore up same.
5. Shore up the Sales Process.<sup>5</sup> Developing and implementing a franchise sales compliance program is critical in ensuring franchise sales are made in compliance with franchise laws, both federal and state. Recurrent training, whether on a quarterly or annual basis, for all franchise sellers should be a part of every franchisor's compliance program. Franchise laws are complicated, prohibit practices that franchise sellers may not realize are in violation of regulations, and change periodically. Sellers should adopt a pre-closing compliance audit (to be completed by the franchisor's team) and checklist to flesh out potential missteps in the franchise offer and sales process, taking into consideration restrictions imposed under the Statement of Policy Regarding the Use of Franchise Questionnaires and Acknowledgments—prepared by the Corporation Finance Section and the Franchise and Business Opportunities Project Group of the North American Securities Administrators Association, Inc. (“NASAA”)—that took effect January 1, 2023, which various franchise registration states have adopted formally or informally. Adopting responsible franchise offer and sales practices and ensuring that broker groups working with the seller do so as well will serve as a proactive measure in avoiding franchise law violations, setting the stage for a smoother transaction.

Before bringing the franchise system to market, franchisors should conduct a comprehensive franchise sales compliance audit. This sales audit will determine whether the franchisor's sales force has followed franchise disclosure and registration laws consistently. Do all Franchise Disclosure Document (“FDD”) receipts authenticate that the franchisor has followed proper compliance procedures? Have franchisees complained about unauthorized financial performance representations or promises made outside the contract? Have franchise brokers used pre-sale materials, such as power point presentations, which contain

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 67-68.

unauthorized financial performance representations? Does the seller have any videos or marketing materials online, including on either their own website or on social media, that contain impermissible financial performance representations? Sellers should work with counsel to create an action plan to address franchise sales compliance errors uncovered through this audit.

6. Enhance the Legal Underpinnings for Growth.<sup>6</sup> One of the most significant factors that boosts a franchisor's valuation is a buyer's belief that it can significantly expand the franchisor's business after the purchase. The seller should do as much as it can to establish the legal underpinnings for this growth potential. One focus can be the provisions of existing franchise agreements. The seller should create sufficient flexibility in its franchise agreements to permit expansion geographically, by product or service, through other brands, and through alternative distribution channels.

More recently, franchisors have viewed international growth as a significant opportunity. Where this is the case, the seller should establish plans for initial development and consider legal actions, such as preemptive trademark filings in appropriate countries coupled with searches to ensure that no conflicting marks already exist. Where buyers look toward international expansion opportunity, typically they will conduct due diligence to preliminarily confirm the possibility. No seller wants to be in the position where the buyer is the first to discover a blocking trademark in a major foreign market.

7. Evaluate Royalty Stream and Opportunities for System Growth. As discussed in more detail below with respect to valuation, a buyer will evaluate franchise unit economics. Franchise unit economics may be a tool for validating or disputing the seller's projections and business plan. Unit economics may be a proxy for evaluating the health of the franchise system—from both the perspective of top-line unit gross sales and bottom-line profitability (or shrinking losses). The economic health of the system will guide a buyer's own determination of the strength and growth potential of the existing royalty stream. It will also help frame a buyer's evaluation of the potential for organic unit growth or decline. It is almost axiomatic that franchisees who operate franchises achieving positive financial outcomes are more likely to speak well of the system in the franchise sales process, organically develop new units, and satisfy area development schedules. On the other hand, poor unit economics may sow the seeds of discontent and revolt among franchisees and may further portend requests for refunds of area development fees, for units that will not be developed, or threats of litigation.
8. Never Too Early to Start—Franchisor Best Practices to Assure a Smooth Sale Down the Road. As was noted in the various examples of seller due diligence in this section, a lot of work must often be done to clean up past issues and shore up standard franchise company practices in order to convince potential buyers of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 68.



value the company represents. It almost goes without saying, that the more care the seller takes in its operations, compliance practices, and record-keeping from the date of its inception, the less clean-up work will need to be done when it comes time to sell. Further, processes can be put into place early that will help a seller populate a meaningful “virtual data room” (“VDR”) with organized diligence materials in advance of a Letter of Intent (“LOI”) signing or shortly after signing (Exhibit C includes a sample VDR structure.) It also benefits the seller to perform an in-depth audit of its FDD, including all agreements and operations manual, to determine points of improvement from a business and strategic legal perspective, which go beyond yearly business and legal updates. If the seller has not been consistently monitoring their franchisees’ compliance with insurance requirements, it would be wise to recommence that process and start collecting and reviewing franchisees’ certificates of insurance, It is never too early to consult with legal, tax and business advisors and start doing things right. A long track record of compliance with best practices will bolster seller credibility in the eyes of the buyer and, hopefully, will translate into higher consideration that the buyer will be willing to pay.

C. Overview of Deal Process. Who are the players and what needs to happen to accomplish the sale of a franchise system? Below is an overview of the deal process. A more detailed discussion of the topics follows in later sections of this paper.

1. Who’s Buying. Franchise mergers and acquisitions have made headlines over the recent past, with acquisitions in a variety of industry segments, including restaurant, fitness, and home services sectors. Over the past few years there has also been an uptick in acquisitions of franchise system suppliers, such as Princeton Equity Group’s investment in International Franchise Professionals Group (IFPG), Southfield Capital’s funding of Franchise Fastlane, and Guideboat Capital Partner’s investment in Franworth. Strategic buyers and financial sponsors actively expanded investments in franchise brands and in franchise suppliers, greatly developing their services and reach.

(a) Strategic Buyers. Those already in the franchise sector or particular industry often seek to add units and market share by capturing competing or similar brands or brands that target the same consumer strata. For example, in 2024, Roark Capital completed its acquisition of Subway®, Self Esteem Brands (the parent company of several franchise systems, including Anytime Fitness®) completed a merger with Orangetheory Fitness®, OYO’s parent company Oravel Stays acquired G6 Hospitality (the parent company of Hotel 6 and Studio 6 brands), and Belfor Franchise Group acquired JUNKCO+®.. Franchisees can be another type of strategic buyer, often in

situations where turn-around strategies are important to a struggling system.<sup>7</sup>

- (b) Financial Sponsors. Private equity firms seeking strong investments for their fund portfolios, are attracted to the long-term royalty streams or product distribution capabilities of franchise companies. For example, in 2024, Levine Leichtman Capital Partners sold Tropical Smoothie Café to Blackstone. Jersey Mike's® announced that it plans to sell a majority interest to Blackstone.
2. Preparing for Sale. As discussed earlier, the seller should lay the legal groundwork to be ready to sell. This includes assessing the franchise agreements, confirming ownership of or securing all necessary intellectual property rights, resolving potential claims, solidifying relationships with suppliers and with key franchisees (or, if applicable, franchisee associations), evaluating the sales process, and developing a clear message on future growth opportunities, such as by adding complementary services, revamping marketing initiatives, and seeking expansion internationally. This exercise is sometimes referred to as “seller due diligence,” In the case of the franchisees, it clarifies the process and requirements of the franchisor (e.g., approval, new buyer requirements, etc.).
3. Assessing Valuation and Working with an M&A Advisor. The seller will want to meet with an experienced M&A financial advisor, such as an investment banker, to find ways to maximize value. These advisors will run through typical factors that drive a premium valuation for the company. The M&A advisor will conduct internal information-gathering and prepare marketing materials to distribute to potential buyers. If a seller is in a strong bargaining position, investment bankers can bring substantial additional value to the sale by canvassing these potential buyers and, in some cases, conducting an auction process.
4. Basic Deal Structure — Stock vs. Assets. The seller must consider its preferred sale structure in consultation with its tax, legal, and M&A advisors early in the process. Tax counsel should be engaged early in the process to identify any corporate formation issues, reorganization considerations, and other structuring concerns. As in non-franchise M&A transactions, the seller often prefers to sell the equity securities of the franchise company, rather than have the franchise company sell its assets, for various reasons, including liability (in an equity sale, all of the company's assets and liabilities stay with it and so accrue to the buyer), comparative simplicity of transfer (less need for third-party consents and approvals

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<sup>7</sup> In 2012, a group of franchisees from Long John's Silver's and another group from A&W purchased franchise systems from YUM! Brands. In 2021, Flynn Restaurant Group acquired 937 Pizza Hut restaurants and 194 Wendy's outlets from NPC International. NPC International was formerly the country's largest Pizza Hut and Wendy's franchisee, with \$1.6 billion in sales from its 1,229 Pizza Hut and 393 Wendy's restaurants at the end of 2019. However, after ongoing financial struggles, which were exacerbated by the arrival of the pandemic in March 2020, NPC International filing for bankruptcy in July 2020. Flynn Restaurant Group became the largest franchisee group in the United States as a result of the acquisition.

in an equity deal), and tax considerations (real estate transfer and other sales taxes can be avoided in an equity deal, thus preserving more value for the parties, and the seller may be able to shelter its capital gains from the stock sale). Buyers, on the other hand, sometimes prefer asset deals, where they can cherry-pick assets and liabilities, as well as seller's employees.

In a "stock" deal structure, the transfer of the equity securities of the target may be through a direct sale of the securities or by merger. In a direct sale of securities, all owners of the target would be parties to the purchase agreement and would agree to sell their securities to the buyer. If the target has a large number of equity owners or some equity owners who may not voluntarily want to sell their securities, a direct sale may be burdensome or impractical.

In those instances, a merger is the legal method to accomplish a stock deal. In a merger, the parties to the transaction are the entities involved (and likely key owners), rather than all of the securities holders. So long as the target entity obtains the requisite approvals, state law would subject all equity holders to the transaction, subject to any dissenters' or appraisal rights. Thus, the merger structure allows the buyer to acquire the target without each target equity holder agreeing to sell its securities to the buyer.

The most common merger structure is where a wholly owned subsidiary of the buyer (referred to as the merger sub) merges with and into the target, and the target, as the surviving entity in the merger, would become a wholly owned subsidiary of the buyer. The consideration is paid by the buyer to the equity holders of the target. This structure allows for the target entity to continue as a legal entity and its operations post-merger.

As noted above, some may prefer an asset sale over a stock sale because the buyer can select which assets it will purchase and which liabilities it will assume. The asset transaction may be preferable in some respects but may be more complicated because consents of third parties and regulatory authorities may be required.

5. Letter of Intent. The M&A advisor will normally require that each possible buyer sign a confidentiality/non-disclosure agreement covering the information it will receive to evaluate the deal. Interested prospective buyers will be asked to submit and negotiate a letter of intent ("LOI") addressing key financial and legal terms of the contemplated transaction.
6. Buyer Due Diligence. The scope of due diligence will depend on whether the transaction is structured as a stock or asset sale or a merger; the speed and complexity of the transaction; the awareness of target personnel of the pending transaction; the geographic scope of the target's franchise network (including extent of international operations); how a buyer intends to conduct the business or use the assets after the closing; and other related issues. Depending on the type of buyer, the seller may wish to limit the scope of the buyer's due diligence. In particular, the seller may need to restrict access to confidential information for a

strategic buyer who is a competitor in order to minimize any advantage the competitor could gain if the deal falls through. This can be accomplished through a clean team agreement or clean team provisions within the confidentiality agreement.

7. Seller Investigation of Buyer. In addition to the due diligence described above, the seller should also perform an investigation and analysis of the proposed buyer, especially with regard to its financial wherewithal (and hence its ability to close the transaction) as well as its reputational and operational suitability as a partner if the seller or its principals are planning to retain a level of involvement post-closing or if the seller is receiving a material amount of the purchase price post-closing.
8. Purchase Agreement. Typically, the LOI contemplates that the parties will sign a “definitive agreement,” which means a negotiated merger or purchase agreement, within a stated time period, or lose exclusivity. This allows the seller the ability to move on if the buyer is moving too slowly but gives the buyer some time to get its due diligence completed. Often, in an auction situation run by the seller’s M&A advisor, the seller’s preferred form of purchase agreement will be posted to a virtual data room (“VDR”) and bidders will need to submit a mark-up together with their bids. This can lead buyers to be very conservative in their agreement mark-up, fearing that heavy revisions would negatively impact the attractiveness of their bids. The purchase agreement is usually negotiated concurrently with due diligence. The negotiations of the purchase agreement will focus on a comprehensive set of representations and warranties related to the franchise business, as well as conditions to the closing and the covenants of the parties. In addition, the indemnification provisions, including the determination of any “dollar one” liabilities and other liabilities subject to a basket, and the cap on liabilities will be negotiated. The results of the due diligence will feed into the negotiations, as the buyer will seek more favorable terms and more risk reducing provisions in the purchase agreement if the buyer’s investigations reveal potential or actual material post-closing liabilities. Sellers, especially sponsors, may require buyers to purchase representations and warranties insurance (“R&W Insurance”) to cover indemnification of certain breaches of the representations and warranties in the purchase agreement. This is desirable to the seller because it allows it to cleanly exit a transaction and avoid hold backs of the purchase price. Who bears the cost of R&W Insurance is negotiable, though in most cases the buyer bears the cost or it’s split 50/50. It is less common for the seller to bear the entire cost.
9. Closing the Deal. Typically, irrespective of whether it is an asset deal, stock deal or mergers, the purchase agreement will be signed with the expectation that the actual transfer of the target assets/company (i.e., the closing of the transaction) will occur at a later date. During the time between signing of the purchase agreement and closing of the transaction—the interim period—the parties will seek any third-party consents required to transfer the assets or business. These could be lease assignment consents from landlords or regulatory consents. At some point in the selling process, the parties will want to consider how the pending transaction should affect the target company’s franchise sales. Also, the buyer will want to prepare

amendments to the franchise disclosure document (“FDD”) in a stock deal and create its own FDD in an asset deal in order to minimize the time period where franchise sales will need to go “dark” (i.e., the franchisor will stop marketing and selling franchises) after the closing. A buyer should be aware that there are some scenarios where you may have a simultaneous sign and close. This would require both the buyer and seller to meet certain conditions prior to closing.

10. Franchise Sales Issues During the Deal Process. Both federal and state laws regulating franchising focus on providing prospective franchisees with material information regarding the franchise being purchased. These laws generally require an FDD amendment when there is a material change in the information presented in the currently effective FDD. The guidelines under which the FDDs are prepared do not specifically address disclosure obligations with respect to a pending sale of a franchise system.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the required disclosures may be impacted by the pending sale and, depending on the circumstances, common law may require disclosure of a potential or pending transaction. The seller and buyer will want to consider a number of business and legal concerns to determine how to address this disclosure issue. See Section F of this paper for a more detailed discussion of sale suspension and FDD amendment considerations during the deal process.

D. Assessing Valuation. The seller’s M&A advisor, usually an investment banker, will play a critical role in assessing valuation. The M&A advisor will look at unit-level economics, quality of earnings, and projected revenue streams from royalties and other fees and from product/services sales into the franchise system, either by the franchisor or its affiliate, and from incentives or rebates paid to the franchisor based on franchisee purchases:

1. Royalty Stream. Buyers place a greater value on royalty income versus up-front franchise fees, product sales, or rebate income. Buyers will evaluate how the overall royalty stream has been growing historically as well as how it is projected to grow based on tenured franchisee performance, anticipated ramp up from newer franchisees, and new expected franchisees in the pipeline (i.e., those who have signed a franchise agreement and are expected to open). Sellers positioning for acquisition should consider a longer initial term for the franchise agreement, typically ten to fifteen (10–15) years, to maximize the value and contractual predictability of the royalty stream for operational locations.
2. Same-Store Sales Growth. Buyers will look at franchise-level revenue trends (on a franchisee-by-franchisee basis) to assess the growth imbedded in the system. Even if overall system revenue is growing, if franchisees are not demonstrating positive same-store sales growth trends, valuation will be negatively impacted. Stagnant same-store sale trends for long-tenured franchisees could demonstrate some level of complacency at the franchisee-level. The franchisor will need to determine what it can do to re-energize the system (or particular franchisees). Sometimes stagnation

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<sup>8</sup> Harris J. Chernow and Charles S. Modell, *Mergers and Acquisition of Franchise Companies*, ABA PUBLISHING, Second Edition (2014) (Vines, Leonard D and Noyes, Christina M., Editors), at 29-33.

in growth suggests that one or more franchisees may need to be worked out of the system to fuel future growth. Strong same-store sales growth trends support a higher valuation. Buyers will also assess how newer store vintages are trending vs. older store vintages to understand viability of new growth. If newer store vintages are underperforming older store vintages, it may be a sign that growth prospects are coming down.

3. Company-Owned Contribution. While company-owned stores are often valuable to a franchisor for training, testing, proof of concept, and overall earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (“EBITDA”) generation, buyers will reduce valuation for franchise systems with significant EBITDA exposure to company-owned units. Sellers with more than around 25% of EBITDA from company-owned units should expect a sum-of-the-parts valuation, which reflects a portion of the business being valued closer to a franchisee than a franchisor. Furthermore, company-owned units significantly increase complexity and franchisor’s liability as compared to a pure-play franchisor. Company-owned stores also require significant overhead and ongoing capital expenditures. Buyers will assess the ability to re-franchise company-owned stores and move to an “asset-lite” model as a way to increase the enterprise value of the business.
4. Franchisee Profitability. Buyers will want to evaluate franchisee profitability to assess the health of the system—are the franchisees making money? Happy and profitable franchisees can have a positive influence on valuation. The best franchise systems are typically those that focus on building culture and strengthening the franchisor-franchisee relationship, with continued, meaningful support beyond the initial opening and ramp-up phase.
5. Franchisee Payback. To help assess the strength of the franchise model, buyers will want to understand the payback or return-on-investment to franchisees. What is the start-up cost for the average franchisee? What is the anticipated payback period for that investment? Generally, a payback period of less than three (3) years is viewed positively. A long payback period may suggest that the franchisees are not making a suitable salary for their efforts, which could impact the franchisee renewal, transfer, or failure rates in the system, thus, potentially negatively impacting valuation.
6. Franchisee Tenure and Renewal Rates. In the absence of having franchisee income statements available, buyers will look to overall franchisee tenure and renewal rates as a factor in determining the overall health of the franchise system. Seeing high renewal rates and long-tenured franchisees provide support for a healthy franchise system, and thus, potentially a higher valuation. Buyers will evaluate future renewals and want to understand the probability of franchisee renewal, as this could significantly negatively impact the future royalty stream (and valuation) in the case of non-renewals (assuming it is not a franchisee that should be encouraged to leave the system in any event).

7. Franchisee “Class” Data. Buyers will want to assess how certain franchisee classes have performed over time. Are nine-year-old franchisees (i.e., franchisees that have been in the system for nine (9) years) continuing to grow their business? How has the initial ramp period for franchisees changed over time (faster ramp, slower ramp)? How has the average unit volume or average unit revenue increased over time for each franchisee class? Perhaps more recent classes of franchisees are achieving higher revenue at a faster rate than older franchisee classes—which could indicate the franchisor is selecting better franchisees and providing better training and supporting. Classes that continue to perform well and can demonstrate a strong growth trajectory over time can substantiate what newer franchisees should be capable of achieving, which in turn can help substantiate the projections and support a higher valuation. Buyers will also assess the level of franchisee churn in the system and benchmark it against other franchisors—higher levels of churn result in lower valuations based upon concerns around sustainability of royalty streams, quality of support, business model, and franchisee selection process.
8. Franchisee Pipeline. Buyers will want to assess the franchisee pipeline and how it has changed over time. Diligence would include the number of inquiries and sources of inquiry, contacts actually made with the franchisor, FDDs sent out, Discovery Days, and ultimately franchise agreements signed. A higher conversion is not always better—attracting high quality franchisees who will be successful is the key to building a sustainable franchise system. That being said, a large number of signed franchisees waiting to open provides support of the ongoing growth of system revenue and royalties (and thus, higher valuation).
9. Competitive Landscape. Franchise concepts that are brand leaders in their industry category or have developed a “different mouse trap” will attract higher valuations.
10. Technology Systems. Franchise concepts that have invested in a strong information technology system that can track key performance indicators across the system and accurately track franchisee revenue (and hopefully profitability) will be viewed more attractively by buyers. Having access to data at the franchisee level is extremely valuable for a franchisor to evaluate what is working in the system—and what is not. Also, the ability to share the data across the franchise system is an extremely important tool for benchmarking and creating friendly competition across the system to drive growth. A robust technology platform can translate into a higher valuation for a franchisor.
11. Litigation. While there are inherent conflicts within any franchise system, substantial litigation between the franchisor and franchisees can infer that something is not working in the model. It could be that management at the franchisor is not supporting the franchisees to help them be successful. It could be that the economics of the model do not work, and franchisees are unhappy with their return on investment. Litigation implies complications, and complicated deals do not get rewarded by a high valuation.

12. Capital Expenditures. Generally, franchisors tend to have low capital expenditure requirements, which is why franchisors, generically speaking, tend to trade at higher valuations as compared to competitors with only company-owned units. However, if substantial investment is required for upgrades, such as a new information technology platform, this could negatively impact valuation.
13. Franchisor vs. Franchisee Valuations. Franchisees tend to trade at lower valuations than franchisors for a number of reasons: (a) franchisees do not control the brand and IP, (b) franchisees are required to make significant capital expenditures and absorb significant fixed-costs in their business, (c) franchisees' rights to operate can expire or terminate with the franchise agreement; (d) franchisees by "definition" are not unique—there are many other businesses exactly like theirs in which to invest—it is a franchise after all, (e) bad franchisees can bring the brand down, and (f) the franchisor is ultimately the conductor of the train.

In summary, based on financial theory, the valuation is derived by determining the present value of the expected future cash flows of a company. The more support that can be given to substantiate the achievability of a company's expected future performance (thus lowering the risk of a buyer's inability to achieve future cash flows), the higher the potential valuation a company might garner.

E. Letter of Intent. As previously stated, the M&A advisor will ask interested potential buyers to submit and negotiate an LOI addressing key financial and legal terms of the proposed transaction. Typically, the LOI will give the selected buyer exclusivity (normally for at least thirty (30) days, but frequently longer) to complete its due diligence and for the parties to sign a definitive purchase agreement, often with the opportunity to extend the exclusivity period upon mutual agreement by the parties. In addition, the LOI may specify an outside "drop dead" date at which time the parties will part ways if no definitive agreement has been executed prior to such date. The LOI also outlines some of the key terms for the purchase agreement and leaves other terms to be negotiated between the parties, as are "customary." The seller normally benefits at this stage from a more detailed LOI, with key economic terms hammered out in advance. For example, the structure for the transaction (asset or stock sale), any seller financing, buyer holdback of purchase price, escrow requirements, and indemnity baskets and caps are helpful to specify at the LOI stage, as well as post-closing employment arrangements, including bonus compensation structures. Although the LOI is normally non-binding, except with respect to exclusivity, confidentiality, and a few other provisions, the LOI establishes a basis for good-faith negotiation. Once the LOI is signed, the buyer due diligence period will start and move forward quickly.

F. Franchise Sales Issues and Suspension and Amendment Concerns During the Deal Process. Both federal and state laws regulating franchising focus on providing prospective franchisees with material information regarding the franchise being purchased. These laws generally require an amendment when there is a material change in the information presented in the FDD. But the guidelines do not specifically address disclosure obligations with respect to a pending sale of a franchise system.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the required disclosures may be impacted by

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<sup>9</sup> Chernow & Modell, *supra* note 4, at 29-33.



the pending sale. For example, in Item 1, the FTC Rule<sup>10</sup> requires disclosure of the franchisor entity, the business history and activities of the franchisor, the parent company of a franchisor,<sup>11</sup> and the franchisor's affiliated programs.<sup>12</sup> Item 2 requires disclosures regarding the directors, officers, and management of the franchisor. In Item 12, the FTC Rule requires the disclosure of certain goods, services, trademark, and territory issues information if the franchisor or an affiliate operates, franchises, or has present plans to operate or franchise a business under a different trademark and the business sells or will sell goods or services similar to those the franchise will offer.<sup>13</sup> Sellers should carefully evaluate post-closing liability risk stemming from franchise offer and sales activity during the period leading up to the execution of the LOI, during the due diligence process, and during the period leading up to the purchase and sale agreement and the closing date. At the state level, some state franchise laws have a general requirement that the franchisor may not "omit to state" a material fact in any disclosure document,<sup>14</sup> and some states include a change in control/ ownership of the franchisor and/or a change in management as examples of material changes.<sup>15</sup> In addition, state common law may require the disclosure of material information.

The decision as to when to stop selling franchises (i.e., "go dark") or disclose a pending sale by amendment<sup>16</sup> will be fluid and heavily fact-based. Often, in practice, there is not a bright line as to when going dark or disclosure by amendment is necessary. On the spectrum, some franchisors may take the most conservative approach and disclose the possibility of a sale when they decide to put themselves on the market. Continuing on the spectrum is suspension of sales or disclosure at the signing of the LOI (even if nonbinding), the signing of the definitive purchase agreement, or at the time when it becomes likely that all closing conditions will be met. From a business standpoint, the parties will not want to reduce the value of the franchise system by suspending or slowing sales. The buyer should also assess how a "go dark" period may affect pending franchise renewals. The buyer will likely resist having sales suspended, especially in an asset deal where it will not assume the liability of the seller for a sales violation. Factors for consideration include:

- Whether the buyer is a financial sponsor or a strategic acquirer;
- Whether key management will likely change post-closing;
- Whether the buyer already owns a franchise system or other business that will compete with or sell supplies to franchisees of the selling franchise system;

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<sup>10</sup> The "FTC Rule" refers to the Federal Trade Commission Franchise Rule as amended. 16 C.F.R. § 436.1, *et seq.* (2007).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at § 436.5(a).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* § 436.5(a).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* § 436.5(I)(6)(iii).

<sup>14</sup> See e.g., MINN. STAT. § 80C.13, Sub.2, which states "No person may offer or sell a franchise in this state by means of any written or oral communication which includes an untrue statement of a material fact or which omits to state a material fact necessary in order to make the statements made, in the light of the circumstances under which they were made, not misleading."; see, also, California Franchise Investment Law, CAL. CORP. CODE §§ 31202.

<sup>15</sup> Chernow & Modell, *supra* note 4, at 30.

<sup>16</sup> Another alternative is to consider disclosing the pending sale outside the disclosure document in a written notice to the franchisee. This would help prevent a later common law claim of material misrepresentation.

- The level of risk of sales violation claims the parties are willing to assume and which party bears the liability for a claim or a rescission right;
- The number of franchise sales that suspension or amendment will delay or affect;
- The jurisdiction applicable to the expected franchise sale (e.g., whether in a non- registration state, a registration state, or a state with a general materiality component to required disclosures);
- The length of time expected after the signing of the LOI prior to the execution of a definitive agreement, and how difficult suspending sales will be from a business and competitive standpoint;
- The risk of creating an expectation with a franchisee prospect that the M&A deal will close when it may not;
- The level of concern that deal communication will raise among the seller’s existing franchisees, and the impact disclosure may have on the franchisee relationships and the activities of any franchise associations or councils;
- The buyer’s desires with respect to suspending franchise sales when considered against the purchase price and the desire to maintain a “hot” franchise concept that is growing rapidly;
- The number of franchisees who need to renew during any “going dark” period to avoid expiration, and the number of transfers in the pipeline;
- When the parties are prepared to make the transaction public, and if either the buyer or seller is a publicly traded company, the requirements of securities laws and regulations regarding the disclosure of material, non-public information; and
- Other factors related to the nature of the target company and deal specifics.

G. Goals of Each Party in Conducting Due Diligence.

1. Buyer’s Potential Goals. In conducting due diligence, the buyer will have certain key objectives, as follows:
  - Identify any “red flags” and ascertain that the buyer wants to buy the target at an acceptable price based on the risk.
  - Assess whether the business enterprise value, as stated in the LOI’s purchase price, needs downward adjustment based on information learned through the diligence process.
  - Determine whether the seller should provide additional or different representations, warranties, covenants, and indemnification coverage based on potential risks discovered.

- Evaluate whether the buyer can achieve its business plan post-closing, and whether there may be any interruptions in the business post-closing. Considerations may include whether buyer has resources to support development of units sold but not yet developed, whether the buyer can identify white space available if it wishes to grow the brand, whether the business has flexibility in its franchise agreements such that necessary operational changes can be made post-closing, or if the buyer wishes to buy back franchised units and operate more company-owned locations, whether the relevant franchise agreements and applicable laws permit such purchases.
- Evaluate whether the business is aligned with past and future acquisitions. Some considerations may include whether the business in consideration may potentially compete with existing franchisees operating under an affiliate brand, and whether existing franchisees under an affiliate brand would be willing to purchase units from the business in consideration.
- If there are international franchisees, determine whether the buyer is capable of supporting international transactions and future development under already executed development agreements.

2. Seller's Potential Goals. During the due diligence process, especially if seller's management takes a stake in the target after closing, the seller will want to evaluate the buyer on a number of fronts, including as follows:

- Determine whether the buyer is a good fit, is committed to closing the transaction, is financially capable of buying the target, has solid, organized management with integrity, will bring added value to the target, communicates well with the target's team, and is reasonable and fair in the negotiations.
- If buyer assumes certain liabilities, seek assurance that the buyer can fulfill these obligations.
- Keep a watchful eye on whether the buyer will retain, and how the buyer plans to treat, the target company's employees.
- Determine whether the buyer is willing and capable of communicating effectively with the franchisees and continue a positive franchisor-franchisee relationship post-closing.
- Determine the scope and timeline of buyer's proposed changes to the business post-closing, which may include operational and role changes, and whether such changes align with seller's goals.

## H. Buyer's Due Diligence Process.<sup>17</sup>

1. Establishing Realistic Goals that are Deal-Specific. How much the buyer can achieve during the due diligence process will depend on many factors.<sup>18</sup> If the target is highly coveted with many potential suitors, the buyer may have to tread more lightly in what it requests as it "courts" the hot prospect. Hot prospects may also significantly limit the time period that bidders are afforded to complete their diligence. In recent years, sellers appear to have better bargaining power because of the increased demand for franchise system targets; however, there has been somewhat of a shift given capital and debt market uncertainty.

If the buyer is a competitor of the seller, the seller may place significant limitations on the buyer's access to information that would hurt the target competitively if the deal were to collapse. At the same time, a competing buyer may need to evaluate its own limitations in concluding the sale, such as whether its franchise agreements' exclusivity provisions will lead to violations of its franchisees' territory rights if the transaction is consummated.

In addition, the record-keeping practices of the seller may lead to significant limitations on what is available for review. If the franchise system has been operating for several decades with legacy franchisees, older documents may be inaccessible or the seller may not have converted documents to a modern document management system. Technological changes may also present a challenge, especially if the seller has converted to several document storage or franchise management systems over the years. Further, some sellers may have outsourced recordkeeping to their counsel or third-party brokers and, so, immediate access to documents may be limited.

The size of the franchise system and the buyer's due diligence budget will play a role in determining the scope of review, and the buyer may have to limit its document review to strategic sampling of the available documents. If such document review is limited to a sampling, then caution should be exercised that such sampling accurately reveals and does not bury potential unknown and known risks and liabilities.

2. Stages of Due Diligence. The buyer should begin due diligence with competent finance and legal teams that have previously participated in similar transactions . The buyer should evaluate whether such internal and external finance and legal teams' capacity and timeliness aligns with the buyer's goals and expectations related to this transaction.

The buyer's finance and legal teams should assist the buyer with developing a shortlist of key issues (e.g., outstanding franchisee disputes, franchise sales activity,

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<sup>17</sup> Substantial portions of this paper's Section H have been used or adapted from 2014 IFA materials; see, Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 5-14,17. Sandra Bodeau assisted in preparing early drafts of the paper cited.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these factors, see, Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 1-2.

and royalty and other revenue source trends) before signing the LOI to determine whether the target franchise system satisfies the buyer's general criteria for a potential acquisition. At a minimum, the buyer should review the business's latest issued franchise disclosure document, which will reveal significant information about the seller and the franchise system and dictate priority items for the due diligence checklist. This early information can help the buyer determine price and other key terms with the seller for the LOI. More detailed legal and financial due diligence will take place after the parties reach this preliminary commitment, though generally before negotiation of the final purchase agreement.

3. Sending Out the Due Diligence Checklist. Legal counsel for the buyer should provide – in addition to, or as part of, a general due diligence checklist – a list of relevant franchise information and documentation to request from the seller. Exhibit A to this paper contains a sample franchise due diligence checklist that buyers may work from in a franchise acquisition transaction.<sup>19</sup> This checklist focuses solely on franchise-related due diligence documents and should be supplemented by items addressing general corporate, tax, employment, employee benefits, IP, real estate, and insurance (as applicable) matters as well as industry or system-specific matters. Because due diligence checklists typically are exhaustive and may overwhelm the seller, a buyer should tailor the checklist to the specific transaction and prioritize its diligence requests. Alternatively, the buyer may decide to conduct due diligence in stages, so that each stage can be reviewed and discussed with the seller. Conducting due diligence in stages may be helpful in setting priority items for the next stage and controlling costs and budgeting for both sides.
4. Preliminary Due Diligence Call with Seller. At approximately the same time as the delivery of the due diligence checklist, the buyer may elect to schedule a kick-off due diligence call with the seller's team, which normally would include the buyer's and seller's legal counsel. A conference call can be helpful in setting the process's tone. Because the due diligence checklist can intimidate the seller, the buyer's counsel can explain its purpose, help set priorities within the long list or break up the checklist into stages, get an initial read on what the seller has and how it will respond, and find out the history of franchise compliance, recordkeeping, and availability of information. Sometimes, though, the buyer may wish to forego an early-stage due diligence call (particularly if the seller is sophisticated and familiar with the purpose and substance of a due diligence checklist) and instead conduct a due diligence call at a later stage, after the buyer and its counsel have had an opportunity to review the due diligence materials provided by the seller.

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<sup>19</sup> The Exhibit A checklist is reproduced from Knack, Brown & Holland, *supra* note 2, at Exhibit A, with minor updates from authors.

5. Assessing the Strength of the Franchise System’s Intellectual Property.<sup>20 21</sup> The intellectual property of a franchise system—its marks, logos, proprietary software, domain names, trade dress, copyrights, and proprietary manuals and other trade secrets—form the foundation of the franchise system. Assessing the vulnerability of those assets is a key aspect of a comprehensive due diligence plan. Each intellectual property asset should be evaluated in terms of its inherent strength, its protectability, and its value to the franchise system. This assessment should take into account the current environment in which each asset exists, as well as the future environment in which it may operate (e.g., international expansion of the system). The assessment should include a general search for domestic and international potential infringers and history of treatment of infringers on the business’s marks.
- (a) Service Marks and Trademarks.<sup>22</sup> The service marks and trademarks (including logos) that identify a franchise system obviously are critical assets of the target franchise system. The buyer must closely examine the primary marks to assess their distinctiveness and overall strength. To adequately determine the strength of the seller’s marks, the buyer should analyze several factors:<sup>23</sup> (i) strength of seller’s ownership of its trademarks and analysis of issues relating to their legal validity; (ii) determination of the primary marks’ distinctiveness and whether any third parties have registered similar marks in the same or related classes -- to the extent the seller relies on a primary mark that is not distinctive to identify a franchise system, the buyer of such a system will likely face more challenges in protecting the mark and avoiding confusion in the marketplace; (iii) whether the seller registered the primary marks in the form and classes of goods and services in which they are used in the franchise system; (iv) whether there have been any impactful determinations published by the USPTO, especially if the trademarks are still pending registration; (v) the extent to which third parties have prior rights of use in key geographic areas—the seller should have a solid base of information on any prior third-party use of each key mark; (vi) whether the seller has effectively protected and policed its trademarks, both within the franchise system and from potential infringing use by third parties; (vii) whether additional trademarks or classes should be filed in domestic and international jurisdictions; (viii) whether franchisees are utilizing consistent marks throughout the system — if there has been changes in the logo marks over the years, additional or amendments to trademark filings may be necessary; and (ix) to the extent the target franchise system has been or potentially may be exported to other countries, whether the seller established a sound strategy for international

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<sup>20</sup> Sandra Bodeau, John Brower & Gaylen Knack, *Acquiring the Franchise System: Due Diligence Tactics to Assess Value*, FRANCHISING WORLD, October 2013 at 29.

<sup>21</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> Bodeau, Brower, & Knack, *supra* note 21, at 29-30.

protection of its primary marks and sought registration of those marks in key foreign markets.

Finally, the buyer should determine whether the seller registered and maintained control over key domain names related to the franchise system domestically and in foreign markets where the seller currently conducts activity or may plan to do so in the future.

- (b) Proprietary Software.<sup>24</sup> Proprietary software and other system-specific intellectual property can distinguish a system from its competitors so long as the seller preserves clear ownership of, and has appropriately protected, the property. A number of franchise systems employ the use of proprietary software. To the extent proprietary software is employed in the target franchise system, it can provide the system with a competitive edge in the marketplace and improve franchisee operational performance. While proprietary software often serves as a valuable asset to the franchise system, the buyer should review certain attributes of the proprietary software to determine its actual value. First, the buyer will need to determine whether the seller or an affiliate owns the software or if ownership rights reside with a third party, possibly a software developer. If the seller or an affiliate owns the software, will that asset be transferred to the buyer at closing? To the extent a third party owns the proprietary software, what rights does the seller have to continue using and licensing the use of the software and what obligations must the seller satisfy to continue using the software (e.g., sale of a minimum number of software licenses)? How does the software license agreement address future updates and maintenance, and who shoulders the burden of those expenses? What are the operating costs, and does the franchisor obtain revenue from the software's use? Can the third-party owner license the same or similar software to others, including the seller's competitors? How does the proprietary software compare to similar software systems available in the marketplace? Specifically, does the proprietary software continue to provide a competitive advantage or is there other software on the market that is better suited for the current and future needs of the system? What is the level of adoption of the software within the franchise system? How is the software perceived by franchisees? These inquiries will assist the buyer in determining the value of any proprietary software used in the target system.
- (c) Operations Manuals, Confidential Information, and Other IP Assets.<sup>25</sup> The operations manual can serve as a key asset of a franchise system or as an indicator of underlying problems in a troubled franchise system. The operations manual should be regularly updated and reflect existing system standards and procedures, and all updates should be accessible from a single

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<sup>24</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 6-7.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 7.

source (i.e., fully incorporated into the manual, as opposed to littered in system-wide emails and memos).

The buyer should evaluate the content of the operations manual to ensure that it is drafted to help shield the seller from potential liability. In these days of uncertainty surrounding potential joint employer liability for franchisors, buyers should carefully review the operations manual for signs that the seller exercises too much control over its franchisees' employees and employment decisions. Specifically, buyers should be sensitive to certain procedures related to wages, background checks, day-to-day staffing, and template employment agreements and employee manuals provided to franchisees. Buyers should also review the manuals for adequate disclaimers to help reduce potential vicarious liability and joint employer liability exposure.

The buyer also should determine whether the seller maintains other valuable IP that can increase the long-term value of the franchise system. The buyer should assess the importance of secret recipes, customer and supplier lists, and any other confidential information and steps taken by the seller to protect the confidentiality of that information.

The integrity of information considered as confidential depends on the seller's steps taken to protect its confidential nature. The buyers should evaluate whether the seller has executed nondisclosure agreements and other restrictive covenant agreements (where permitted) with its employees, and contractors to protect its confidential information. To limit availability and protect confidentiality of the manual, many systems elect to use online platforms to host the manual and control access in lieu of providing paper copies or PDFs to franchisees and their employees.

Similar assessments should be conducted regarding other potentially valuable IP, such as copyrights, patents, and the seller's website and social media accounts that use seller's trademarks. Special attention should be provided if such social media accounts and website are maintained by franchisees.

6. Analyzing the Strength of the Franchise (and Related) Agreements.<sup>26</sup> The value of a franchise system depends largely on the quality of the franchise agreements that document the relationship and the royalty stream.<sup>27</sup> Careful review of the existing franchise agreements will help the buyer measure the worth of the royalty stream and validate reliance on the stream in its projections.

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>27</sup> Bodeau, Brower, & Knack, *supra* note 21, at 29.



The buyer should review how many versions of the seller's franchise agreement (and multi-unit development agreement) exist, how they differ, which units they cover, and when they expire. For most companies, lining up the versions by year will work best because a franchisor usually makes contract changes when it annually updates its FDD. The buyer should request a summary of the number of franchisees operating under each version of the franchise agreements, especially versions with lower fees, longer terms, larger territory grants, and other material and potentially unfavorable terms the seller later changed. The buyer should also request a list of franchise agreements signed but never opened, especially those past the development time frames that were not terminated.

The buyer should also carefully review changes in fees over the years, determine whether such allowable fees are being charged to the franchisees, and whether franchisees comply with such payment. It is common for franchisors to reduce or waive fees for franchisees, temporarily, and where such costs are absorbed by the franchisor. This analysis will reveal the potential to recapture fees, provided that the franchise agreement allows for such changes.

The buyer should review whether the franchise agreements give the seller flexibility in responding to dynamic changes in the marketplace. For example, can the franchisor require that franchisees add a new product or service line, install a drive-thru, comply with an Internet sales program, add an online store, change restaurant seating availability by adding a bar, etc.? If not, the buyer may face restrictions in implementing changes in the system going forward. As discussed below, the scope of rights granted to franchisees and outdated technology provisions tend to be two provisions that can restrict future system changes.

A thorough and useful contract review will summarize significant changes that have occurred over the years in royalty fees, marketing fees, technology and other fees, territorial rights, and other key areas.<sup>28</sup>

- (a) Assignability of Franchise and Other Key Agreements.<sup>29</sup> Before advancing far into a review of the target franchise system's franchise agreements, the buyer must ensure that the franchise agreements, as well as other significant agreements, can be assigned upon sale of the system. Buyers generally find that the system's franchise agreements include provisions permitting the seller to assign its interests in the agreements without the consent of the franchisees. The buyer will need to confirm that each version of the seller's franchise agreements includes these provisions and that the seller has not modified these provisions for select (often early-stage or large multi-unit) franchisees. The buyer also should review key vendor contracts, leases, and other significant contracts to determine what, if any, third-party consents must be obtained as part of the acquisition of the target system or whether

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 29.

<sup>29</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 8.

notice requirements exist. To the extent a third-party consent is necessary, the buyer will need to discuss with the seller any challenges in obtaining third-party consents and who will be responsible—buyer or seller—for obtaining such consents. The number of such consents required may also impact the length of the interim period between the signing of the purchase agreement and closing to allow a reasonable opportunity for such consents to be obtained.

- (b) Risk Assessment of Franchisor Entity. After a preliminary review of franchise and other agreements, the buyer should perform a risk assessment to determine whether the seller's franchisor entity will continue serving as the franchisor after the sale or whether a new franchisor entity will be formed to take assignment of the existing franchise agreements and resume offering new franchises. This assessment is fact-dependent but may include a review of the history of litigation, registration and compliance issues and member or owner disputes. If a new franchisor entity is formed, additional filings and amendments become necessary, including, but not limited to, trademark assignments and new franchise registration filings, which may delay the offering of new franchises after the sale.
- (c) Scope of Grant/Reservation of Rights.<sup>30</sup> The buyer should determine the exact nature of the license granted in the franchise agreement. How broad are the rights granted, and what rights have been reserved by the seller? Has the seller consistently defined the rights granted to franchisees and rights reserved to the seller or do earlier versions of the franchise agreement grant franchisees broader or different rights? The buyer should determine whether the seller has reserved rights as to potential future markets and distribution channels, such as internet sales, captive markets, and national accounts. Rules should be established, either in the franchise agreement or the operations manual, regarding the franchisor's rights to sell to customers in a franchisee's territory and a franchisee's right to sell outside of its territory and in another franchisee's territory. Finally, did the disclosures in the FDD accurately reflect the rights granted to each franchisee under the franchise agreement? Surprisingly, inconsistencies between the franchise agreement and the FDD can also arise and blur rights granted to franchisees.
- (d) Addressing Territory Conflicts.<sup>31</sup> To the extent the buyer owns similar or competing franchise systems (or may do so in the future), it will need to assess whether the rights granted to the seller's franchisees may conflict with the current or future rights of franchisees in the buyer's existing franchise systems. Do the targeted franchise system's franchise agreements specifically permit the seller (and its affiliates) to operate or franchise other or competing brands under different trademarks within the franchisee's

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<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 8.

territory? If the targeted system's franchise agreements do not specifically reserve this right to the seller, the buyer will need to assess its ability to proceed with the transaction and the reaction of the targeted system's franchisees. Even if the targeted system's franchise agreements specifically permit the seller (and its affiliates) to acquire, be acquired by, and operate or franchise competing brands within the franchisee's territory, the buyer will need to determine the possible reaction of the seller's franchisees as well as that of the buyer's existing franchisees.

- (e) Flexibility to Modify the System.<sup>32</sup> The buyer should analyze whether the franchise agreements and the operations manual are adaptable and give the franchisor flexibility in responding to dynamic changes in and demands of the marketplace. Can the seller update system technology, add new product/service lines, change suppliers, create value programs, or add services that could not have been anticipated when the franchise system was first established?<sup>33</sup> Can the buyer require franchisees to adopt new systems or processes, such as requiring automatic royalty and other fee payments, when none have been in place before the sale?
- (f) Necessity/Ability to Re-Brand the System or Individual Units. Each of the seller's franchise agreements should also be reviewed for the franchisor's ability to change the primary mark under which the system is operated (i.e., the ability to re-brand the system). In some cases, the buyer may want to fold some or all of the seller's units into an existing, competing system that the buyer already operates and, so, a change in name, marks and trade dress may be necessary. Other times, the target system may have become somewhat outdated and in need of a refresh in order to boost future sales and profitability. In either such scenario, the buyer will want to know whether it will be able to mandate such changes post-closing, or whether it is instead in for a series of protracted negotiations with the franchisees post-closing. Many newer franchise agreements provide such flexibility to the franchisor, but many older forms of agreement may not, thereby adding potentially significant costs to the buyer's desired integration and expansion plans. Even if these changes are contractually a possibility, the buyer should make an assessment as to whether existing franchisees are financially and operationally capable and willing to adopt post-closing system changes.
- (g) Number of Negotiated Changes, Special Deals, and Atypical Provisions.<sup>34</sup> The buyer must evaluate whether the seller has followed a uniform contract program. In the interest of growing the system and completing sales, the seller may have granted numerous concessions and made side offers favorable to the franchisee. The buyer will need to identify and review these

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<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> Bodeau, Brower, & Knack, *supra* note 21, at 29.

<sup>34</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 9-10.

negotiated deals and consider the implications of administering a non-uniform system.<sup>35</sup> Did the seller comply with franchise sales laws in negotiating changes to the standard-form franchise agreement? For example, negotiated changes to franchise agreements involving California franchisees or franchises require compliance with unique negotiated change rules under the California Franchise Investment Law.<sup>36</sup> The buyer should also consider the implication of negotiated changes from a long-term perspective. When renewal time arrives, how successful can the buyer expect to be in eliminating these “one-off” deals and imposing a standardized then-current form of franchise agreement as a condition to renewal of the franchise? Was part of the negotiated deal the understanding that the franchisee will get to keep the favorable terms through renewals? The buyer also will need to identify any unusual provisions that are atypical in franchise programs, which may create a material risk to the buyer as the new franchisor. For example, if a franchisee can easily terminate the franchise agreement without cause or get a royalty reduction if certain sales levels are not achieved, the franchisor may face the loss of all or a portion of its revenue stream for that contract. The buyer might need to factor this risk into the purchase agreement with a price reduction, hold-back, or an indemnity.

- (h) Three-Party Arrangements. If the franchisor has entered into three-party arrangements, such as master franchise or area representative agreements, which permit a third party to solicit franchises and/or support unit-level franchisees on behalf of the franchisor, such arrangements will warrant careful scrutiny by the buyer. These arrangements often involve a large upfront payment by the third-party master franchisee/area representative in exchange for a large territory grant in which the master franchisee/area representative is to solicit franchises and provide support to unit-level franchisees. While these arrangements are common (and often successful) internationally, especially the master franchise grants, domestically, these relationships often present a challenge. Often, these agreements impose insufficiently defined responsibilities on the master franchisee/area representative, who then does not perform to the franchisor’s expectation, which in effect locks up a large territory from further development by the franchisor, especially if the third party is unwilling to exit the system without a refund of its initial investment. Such arrangements may also result in unhappy unit-level franchisees if they are not receiving proper support from the master franchisee/area representative. In such situations, a buyer will need to develop a go-forward strategy of addressing these problems and, if necessary, exiting any non-performing third parties from the system.

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<sup>35</sup> Bodeau, Brower, & Knack, *supra* note 21, at 30.

<sup>36</sup> California Franchise Investment Law, CAL. CORP. CODE §§ 31110, *et. seq.*

- (i) Existence of Promises or Oral Agreements Outside of the Written Contract. The buyer should not limit its review to specific provisions of the target system’s franchise agreements in determining the seller’s rights. It should also consider what expectations have been created by communications with the franchisee community outside of the FDD and franchise agreement — whether those communications take place one-to-one, with a select group of franchisees or with a franchisee council. What safeguards, such as closing acknowledgments, has the seller implemented to limit franchisee claims that are based on representations made outside the franchise agreement or the FDD? Following the implementation of the NASAA Statement of Policy Regarding the Use of Franchise Questionnaires and Acknowledgments, franchisors with franchise sales activity in various franchise registration states are, to an extent, hamstrung by the elimination of the ability to implement meaningful pre-closing compliance questionnaires and franchise agreement acknowledgement provisions, which previously served to apprise the franchisor of regulatory compliance issues in the franchise sales process before the franchisor countersigned the franchise agreement. Franchisors are now forced to move forward with closing, blind as to whether a rogue salesperson, franchise brokers, or other franchise sellers violated (whether knowingly or unintentionally) franchise laws in the offer and sales process.
- (j) Enforcement Practices of Franchisor. Have the seller’s historical practices led to lower standards within the franchise system? If the franchise agreement calls for the achievement of minimum sales, has the seller enforced such provisions?<sup>37</sup> In situations where the seller has not enforced franchise agreement provisions, has it instituted a “new day” program (i.e., “We’ve let you slide in the past, but now we’re getting serious about compliance and will hold you accountable to our standards going forward.”) and with what success and ongoing implications to the enforceability of standards? If a significant number of franchisees are not achieving such minimum sales requirements, the buyer should assess how feasible the minimum requirements are in the first place. The buyer should also make an assessment as to its ability to enforce such provisions post-sale and have a plan to address potentially upset franchisees asked to comply with provisions post-sale that negatively affect their income streams. Further, the seller should assess whether it inadvertently waived certain of its rights due to failure to enforce provisions of the franchise agreement.<sup>38</sup>
- (k) Reviewing the Operations Manual. The buyer should carefully review the operations manual, including the frequency and manner in which it has been updated. The seller should have a standard method for implementing system

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<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 30.

<sup>38</sup> See Karen Marchiano, Glenn Plattner, and Leonard Vines, *Roadmap for Default and Termination Process*, in AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION 35<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL FORUM ON FRANCHISING (2012), 21-22.

changes through the operations manual and for notifying franchisees of each change to the operations manual as it occurs. If the operations manual is outdated, the buyer should evaluate the areas for updates, identify members who should contribute to the updates (including the outgoing seller), and determine a reasonable course of action to roll out the new manual after the acquisition.

A thorough review of the operations manual, however, goes far beyond understanding modifications of system standards. An operations manual should assist a franchisor in limiting liability resulting from activities occurring at the franchisee unit level. An operations manual that is not carefully drafted can result in potential joint employer or vicarious liability for a franchisor due to the level of control exercised or available to the franchisor.<sup>39</sup> The buyer should review the operations manual for common mistakes, such as directives intended for company-owned units or franchisor's employees or excessive and detailed direction on employment or safety-related unit standards. The buyer should perform a thorough review of template documents made available to franchisees by the seller and revoke any unsuitable templates, including, but not limited to, template employee manuals, offer letters, contracts for employment, asset purchase agreements for use between franchisees, and other agreements where the franchisor is not a party.

- (l) Insurance Policies Review. It is not uncommon that the franchisor does not maintain records of franchisees' certificates of insurance. Depending upon the industry that the seller is in, failing to monitor franchisees' compliance with insurance requirements can result in greater exposure, which may impact negotiations in the purchase agreement, such those pertaining to the seller's indemnification obligations. Therefore, a compliance plan post-acquisition should include requesting copies of certificates of insurance from franchisees to confirm that franchisees are complying with the franchise agreement requirements for maintaining insurance.

The buyer should perform a review of the franchise system's required insurance policies to identify any other areas of risk for which insurance is available. With the increase in claims related to employment and cyber security, the buyers should evaluate whether employment practices liability insurance ("EPLI") and/or cyber liability insurance would be appropriate for the system (among others), in addition to any general commercial liability insurance. Further, the buyer should perform an industry-specific analysis to determine whether additional policies would be appropriate given the franchise system's business activities as well as appropriate limits.

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<sup>39</sup> See Section G, subparagraphs 8-9.

If the buyer determines that additional policies would be appropriate, the buyer should review the franchise agreement and manual to determine whether the franchisor has the ability to mandate additional policies or modify the limits of insurance policies. Any policy changes most likely will increase costs for franchisees, and, therefore, the buyer should present an insurance carrier willing to provide competitive rates for the entire system to incentivize the franchise system's compliance.

7. Gauging Compliance with Franchise Sales and Relationship Laws/Practices.<sup>40</sup> Franchisors must comply with franchise and business opportunity laws regulating the offer and sale of franchises as well as the franchise relationship. Failure to comply with these laws can lead to, among other things, costly regulatory actions, legal claims by franchisees, or challenges to the future enforcement of franchise agreements. These claims or actions often arise months or years following the sale of the system, and a buyer who steps into the seller's shoes under franchise agreements often is left facing such claims or actions. For this reason, the buyer must review the target system's compliance with franchise sales laws and franchise relationship laws.
  - (a) Franchise Disclosure Document.<sup>41</sup> The buyer should closely examine the seller's past and current FDDs for compliance with applicable federal and state franchise disclosure requirements. Ideally this review would cover FDDs for the last four to five years to cover applicable statute of limitations periods. Key areas addressed in the FDD that deserve focus include the following:
    - (i) Consistent Disclosure of Franchise Agreement Provisions.<sup>42</sup> The FTC Rule and state law requires a franchisor to disclose, in an FDD, specific information about the franchisor, the franchise system, and the terms of the franchisor's franchise agreement. As previously discussed, the buyer should determine whether there are inconsistencies between the FDD and the terms of the applicable franchise agreements. Although this may seem an unlikely mistake, the failure to align provisions does occur. For example, the franchise agreement may state that the seller can increase fees up to a capped percentage or amount, but the FDD may use language that does not track uniformly with the franchise agreement, creating an ambiguity as to what fees can be charged. As another example, the franchise agreement may permit the seller to offer a competing brand under a different trademark, while the FDD may state that the seller will not open or franchise another competing outlet within the franchisee's territory under any brand, leaving it questionable as to what is

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<sup>40</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 10.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 10-11.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 10.

permitted or prohibited. The integration provision in the franchise agreement will likely state that the provision is not intended to change any representation in the FDD, leaving the buyer with the task of dealing with this ambiguity.

- (ii) Litigation and Regulatory Enforcement Actions. The disclosure of litigation and regulatory enforcement actions in Item 3 of the FDD can be a material item for prospective franchisees and the failure to make appropriate disclosures could lead to future claims. For additional reasons, however, litigation — including any action subject to dispute resolution — deserves special attention when considering whether to acquire a franchise system. The buyer will need to understand what litigation exists and how it will be treated in negotiating the purchase agreement. The buyer also must determine whether existing or past regulatory actions or litigation may lead to similar claims in the future. In addition, the buyer should investigate the industry in which the system operates for recent litigation trends. For example, if the FTC or a state attorney general has investigated a type of practice or product used in the seller’s industry, other states may pursue copycat investigations or third parties may initiate class action or multiparty claims, often at great expense to the franchisor.
  
- (iii) Financial Performance Representations.<sup>43</sup> Financial performance representations (FPRs) merit detailed scrutiny as well.<sup>44</sup> To the extent the seller has included an FPR in its FDD, the buyer will want assurance that the seller has strictly complied with FTC and applicable state franchise law standards for disclosure and that sales force activities have been consistent with Item 19 disclosures and the franchise laws. Within the parameters of what is allowable for an FPR in Item 19, the buyer needs to understand that the seller has some flexibility in selecting the categories of information to disclose and the manner of the presentation to make it look favorable. At the same time, there are also very specific requirements in the NASAA Commentary regarding FPRs that the seller must comply with. For this reason, the buyer should require the seller to provide details that demonstrate it has a reasonable basis for an FPR, together with written substantiation of the data to back up its representations. This substantiating data separately may assist the buyer in understanding unit level sales and profitability (see Section D.4 on financial considerations).

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<sup>43</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 11.

<sup>44</sup> Bodeau, Brower, & Knack, *supra* note 21, at 30.



The buyer should request in due diligence and carefully review franchise sales marketing materials, including PowerPoint presentations, excel spreadsheets, video promotions, and other materials used in the sales process by the seller and its brokers, if applicable, to ensure compliance with franchise regulations, including the regulations regarding financial performance representations.

The buyer's task in reviewing the seller's sales practices where no Item 19 FPR exists is more challenging. The buyer will need to take steps to determine whether the seller and its sales force have made any impermissible FPRs during the franchise sales process. The buyer should obtain assurances from the seller and review any supporting documentation (such as closing acknowledgments) to verify, to the extent possible, the seller's compliance.

- (iv) FDD Recordkeeping and Item 20. The buyer should evaluate whether the seller has kept good records of its historical FDDs and all versions issued (if any) in a fiscal year. The seller should also be able to produce state registration and exemption filings and acceptances for the previous four to five (4–5) years.

In addition to generally maintaining the FDD, the buyer should investigate seller's procedure for generating a compliant Item 20 disclosure. It is not uncommon for franchise systems to have incorrectly categorized certain events in Table 3, Table 5, and corresponding exhibits. The buyer should plan for a brief audit of Item 20 prior to closing and a more thorough audit after closing.

- (b) Franchise Sales Compliance. The buyer will need to determine if the seller has taken a disciplined approach to its franchise sales practices and ongoing franchisee administration. The number of franchise files reviewed by the buyer in the due diligence process will depend, in part, on the size of the franchise system, the buyer's budget, the time pressures of the deal, and the cooperation of the seller. When reviewing the franchise sales compliance materials, the buyer should analyze a number of issues to help flush out typical franchise compliance violations:
  - (i) Was an FDD receipt signed by the franchisee or a key individual of the franchisee entity?
  - (ii) Does the date of the franchise agreement, when compared to the date of the signed receipt and other correspondence, confirm compliance with the FTC Rule and individual state law disclosure waiting periods?

- (iii) To the extent the sale involved one or more franchise registration states, did the seller have current registrations or exemptions in those states?
- (iv) Was the then-current version of the FDD provided?
- (v) In particular, if the renewal FDD was issued after the date of the franchisee's receipt, was the updated FDD provided to the franchisee and the waiting periods observed?
- (vi) If a seller claimed an exemption for a sale, can the seller produce evidence of the exemption (if self-executing) or provide pre- or post-sale filings?
- (vii) If the seller utilized franchise disclosure questionnaires, did the seller appropriately address any improper responses from franchisee candidates before the sale?
- (viii) Did the seller use franchise disclosure questionnaires and/or franchise agreement acknowledges that contain "Prohibited Statements," as defined under the NASAA Statement of Policy, in registration states after January 1, 2023?
- (ix) Did the seller comply with regulations regarding acceptance of fees from franchise candidates?
- (x) Can the seller produce evidence of compliance training of its sales personnel? Can the seller provide evidence of other internal compliance measures taken?
- (xi) For transfers and terminations, can the seller provide evidence of adherence to any applicable state relationship laws?

Further inquiries should reveal poor or improper franchise sales or poor recordkeeping. For example, was the franchise agreement properly signed by the party acting as the franchisee? Did all required owners of a franchisee entity sign the guaranty and confidentiality provisions? Was each ancillary agreement and any state specific addendum signed and dated? Were the exhibits completed properly? Franchisors frequently forget to complete the territory description upon signing the franchise agreement and may leave the description blank or state "TBD" (to be determined). The buyer should request copies of state franchise registration orders, comment letters, and related correspondence for prior years to help the buyer determine if sales were made properly.

The buyer should review any advertising materials that the seller has used to identify prospects and sell franchises to assess their proper registration (if applicable) and determine whether the materials included any

information that was inconsistent with the FDD or franchise agreement, especially financial performance representations.

- (c) Broker Relations. If the seller utilized third-party brokers or sales representatives, the buyer should be especially leery and closely evaluate the broker's internal compliance measures. Often, when the seller outsources franchise sales to an outside broker firm, the seller assumes that proper compliance measures are taken. The buyer should closely audit all third-party broker's registrations, litigation history, compliance measures, pre-sale marketing materials, and records of sales made for the franchise system. The buyer should also review the terms of the broker agreements to evaluate whether the broker is required to indemnify the seller if the broker fails to comply with applicable laws.

The buyer should also determine whether it is appropriate to continue utilizing the third-party broker after closing. If the buyer continues the relationship, it may be necessary to re-negotiate the broker contract or impose additional compliance measures post-closing. If the buyer decides to end the broker relationship, the buyer should be equipped with an internal sales team to take on sales and generate a transition program to end the broker relationship.

8. Joint Employer Concerns. A key issue that has received a great deal of attention in the general media and throughout the franchise community in the last several years is the potential that franchisors may be treated as "joint employers" with respect to the franchisees' employees. The joint employer issue arises most frequently in the context of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, the National Labor Relations Act, or Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. An exhaustive summary of the rapidly evolving legal considerations with respect to each of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as a general rule, franchisors can be at risk for a joint employer liability if through contractual language or operational reality, the franchisor, directly or indirectly, controls or has the right to control, the franchisee's employment-related decision-making. The buyer's due diligence review should assess the level of control (or advice) the franchisor actually or potentially can exercise over these employment-related issues of the franchisee's business. This would include a review of the franchise agreements and the franchisor's operation manuals to see what rights the franchisor has in this area, as well as other guidance and assistance that the franchisor provides on employment-related issues, and what efforts the franchisor has taken to ensure that franchisees' employees understand that the franchisee, and not the franchisor, is their employer. For example, sometimes a franchisor has adapted manuals from its company-owned operations and failed to remove provisions regarding the hiring or firing of employees or their day-to-day supervision. This can provide a pathway to joint employer liability claims. If control provisions are found in this context, it increases the risk that the franchisor could be determined to be a joint employer with the franchisees. A review of the operations manual, the franchise agreement, any template documents provided to franchisees, and franchisor-provided

monitoring software that requires staffing levels or otherwise controls the franchisees' employees should identify potential joint employer liability risk.

9. Vicarious Liability Risk. An issue related to joint employer liability is that franchisors may be held vicariously liable for the actions of their franchisees. With respect to vicarious liability, the operative inquiry is whether the franchisor exercises enough control over the franchisee's daily operations, especially the operations related to the alleged harm, that it should be held liable for the acts of the franchisee or its employees. Controlling the use of the trademark and those aspects of the franchisee's business that encompass "the brand" is generally permissible and should not result in vicarious liability. However, if the franchisor exerts control that goes beyond brand protection, the risk of vicarious liability increases. The buyer's due diligence review of the franchise agreements, the franchisor's relationship with franchisees, and the operations manuals is warranted to ferret out the potential for vicarious liability claims.
  
10. Understanding Purchasing and Supply Chain Issues.<sup>45</sup> Depending on the franchise system involved, purchasing and supply chain issues may play an incidental or significant role in assessing the value of the system. For nearly all franchise systems, the buyer will need to conduct due diligence as to purchasing-related issues. What key goods or services must each franchisee acquire, and how has the seller structured acquisition of and control over the purchase of these goods or services? For franchisees in certain franchise systems, purchasing focuses simply on goods and services necessary to conduct the franchised business. For franchisees in retail and many food-based systems, however, the supply chain becomes a much more central aspect of the franchise system. What role does the seller (or its affiliates) play in the supply chain? In many franchise systems, the seller (or its affiliates) may supply goods or services directly to franchisees. In those situations, to what extent does the seller profit from sales of these goods or services, and is the seller's pricing structure competitive with that of third parties? In other franchise systems, the seller may impose restrictions on the type of goods/services or vendors the franchisees must purchase/use. The buyer should review these restrictions to ensure they are consistent with antitrust regulations and satisfy system-wide objectives.

In conducting due diligence involving purchasing and supply chain issues, the buyer will need to review franchise agreement provisions and operational standards established to monitor or control franchisee purchases and the system supply chain. The buyer also must examine agreements and relationships with key third-party vendors to determine the nature and strength of those relationships. Are these relationships properly documented or more informal in nature? Do they result in favorable pricing to franchisees in comparison to alternative vendors? How much control do key vendors have with respect to the system, and what options does the seller have to change vendors? What rebates or commissions does the seller receive

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<sup>45</sup> Knack, Brown, & Holland, *supra* note 2, at 17.

from third-party vendors, and how are those arrangements documented? Finally, has the seller properly disclosed in the FDD (Item 8) its (or its affiliates') role in the supply chain and the revenues it (or an affiliate) receives from franchisee leases/purchases of products and services?

11. Talking to Stakeholders. Rather than simply taking the seller's word (as supported by its internal records) that its relationships with key stakeholders are stable, buyers sometimes wish to investigate those relationships by communicating with those stakeholders directly.

Understandably, sellers typically resist allowing buyers the opportunity to interview franchisees, landlords, employees, or suppliers, particularly, before they have a reasonable degree of certainty that the deal will go through. One approach that buyers sometimes use in smaller systems is to impose a requirement that the seller have its franchisees and landlords execute and return estoppel certificates, pursuant to which the signer certifies that it has complied with the franchise or lease agreement, as applicable, that it is not aware of any claims or possible claims that the franchisor may have against it, and that it has no claims against the franchisor. Whether or not these certificates have any legal force opposite the franchisees or landlords who sign them may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction; however, some buyers (i.e., those with a high degree of bargaining power in the sale transaction) are able to insert closing conditions into their purchase agreement requiring that a certain (high) threshold of certificates be returned before they will be required to proceed with the transaction. Review of franchisee satisfaction surveys, if available, can also help support the buyer's request to interview franchisees if the surveys identify franchisee relationship concerns.

12. Cross-Border Issues. As mentioned above, it is essential to engage local legal counsel and tax advisors early in the deal process whenever the transaction involves a target or party in another jurisdiction or a system with international presence. Local counsel can provide key assistance with understanding and observing local franchise laws, structuring the transaction, conducting and interpreting the results of the franchise due diligence review, and negotiating and drafting the definitive purchase agreement. For example, since franchise and other applicable laws differ across jurisdictions, the buyer's investigation into the seller's compliance must be tailored, to a certain degree, to account for those differences — local counsel can help by telling the buyer and their domestic counsel what additional questions to ask. Similarly, the representations and warranties in the purchase agreement should be customized to take into account local compliance matters.

Aside from franchise-specific assistance, local counsel may be needed to conduct trademark, security, and other searches on the seller and its assets and to file notices or apply for relief under applicable antitrust, foreign investment review, and other local statutes. Again, any issues in such areas are best discovered as early as possible in the process, and so local counsel should be consulted before significant steps are taken and money is spent in advancing the proposed transaction.

13. Data. As part of its broader data privacy and cybersecurity due diligence, the buyer will also want to understand seller’s approach to customer data generated and/or used by the franchised businesses. Do the seller’s franchise agreements provide for the franchisor’s ownership of customer data or, at least, grant the franchisor the right to access and use such data? Do the franchise agreements impose an obligation on the franchisee to comply with applicable data privacy and security laws as well as franchisor’s related policies? Is the franchisor up to speed on and in compliance with evolving legislation regarding consumer data protection? Do the business operations subject the seller and/or the franchisees to the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (the GDPR) or other foreign data privacy and security legislation or domestic legislation, such as the California Consumer Privacy Act?

I. Purchase Agreement Negotiations: How the Due Diligence Process can Impact the Transaction.

As the deal progresses, the parties will work toward signing a “definitive agreement,” which means a negotiated purchase agreement, within a stated time period, or the buyer will lose exclusivity on the deal. The purchase agreement is usually negotiated concurrently with due diligence, though in franchisee transactions it’s customary to conduct due diligence with exclusivity after the signing of the purchase agreement. Who prepares the first draft? If the deal follows an auction process with multiple potential buyers—meaning the seller has bargaining power—the seller’s legal counsel will prepare the first draft and expect the potential buyers to work within this draft as negotiations proceed. Absent an auction process, we typically see the buyer’s counsel control the first draft. The negotiations will focus on representations related to the business as well as the covenants of the parties. In addition, the indemnification provisions, including the determination of any “dollar one” liabilities, other liabilities subject to a basket or a deductible, and any cap on liabilities, will be negotiated. The results of the due diligence will feed into the negotiations, as the buyer will seek more favorable terms and more risk reducing provisions if the buyer’s investigations reveal red flags.

1. Franchise Representations and Warranties. At the heart of any acquisition of a franchise system are the franchise-related representations and warranties (referred to as “representations” hereafter). The representations in the purchase agreement and the disclosures made by the seller in response to them are a major source of information about the target company.<sup>46</sup> The representations should address and confirm the areas of due diligence discussed above. The buyer’s goal in establishing these representations is to create a benchmark of key information and statements upon which the buyer can rely in buying the system. The consequence to the seller of a breach of its representations is that the seller will pay any buyer losses associated with the breach, subject to certain conditions and limitations by indemnification.
2. Sample Franchise Representations. A detailed review of typical representations is beyond the scope of this M&A Basics paper. Generally, however, the

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<sup>46</sup> Bodeau, Brower, & Knack, *supra* note 21, at 31.

representations follow the key due diligence review areas in the buyer's due diligence process. A sample of possible franchise-issues representations is attached to this paper as Exhibit B. As you will see in the sample, through the language of the representations and the items the Seller puts on the disclosure schedules, the buyer will want to:

- Assure that it has received complete copies of all of the franchise agreements, including any amendments and addenda, whether oral or written.
- Confirm that the franchise agreements are valid, binding, and enforceable as written.
- Review a schedule of pending or possible defaults (i.e., situations that, with the passage of time or the giving of notice, would result in defaults).
- Confirm that all advertising and other funds have been administered properly.
- Review a schedule of pending or possible defaults (i.e., situations that, with the passage of time or the giving of notice, would result in defaults).
- Confirm that all advertising and other funds have been administered properly.
- Obtain a full disclosure of pending or threatened franchise-related claims or governmental actions, including any vicarious or joint employer liability claims.
- Identify all forms of the FDD used for sales and assure that they were prepared and delivered in compliance with franchise laws. Consider adding a more specific representation with respect to any financial performance representations (“FPRs”) if the franchisor has an FPR in Item 19 of its FDD (e.g., a representation that the franchise sellers have made no FPRs other than those set forth in Item 19).
- Identify the jurisdictions in which the franchisor is or has been registered or claimed exemption for its franchise offering.
- Confirm the franchisor's compliance with all franchise laws, including franchise relationship laws applicable to franchise terminations, transfers, and non-renewals.
- Check for issues related to territory grants, including franchisee territory disputes and whether the grants are described as exclusive or non-exclusive.
- Determine whether the franchisor has used any franchise brokers. If brokers have been used, additional representations should be made as to the franchise brokers' compliance with franchise laws. Any fee arrangements and outstanding amounts owed to brokers should be identified in the disclosure schedules.
- Identify rebates and related contracts and confirm that disclosures have been properly made about them in the FDD and rebates have been properly administered by the franchisor.

- Determine that there are no franchise-related options applicable to the franchise agreements or the franchised business, including franchisees having a right of first refusal on additional territories/franchises or options to purchase additional territories/franchises.
- Assure that former franchisees have not been allowed to compete with the franchise system.
- Confirm that the franchisor has consistently enforced and protected its rights under the franchise agreements.
- Assure that the franchisor has taken adequate steps to minimize the risk of joint employer and other vicarious liability.
- Verify that the franchisor has effectively monitored and enforced franchisees' compliance with insurance requirements, and that franchisees have named the franchisor (and its affiliates) as an additional insured on the franchisee's policy.
- Identify all pending or threatened claims made by franchisees that are not otherwise disclosed in the FDD.

3. Representations and Warranties Insurance. Whether the buyer or seller will obtain representations and warranties insurance, and the scope of the insurance coverage, also can significantly impact the breadth of the representations that the seller is willing to provide. These insurance products can shift the risk of certain indemnification claims based on breaches of representations from the seller to the insurance carrier, subject to certain deductibles, caps, and exclusions. These insurance policies can provide sellers comfort as to the purchase price not being subject to significant indemnification claims, and for the benefit of buyers, can result in sellers being willing to provide more expanded representations. When a buyer purchases a representations and warranties insurance, such decision presents an interesting conflict for a buyer during its diligence investigations, as the insurer will require that the buyer share with it all of its due diligence findings, which then will form the basis for the negotiation of any exclusions from the insurance coverage. The insurance carrier will also require more formalized diligence reports (e.g., quality of earnings, tax, legal) from third parties, which will increase the cost and time of diligence. The cost to secure the representations and warranties insurance is a term to be negotiated between the parties.

4. Reductions to Price; Minimizing Risk with Seller Indemnifications, Holdbacks and Escrows; Covenants. Based on the findings of the buyer's due diligence review, including what the seller reports on the disclosure schedules (in respect of the representations and warranties made), and on, particularly, any discoveries that rise to the level of a material risk or "red flag," the buyer may seek to reduce the purchase price or use the red flags to justify any special indemnity treatment for high-risk areas. Strategies regarding indemnifications with respect to red flag areas of concern will include requiring a lower deductible above which the seller must pay any buyer losses, going to "dollar one" liability (no deductible or a tipping



basket) for specific losses related to franchise red-flag issues, or increasing any cap on liability related to the red-flag issues. If the franchise diligence overall reveals significant liability exposure, the buyer may push to designate the franchise representations as “fundamental representations,” thus excluding related liability from any deductible/cap limitations (or providing for a lower deductible and/or larger liability cap) and extending the survival period of the representations to, e.g., an applicable statute of limitations period. The additions of covenants can also protect the buyer, such as a covenant requiring that key employees of seller will continue with the business post-closing for a certain period of time and that relationships with major suppliers to the system will not be disrupted post-closing by the seller.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the buyer will seek ways to assure the seller can “make good” on its indemnities through holdbacks to the purchase price or, alternatively, the escrowing of funds to enhance buyer security.

5. Keeping A Hand In — A Note on Roll-Over Equity, Earn-Outs, and Post-Closing Employment/Consulting Agreements. A relatively common occurrence with owner-operated businesses is the desire of one or both parties to the sale to have the founder/principal stay on for a period of time following closing. Financial buyers may see the owner’s participation as a key part of the ongoing success of the business, and the owner may want to continue to participate in the growth of the business. In those instances, the owner will invest or roll-over/retain equity securities in the business and stay on post-closing. The negotiation and documentation of the governing documents of the business and ancillary agreements post-transaction are beyond the scope of this paper but will be an additional significant point of negotiation. The parties may view such participation as a temporary measure to help ensure a smooth transition to new ownership, or it may be regarded as a more permanent arrangement, often where the founder’s/principal’s own image and personality are closely tied to the brand’s image and, thus, to the goodwill of the business. In such circumstances, an employment or consulting agreement is typically entered into between the buyer and the founder/principal for the desired transitional or other period. Such agreements should set out in detail the founder’s/principal’s obligations as well as how the individual will be supervised and by whom. In some cases, the compensation to be paid under these arrangements is tied to the performance of the franchisor company post-closing and can represent a significant portion of the overall consideration paid by the buyer to the founder/principal on the sale. These agreements may also supplement an earn-out clause in the purchase agreement — in such circumstances, the term of the employment/consulting agreement usually coincides with the term of the earn-out. Needless to say, whenever such an arrangement is contemplated, the buyer must ensure that it has sufficient visibility into and checks and balances surrounding the operating results (and the reporting of those results) that form the basis of the earn-out calculation and/or the founder/principal’s compensation as an employee or consultant. Whenever the business will be subject to an earnout period post-closing, the buyer needs to

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<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 31.

carefully think through its post-closing strategy for the acquired business and ensure that any material changes the buyer wishes to implement post-closing (during the earnout period) are addressed as part of the earnout negotiations, so they do not later result in allegations by seller that the buyer interfered with the seller's ability to maximize its earnout.

J. Post-Closing Challenges and Franchisee Relations.

The buyer should be well positioned and able to communicate the impact of the merger or acquisition to current franchisees and the franchisor's employees. As with any change, the buyer can expect a certain healthy amount of hesitancy from franchisees, especially legacy franchisees that have been in the system for long periods of time. The buyer may encounter the following post-closing:

1. Initial Announcement and FDD Amendment. The buyer should determine the optimal time to conduct the closing and announce the acquisition or merger. While this can involve a fair amount of analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper, strategic consideration should include expected sales of new franchises post-closing, the timing for updating the FDD, and the time of year of such required updates.

The FTC Rule and certain registration state law require the franchise to amend the franchise disclosure document within a reasonable time, typically thirty (30) days after the acquisition, with relevant information related to the merger or acquisition when there has been a change in control or other "material change."<sup>48</sup> Because this requires an amendment to the existing FDD, the buyer should be prepared to include unaudited interim financials capturing the acquisition or merger.<sup>49</sup> It should also cease all new franchise sales and expect a period of going dark while post-effective amendments are filed and accepted with the applicable registration states.<sup>50</sup> Depending on the time of year, filing and acceptance of the post-effective amendments may be a lengthy process; for example, if the franchisor makes such filings in the February to April time period, it could experience significant delays and may want to go dark in certain registration states until it can make a more complete filing with its annual FDD updates.

If the buyer is involved in franchising of other brands, updates to those brands' FDDs may also be necessary if the acquisition or merger has a "material" or "negative effect" on the financial condition.<sup>51</sup> Since the FTC does not expressly

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<sup>48</sup> *The Franchise Compliance Guide* ("Compliance Guide") was issued by the Federal Trade Commission in May 2008. The Compliance Guide can be found at <https://www.ftc.gov/tipsadvice/business-center/guidance/franchise-rule-compliance-guide>; see Amy Cheng, Diana Vilmenay, and Theresa Leets, *Thorny FDD Disclosure Issues*, International Franchise Association 51st Annual Legal Symposium, p. 13–19, Exhibit A (2018); see also Terrence M. Dunn, *Material Changes and the FDD: Amending and Going Dark*, *Franchise Law Journal*, 34(4) (2015).

<sup>49</sup> Compliance Guide, *supra* note 47, at 126.

<sup>50</sup> Dunn, *supra* note 47, at 542.

<sup>51</sup> Compliance Guide, *supra* note 47, at 126.

define “material event” or “material change,” a more fact-specific analysis should be conducted based on the particulars of the acquisition, the franchisor, and the franchise system to determine the acquisition’s effect on the acquired brand and any other affiliated brands.<sup>52</sup>

2. Business as Usual? The seller and the buyer should determine whether the existing leadership and other key employees will continue post-acquisition. The franchisor’s founders or the executive team may choose to continue to be involved (or only involved for a certain period) or choose to exit at the time of the acquisition. In the same vein, certain key employees may find other opportunities pre- or post-closing. The buyer should be prepared with a reasonable transition plan for any personnel changes, so the franchise system is adequately supported, and the introduction of any new employees involved with leadership or the day-to-day management of the franchise system; any such changes may need to be reflected in the amended FDD.

Although a challenge, the buyer should attempt to dedicate resources to complete a full audit of franchised units and corresponding franchise agreements and related documents, regardless of the disclosures and discoveries made during the due diligence process. More likely than not, the buyer will discover additional deficiencies that the buyer may need to address timely. This audit will also provide the buyer a baseline and contribute to strategic decisions in the first few months to a year post-closing, which is often a critical time for the buyer to have a positive impact on the acquired franchise system.

3. Operational Changes and Amendments. After taking the reins, the buyer should identify the processes it aims to preserve and processes that could use improvement. Due diligence should have revealed the buyer’s ability to institute change within the life cycle of the different versions of the franchise agreements in effect. Some considerations include, but are not limited to:
  - Updating the operations manual;
  - Updating accounting and payment processing;
  - Instituting or enforcing advertising requirements within the scope of the franchise agreement;
  - Instituting a better renewal and transfer process;
  - Re-instituting operational requirements or fees that previously were waived; and
  - Instituting new system-wide programs, which may only be achieved by way of an amendment to the franchise agreement. The buyer may need to incentivize

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<sup>52</sup> See Dunn, *supra* note 47, at 537.

franchisee participation in such programs if they are outside the scope of the franchise agreement.

Instituting system-wide changes is typically not smooth, even outside of a merger or acquisition. Effective communication about the benefits of such changes can be helpful to obtaining voluntary participation from existing franchisees. However, depending on the expectations and success of historical leadership, some franchise systems may consider offering lower performing or especially disgruntled franchisees an opportunity to exit the system if they are unable or unwilling to make the necessary post-acquisition changes.

4. Expecting (and preparing for) the Unexpected. Regardless of the length or depth of due diligence conducted, the buyer may still experience surprises or other unforeseen challenges. Some post-closing challenges may include:
- Discovery of holdover franchisees or franchisees operating units without franchise agreements;
  - Resolving discrepancies in Item 20 disclosure and franchisee lists;
  - Formation or resurgence of independent franchisee associations;
  - Licensees who should actually be franchisees;
  - Changes in financial assurance requirements in corresponding state registration applications;
  - Manifestation of issues resulting from poor sales practices or financial performance representations from years prior; and
  - Issues related to poor recordkeeping or poor document execution and management.

K. Conclusion.

As the above overview of franchise mergers and acquisitions illustrates, the sale and purchase of a franchise system presents a unique set of financial and legal considerations. Sellers should prepare carefully in advance for a sale and will benefit from consultation with an M&A advisor. Buyers should understand that franchising poses distinctive opportunities and concerns and, therefore, should appropriately tailor their due diligence process to address such opportunities and concerns.

EXHIBIT A<sup>53</sup>

**SAMPLE FRANCHISE DUE DILIGENCE CHECKLIST**

**(NAME OF POTENTIAL FRANCHISOR SELLER)**

Date:

For purposes of this document, the term “Company” collectively refers to \_\_\_\_\_ **[FRANCHISOR SELLER]** and all of its affiliates, parent companies, subsidiaries, and any predecessors that have sold franchises during the past ten (10) years.

The term “franchisee” is intended to refer to Company’s domestic and foreign franchisees, area franchisees, area developers, area representatives, subfranchisors, master franchisees, and licensees, as applicable. In addition, the term “subfranchisee” is intended to refer to the domestic and foreign subfranchisees and sublicensees, as applicable, of Company’s franchisees.

The term “Disclosure Document” refers to and includes any franchise or business opportunity disclosure document (including Uniform Franchise Offering Circulars (“UFOCs”) and Franchise Disclosure Documents (“FDDs”)) prepared by or for Company for use in (i) the United States, including any of its states, jurisdictions, districts, territories, or possessions; (ii) Canada, including any of its provinces, jurisdictions, territories, or possessions; (iii) , **[LIST ANY OTHER COUNTRIES IN WHICH COMPANY MAY BE SPECIFICALLY INVOLVED]**, including any of its states, jurisdictions, districts, autonomous regions, territories, or possessions; or (vi) any other foreign country or jurisdiction.

Please provide to us the information described below. **[Identify format in which all requested information is to be received.]**

**Section A. Disclosure Documents and Registration/Notice Filings**

1. All Disclosure Documents for the past five (5) years approved, used, or pending in any state, province, jurisdiction, district, autonomous region, territory, or possession of the United States (including Puerto Rico), Canada, **[LIST ANY OTHER COUNTRIES IN WHICH COMPANY MAY BE SPECIFICALLY INVOLVED]**, or any other foreign country. Provide a clean copy of each different version of each Disclosure Document, as well as blacklined copies showing changes between the different versions of each Disclosure Document (i.e., year to year changes as well as state-specific FDD changes). Also provide an electronic clean copy of each different version of each Disclosure Document in Microsoft Word format.

2. All files relating to effective and pending U.S. and any foreign franchise registration/notice filings, exemption filings, and business opportunity notice filings made by or on behalf of Company during the past five (5) years, including all comment letters, approvals, and other correspondence with applicable franchise regulators and governmental agencies.

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<sup>53</sup> This checklist is reproduced from Knack, Brown & Holland, supra, Note 2, with minor updates from the authors.

3. All U.S. and foreign franchise registration, business opportunity, or exemption applications (including initial, amendment, or renewal applications) pending or in the process of being prepared for filing.

4. A list of all jurisdictions (U.S. and foreign) having franchise registration/notice laws or business opportunity laws where no required registrations or notices of sale are effective or currently in process and where the Company has offered or sold franchises since 20\_\_.

5. A chart indicating all applicable effective dates, amendment dates, expiration dates, and renewal dates for all required franchise registration/notice filings, exemption filings, and business opportunity notice filings in each jurisdiction in which the Company has offered or sold franchises since 20\_\_.

6. A copy of all questionnaires provided to counsel to assist in preparation and updating of Disclosure Documents during the past five (5) years.

7. A copy of all advertising and marketing materials used by Company to promote and sell franchises during the past five (5) years and all related registration filings submitted by or on behalf of Company to franchise regulators or governmental agencies during the same period.

8. A copy of all sales representative disclosure forms submitted by or on behalf of Company to franchise regulators and governmental agencies during the past five (5) years.

9. A copy of all correspondence with the Federal Trade Commission (“FTC”), state franchise regulators, and governmental agencies about franchise or business opportunity sales, enforcement actions (if applicable), consumer marketing activities, or franchisee comments or complaints.

10. A franchisee pipeline chart for the sales process.

11. A list of all franchise brokers or third-party salespersons currently used and have been used in the last three (3) years and, if any, all agreements governing the relationship between such parties and the franchisor entity and any affiliate.

12. If such franchise brokers or third-party salespersons maintain any records for the franchisor, then a copy of all such records and access to software used for the franchise system, including, but not limited to, electronic signature platforms such as DocuSign.

13. Any consumer or governmental complaint or inquiry or franchise compliance or allegation of non-compliance with consumer protection laws, credit card processing, gift card operations, or any other commercial or consumer matter.

14. A list of all franchise and other counsel who assisted with development and maintenance of any U.S. and foreign franchise agreements, master franchise agreements, development agreements, option agreements, area franchise agreements, area representative agreements, license agreements, subfranchise agreements, sublicense agreements, and like agreements currently in effect that Company or its franchisees, as applicable, including counsel who assisted with registrations and other filings of such documents.

## **Section B. Franchise Agreements and Other Agreements**

1. Executed copies of all U.S. and foreign franchise agreements, master franchise agreements, development agreements, option agreements, area franchise agreements, area representative agreements, license agreements, subfranchise agreements, sublicense agreements, and like agreements currently in effect that the Company or its franchisees, as applicable, have entered into with franchisees or subfranchisees (collectively the “Franchise Agreements”). For each Franchise Agreement, include a copy of (a) all addenda, amendments, lease riders, exhibits, SBA addendums or negotiated addendums for benefit of lenders, and ancillary documents pertaining to that Franchise Agreement; (b) the signed and dated receipt for the Disclosure Document, if any, associated with that Franchise Agreement; (c) indication of whether or not still in effect or if operating past the term; (d) any other material in Company’s files evidencing compliance with all applicable waiting periods and disclosure procedures with respect to any Franchise Agreements signed during the past five (5) years; (e) if franchisee is an entity, the entity’s organizational filings and operating/shareholders agreement and EIN; (f) franchisee’s lease agreements; and (g) franchisee’s certificates of insurance.

2. A list of any franchisees or subfranchisees that executed non-standard forms of Franchise Agreements or that negotiated material changes to their Franchise Agreements (whether prior or subsequent to execution of the Franchise Agreements), together with a brief summary of all terms that are materially different from the terms contained within the standard form of Franchise Agreement utilized at that time. Limit this request to current franchisees and subfranchisees and current and former franchisees and subfranchisees whose Franchise Agreements expired or were terminated within the past five (5) years.

3. A list of any franchisees or subfranchisees that have been granted an option, right of first refusal, or other similar right to establish one or more additional franchises.

4. A clean copy of each different form of Franchise Agreement Company has used during the past five to ten (5–10) years, as well as blacklined copies showing changes between each different form of Franchise Agreement. Also provide an electronic clean copy of each different form of Franchise Agreement in Microsoft Word format.

5. Executed copies of any lease or sublease the Company has signed or guaranteed on behalf of any franchisee or subfranchisee and, in the case of any subleases, an executed copy of the underlying lease. Limit this request to current franchisees and subfranchisees and current and former franchisees and subfranchisees whose Franchise Agreements expired or were terminated within the past five (5) years.

6. Executed copies of any agreements Company has signed for any Company- or Affiliate-owned franchises, licenses, or locations.

7. Franchise disclosure documents and other contracts used with respect to the offer and sale of franchises in foreign jurisdictions and, where applicable, proof of registration.

8. Description of any contentious discussions with prospects or existing franchisees relating to the renewal, amendment, or opening of any franchise.

9. A current list of all franchisees that have signed franchise agreements but have not yet opened.

10. A current list of all franchisees that have a franchised unit open but do not have corresponding franchise agreements or other agreements governing the operation of such unit.

11. A current list of all franchisees that have a franchise agreement and have opened for business but closed for any reason and the corresponding franchise agreement has not yet been contractually terminated.

12. A current list of all domestic and international developers with units not yet open and number of units not yet open, including corresponding development deadlines.

13. A separate and current list of expiration dates of all international franchise, multi-unit development, license, and master agreements, and a list of counsel who assisted with preparation of those documents.

### **Section C. Franchisee Matters/Franchise Sales Matters**

1. A list of all current franchisees and subfranchisees. For each such franchisee/subfranchisee, provide (a) its name, address, and telephone number; (b) the effective date of each of its current Franchise Agreements; (c) the location or locations it has been granted the right to establish, and/or the territory it has been given the right to develop, under each current Franchise Agreement; (d) the name and address of its guarantors, if any, for each Franchise Agreement; and (e) the respective exclusive territory, if any, granted to it under each current Franchise Agreement.

2. A list of all current and former franchisees and subfranchisees that had the term of their Franchise Agreements end as the result of expiration, termination, or non-renewal during the past five (5) years. For each such current or former franchisee/subfranchisee, provide (a) its name, last known address, and phone number; (b) the effective date of each of its prior Franchise Agreements; (c) the location or locations it had been granted the right to establish, and/or the territory it had been given the right to develop, under each of its prior Franchise Agreements; (d) the date and reason the term of each of its prior Franchise Agreements ended, including a copy of any termination or non-renewal notice or agreement documenting the same; and (e) general or mutual releases signed and related documentation. This list should also include franchisees that have ceased operations but for whom franchise agreements have not yet been officially terminated.

3. A list of prospective franchisees and subfranchisees (including name, address, and telephone number) that have been approached or contacted about becoming a franchisee/subfranchisee. Indicate which of these prospective franchisees or subfranchisees, if any, Company or its franchisee, as applicable, expects will sign Franchise Agreements during the next ninety (90) days. Provide copies of all agreements, letters of intent, or similar expressions of interest, binding or nonbinding, with prospective franchisees or subfranchisees.

4. Access to Company's franchise files, including those containing (a) Disclosure Documents and registration, notice and exemption filings; (b) executed Franchise Agreements;



(c) correspondence between Company and former, current, and prospective franchisees and subfranchisees; and (d) inspection reports, internal compliance reports, and checklists for all franchisees and subfranchisees.

5. All correspondence, notices, agreements, consents, and similar material related to any transfer completed by a franchisee or subfranchisee during the past five (5) years, as well as a description of any pending or proposed sales of existing franchises or subfranchises by franchisees or subfranchisees, and Company's rights of first refusal to purchase such franchises or subfranchises, if any.

6. A list of all franchisees and subfranchisees currently in default of their Franchise Agreements, indicating the cause, the date of the default, the date and type of notice sent to the franchisee or subfranchisee, if any, the cure date, whether any cure plan has been agreed upon, and Company's assessment of the probability of cure. We may request the full franchise file on any listed franchisee or subfranchisee.

7. All termination or nonrenewal notices to franchisees or subfranchisees, either pending or implemented in the past five (5) years, together with a basic summary of the status or outcome.

8. A list of any current or former franchisee or subfranchisee that is currently violating or who has violated, during the past five (5) years, any post-term noncompete or other post-term covenant contained in its expired or terminated Franchise Agreement.

9. A list of any prospective or current franchisees or subfranchisees that have been promised a waiver or reduction of any of the fees described in the current form Franchise Agreements.

10. Describe any policy relating to delays by franchisees or subfranchisees in starting or completing pre-opening activities beyond the performance dates in the Franchise Agreements.

11. State whether franchisees are required to obtain additional insured endorsements in favor of Company for franchisee insurance policies and describe procedures for monitoring franchisee compliance with insurance requirements.

12. A copy of the bylaws, minutes, correspondence, and other documents relating to any independent or franchisor-sponsored franchisee advisory council or other representative body and any franchisee association, including any documents that create obligations on the part of the Company to obtain franchisee approval of standards or policy changes or other franchise system matters and correspondence requesting inclusion in the FDD.

13. A description of all financing arrangements offered by Company to franchisees or subfranchisees, amounts outstanding under such arrangements, amounts past due or in default, and reserves established for doubtful accounts under such arrangements. Include copies of loan proposals, loan commitments, and reports and correspondence relating to this activity. Also, include sample copies of all notes, financing documents, Uniform Commercial Code's ("UCC's"), and disclosures, if any, required by law in connection with such financing.

14. A description of all instances where Company has consented to a collateral assignment of any Franchise Agreement to secure any franchisee or subfranchisee loan obligations.
15. A list of all contingent liabilities of Company relating to its franchisees or any guarantees of franchisee obligations.
16. All material system-wide communications with franchisees or franchisee groups since 20\_\_.
17. A copy of Company's current franchise application form, as well as any other forms of franchise application Company has use over the past five (5) years.
18. Copies of all form letters, notices, and memoranda (i.e., form default notices, form termination letters, and form transfer and consent to transfer agreements).
19. A list of all brokers or sales agents used by Company to sell franchises in the past five (5) years, and copies of any agreements Company entered into with them.
20. A list of any franchise consultants used by Company in the past five (5) years, and copies of any agreements Company entered into with them.
21. A list of all franchise sales shows, events, and commitments for the upcoming twelve (12) months, including the date, a description of the event, the persons scheduled to attend, and the financial commitment.
22. Monthly and annual payment, receivables, and receivable aging reports for franchisees for royalties, advertising payments, and other regular payment obligations of the franchisees.
23. System privacy policies and any franchisee privacy policies for each brand, including all correspondence or complaints related to franchisor or franchisee compliance or violation of privacy policies or privacy laws.
24. Any notice from any state department of labor or wage and hour agency (or equivalent state agency) requesting information from franchisor as related to its franchisee's labor practices in the last five (5) years.
25. A list of all franchise relationship management, accounting, and other software used to aid the franchisor in maintaining the franchise system and read-only access to such software.

#### **Section D. Disputes, Litigation ,and Regulators**

1. All orders, directives, investigations, or inquiries received from the FTC or any state or foreign franchising, business opportunities, or other regulatory authority related to the franchise system. All correspondence with any federal, state, or foreign regulator pertaining to the franchise system, including franchisee or subfranchisee comments or complaints or alleged violations of applicable law.

2. A detailed description of the current status or results of, as applicable, all pending, threatened, and concluded litigation, arbitration or mediation proceedings brought against Company or any of its officers, directors, or employees, during the past ten (10) years (even if not considered material for purposes of inclusion in the Disclosure Documents), which involve or relate to franchisees or subfranchisees or the franchise system. Provide a copy of all pleadings and notices in these cases. Provide a list of all vicarious liability claims and cases, indicating which claims are uninsured or underinsured, describing the nature of the claims. Disclose any policy relating to suits against franchisees or subfranchisees, including any policy about cases that should not be filed or defended. Describe Company's collection policy for delinquent fees from franchisees and subfranchisees. Provide copies of pleading files for all Company-initiated litigation, arbitration, and mediation proceedings brought against franchisees or subfranchisees during the past five (5) years.

3. Copies of all notices or correspondence from third parties within the past five (5) years alleging violations by the Company of the FTC Franchise Rule; any state or foreign franchise disclosure, registration or relationship law; any federal, state or foreign deceptive trade practices act (or comparable laws); any federal, state or foreign business opportunities law, or any other federal, state, or foreign law specifically regulating franchises, business opportunities, or similar arrangements.

4. A description of all litigation in the past five (5) years involving or affecting any of Company's intellectual property rights.

5. Copies of all correspondence threatening litigation against Company within the past five (5) years.

6. Copies of all termination, settlement, release, or estoppel agreements with current or former franchisees executed within the past five (5) years.

#### **Section E. Supply and Distribution**

1. Copies of all agreements, if any, between Company and/or Company's affiliates, parent companies, or subsidiaries relating to the manufacture, supply, and/or distribution of products and services to franchisees or subfranchisees.

2. Copies of all manufacturing, supply, and distribution agreements, if any, between Company and any manufacturers, suppliers, or distributors of products and services to franchisees or subfranchisees.

3. Copies of all manufacturing, supply, and distribution agreements, if any, between Company or Company's affiliates and franchisees or subfranchisees.

4. A list of all manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors designated by Company as an approved source or as the only or one of the only approved sources from whom franchisees or subfranchisees may or must purchase products and services. Identify any manufacturer, supplier, or distributor who falls within the definition of "Company."

5. Describe any commissions, rebates, discounts, or other consideration Company receives from third-party manufacturers, suppliers, and/or distributors as the result of the sale of products and services to franchisees. Provide the specific dollar amount Company received from third-party manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors for each of the past three (3) fiscal years. Provide the specific dollar amount Company received as the result of its direct sale of products and services to franchisees and subfranchisees for each of the past three (3) fiscal years.

6. Copies of all documents concerning Company's approval or disapproval of manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors since 20\_\_, including all related correspondence.

#### **Section F. Advertising (Marketing) Fund and Local Advertising Vendors**

1. A description of the national advertising fund the Company administers, as well as any other local, regional, national, or international advertising programs Company administers or controls to which franchisees or subfranchisees contribute. Include copies of all relevant articles, bylaws, or other governing documents.

2. A description of how contributions to any local, regional, national, and international advertising programs Company administers or controls have been spent from the beginning of 20\_\_ to the present. Include copies of financial statements for the past three (3) fiscal years and an accounting of the advertising fees Company collected in 20\_\_.

3. List of franchisees and subfranchisees that are more than sixty (60) days behind in advertising fee payments.

4. A list of all third-party advertising and marketing vendors on franchisor's approved vendor list who may assist franchisees with local advertising or grand opening efforts, and a description of services each offers to franchisees and related cost.

#### **Section G. Franchise System**

1. Provide a clean copy of all current (a) manuals made available to franchisees and (b) internal policy manuals or other materials describing policies relating to franchise sales and administration. In addition, provide any different versions of these manuals Company has used over the past five (5) years, with a description of the changes between the different versions.

2. A description of all training programs provided to franchisees or subfranchisees during the past three (3) years, including copies of all written materials provided to franchisees and subfranchisees, and instructions from Company to the training staff. Provide a schedule of all training activities for the next twelve (12) months, including classes at home office and training programs in the field and at franchised locations.

3. Copies of all quality assurance reports written by Company pertaining to franchisees and subfranchisees during the past three (3) years.

4. Describe any proprietary component of the franchise system licensed to Company by a third party or otherwise not owned and controlled exclusively by Company.

5. Printouts of all content currently published by Company on any internet or intranet or other computer network accessible by current or prospective franchisees or subfranchisees or the general public.

6. A copy of all written policies and public statements, press releases, and announcements by any officer, director, or representative of Company that affect the enforcement or interpretation of any of the Franchise Agreements, including termination rights, calculation of quantitative measures and metrics, impact/encroachment policies, and quality assurance/standards policies.

7. Provide a copy of all audit reports generated during the last three (3) years from audits of franchisees and subfranchisees and any related correspondence, billing, collection, and contract modification activity relating to audits.

8. Copies or descriptions of all earnings claims/financial performance representations, including supplemental earnings claims/financial performance representations, made or provided to prospective franchisees or subfranchisees (both within or outside of the Disclosure Documents), and all related substantiating data.

9. Instructions to franchise sales staff or franchise brokers regarding the making of earnings claims/financial performance representations to prospective franchisees.

10. Description of any required computer hardware or software.

11. Agreements and arrangements with third parties and with franchisees regarding the use, sale, and administration of gift cards, reloadable stored value cards, and other frequent purchaser or customer preference cards, including legal compliance policies.

12. An employee organization chart showing all of franchisor's personnel who assist with day-to-day franchise system management and operations.

## **Section H. Intellectual Property**

1. A description and the status of any and all U.S. and foreign intellectual property (collectively "Intellectual Property") owned, licensed, or used by Company, including, but not limited to, patents, patent applications, and any and all other patent rights, trademarks, trade names, service marks, trade dress, brand names, logos, other trade designations (including unregistered names and marks), trademark applications, trademark registrations, service mark applications, service mark registrations, copyrights, copyright applications, inventions, inventors' notes, moral rights, formulations, processes, methods, Internet domain names, Internet websites, URLs, social media accounts, trade secrets, software, computer programs, computer source codes, know-how, customer information, supplier information, proprietary development information, and drawings and designs.

2. Copies of all (a) agreements, including, without limitation, all licensing agreements (other than franchise agreements), assignment agreements, security agreements, maintenance agreements, confidentiality agreements (including those with members, managers, officers, directors, employees, and agents of Company), advertising agreements, marketing agreements and

development, manufacturing, distribution, dealer, sales agency, sales representative, or other like agreements, (b) applications, (c) registrations, (d) correspondence, and (e) other documents relating to the ownership, use, or exploitation of any Intellectual Property.

3. A description of any royalty arrangements involving the Intellectual Property, together with a statement of royalties paid out or received.

4. A list of all known pre-existing uses of the Intellectual Property (particularly trademarks and service marks), and, to the extent possible, identify the user(s). Additionally, provide a list of areas within the U.S. and any foreign jurisdiction where Company is prohibited from using its Intellectual Property (particularly trademarks and service marks).

5. A description of all infringement actions, oppositions, proceedings, or challenges to ownership (whether pending or threatened, verbal or written) filed by or against Company, in the U.S. or internationally, with respect to any Intellectual Property or other right belonging to Company, and copies of all executed settlement agreements and related documents and other material agreements, correspondence, and documents concerning any such infringement actions, oppositions, proceedings, or challenges.

6. List all software owned or licensed by Company and, for each item of software, a description of whether it is “off the shelf” software readily available for purchase or license or software specifically developed for Company by employees of Company or by outside parties. If any software development occurred, provide copies of applicable agreements relating to that development.

7. A list of all copyrighted works material to the franchise system for which no application to register has been filed. Any works owned by third parties should be separately identified.

8. Copies of Company’s current policies, guidelines, and actual practices with respect to the protection of its Intellectual Property.

9. A description, along with copies of all related documentation, regarding what actions, if any, have been taken to protect Company’s Intellectual Property in each of the jurisdictions in which it has, directly or indirectly, conducted business.

10. A summary description of all litigation in the past five (5) years involving or affecting any of Company’s Intellectual Property rights.

11. A description of whether Company has access to data stored on franchisees’ computer systems, including customer data. Information on who owns the customer data (Company vs. a franchisee). A description of what steps, if any, the Company has taken in compliance with the GDPR (if applicable), the California’s Consumer Protection Act (“CCPA”) and/or other applicable consumer data protection legislation.

12. A copy of all confidentiality and other restrictive covenant agreements signed by franchisor’s employees or any other individuals regarding access to or use of Intellectual Property or other confidential information.

13. A list of all fictitious business names used by the franchisor entity and “doing business as” filings filed with any states.

## EXHIBIT B

### SAMPLE FRANCHISE REPRESENTATIONS AND WARRANTIES<sup>54</sup>

The Company hereby represents and warrants to Purchaser, both as the Effective Date of this Agreement and the Closing Date, as follows:

#### Section [I]. Franchise Matters:

1. Franchise System. Other than the Franchise System, neither the Company nor Owner has owned or operated any franchise system.

2. Franchise Agreements. Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule sets forth a list of all Franchise Agreements that are currently in effect between the Company and any Franchisee. The Company has made available to Purchaser accurate and complete copies of each Franchise Agreement (including all addenda and amendments thereto). The list of Franchise Agreements accurately includes (a) the name of the Franchisee, (b) the business address of each franchised location operated by such Franchisee, (c) the effective and expiration dates, (d) the number of remaining renewals, and (e) a description of any material waivers, alterations, amendments, or other modifications of any Franchise Agreement (including regarding any fees, costs, expenses, territorial rights, defaults, or obligations of a Franchisee) since the execution of such Franchise Agreement to which the Company or any of its agents have agreed to, entered into, or acquiesced.

3. Violations. Except as set forth in Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule, neither the Company or, to the Knowledge of the Company, any other party thereto is in or has received written notice of any violation of, threatened violation of, or default under (including any condition that with the passage of time or the giving of notice would cause such a violation or default under) any Franchise Agreement. Each Franchise Agreement is a valid and binding agreement of the Company, is in full force and effect (except to the extent such Franchise Agreement terminates or expires after the date hereof in accordance with its terms), and is enforceable against the Company and is valid, binding, and enforceable against each Franchisee and not subject to any claim of or right to termination or rescission by any Franchisee or, to the Knowledge of the Company, any third party thereto in accordance with its terms, except as enforcement may be limited by applicable bankruptcy, insolvency, reorganization, moratorium, or similar laws affecting creditors' rights generally and by general principles of equity (regardless of whether considered in a proceeding in equity or at law).

4. Options. No Franchisee or other Person has any enforceable right of first refusal, option, or other right or arrangement to sign any Franchise Agreement or acquire any Franchise.

5. Franchisee Funds. All funds or cooperatives administered by or paid to the Company on behalf of any Franchisees, including funds that Franchisees contributed for

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<sup>54</sup> These sample franchise representations and warranties are more typical for a private company acquisition. For a sample of franchise representations and warranties that would be more typical in a public company acquisition, the authors recommend a review of publicly filed acquisition agreements on the SEC website. For example, see: <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/0000068270/000119312517347719/d474183ddefm14a.htm>.



advertising and promotion, (a) have been administered and used in accordance with all Franchise Laws, all descriptions in the FDDs, and all Franchise Agreements, and (b) the Company has in all material respects properly accounted for all payments made by each Franchisee with respect to any such fund or cooperative. There are no loans owed to or owing from any such funds or cooperatives. To the Knowledge of the Company, there are no claims that any of the expenditures from any such funds or cooperatives have been improperly collected, accounted for, maintained, used, or applied. Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule contains a listing of all presently established advertising funds or cooperatives regarding the Franchises, which schedule also identifies whether each such fund or cooperative is presently operating.

6. Disputes. Either the FDDs or Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule contain a summary of all (a) Franchise-related or Franchisee-related arbitrations, litigation, class proceedings, material complaints, or disputes, including claims that the Company is vicariously or jointly liable with any Franchisee, since [Reference Date<sup>55</sup>], (b) “litigation” required for disclosure under the FTC Rule or NASAA Commentary since the [Reference Date], and (c) other Legal Proceedings, which were or are pending or, to the Knowledge of the Company, threatened since [Reference Date] from any Franchisee, association purporting to represent a group of Franchisees, or Governmental Authority.

7. Forms of FDDs. Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule sets forth a list of all forms of FDDs that the Company has used to offer or sell Franchises at any time since [Reference Date] and the time period of effectiveness of each such FDD form. The Company has made available to Purchaser accurate and complete copies of each such form of FDD. All FDDs that the Company has used to offer or sell franchises at any time since [Reference Date] have contained all information required by the FTC Rule, NASAA Commentary, and other Franchise Laws and have otherwise been prepared and delivered to prospective Franchisees in compliance with the Franchise Laws, and no such FDD contains any statement which is false or misleading with respect to any material fact or omits to state any material fact required to be stated therein or necessary in order to make the statements made therein not false or misleading in light of the circumstances under which they are made. The Company has made available to Purchaser correct and complete copies of all material correspondence with state and federal authorities concerning compliance with Franchise Laws.

8. Forms of Franchise Agreements. Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule sets forth a list of all forms or versions of Franchise Agreements for the Franchise System used since [Reference Date] and the time period of effectiveness of each such Franchise Agreement form.

9. Financial Performance. Since [Reference Date], no “Financial Performance Representation” (as defined in the FTC Rule) has ever been made to any Franchisee or prospective franchisee by the Company or an officer, general partner, limited partner, salesperson, or Representative of the Company, except Financial Performance Representations which have been incorporated properly into the applicable FDD.

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<sup>55</sup> Buyers will look to designate a Reference Date that allows the applicable representation to cover a four-to-five-year period (i.e., to cover the applicable statute of limitations period).

10. Jurisdictions. Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule sets forth a list of the jurisdictions in which the Company is currently registered or authorized to offer and sell Franchises or is exempt from such registration under a Franchise Law. There are no stop orders or other proceedings in effect or threatened that would prohibit or impede the Company's ability to offer or sell Franchises or enter into Franchise Agreements immediately following the Closing Date, except for any amendment filings and changes to the FDD (if any) that might be required to describe the transactions contemplated by this Agreement.

11. Franchise Laws. The Company is and since has been in compliance with all Franchise Laws and has not offered or sold any Franchise in violation of any Franchise Law (including any violation for failure to file on a timely basis all required amendments and renewals of the registrations and exemptions under the Franchise Laws and any violation for failure to file franchise advertisements). With respect to the relations of the Company with existing and former Franchisees and all terminations, non-renewals, and transfers of Franchises since [Reference Date], the Company has complied with all the proper cause for default, default notice, time to cure, and actual termination, non-renewal, and/or transfer requirements of any Franchise Agreement required by any Franchise Law.

12. Territories. No Franchisee has been granted protected or exclusive territory rights, a designated area, or an option, right of first refusal, or other arrangement regarding additional territory rights, except as set forth in the applicable form Franchise Agreement used by the Company at the time. No Franchisee's protected or exclusive territory rights or designated area are violated in any way by another Franchisee's protected or exclusive territory rights or designated area.

13. Sales Agents. The Company has not used any independent sales agents, sales brokers, and referral sources to assist with the sale of Franchises.

14. Rebates; Products. Except as set forth on Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule, since [Reference Date], the Company has not entered into any Contract whereby the Company or any Affiliate receives rebates, allowances, discounts, or other payments or remuneration of any kind (collectively, "Rebates") from suppliers or other third parties selling products or services, directly or indirectly, to Franchisees. Neither the Company nor any of its Affiliates has made any commitment, promise, or pledge (oral or written) to share with Franchisees any Rebates. The Company has not received any revenue or other consideration, directly or indirectly, as a result of Franchisees' required purchases or leases of products or services.

15. Councils. Except as set forth on Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule, to the Knowledge of the Company, no franchise association or organization is acting as a representative of any group of five (5) or more Franchisees. Any franchise council or advisory group (whether independently formed or sponsored by the Company) presently in place is advisory in nature and is disclosed on Schedule [ ] of the Disclosure Schedule.

16. Consents. Neither the execution of this Agreement nor the consummation of the transactions contemplated hereby (a) will require the consent or approval by any Franchisee, council, association, or other third party or (b) result in a violation of, a default under, or give rise

to a right of termination, modification, cancellation, rescission, or acceleration of any obligation or loss of material benefits under any Franchise Agreement.

17. Non-Competes. Since [Reference Date], the Company has not waived enforcement of any non-compete restriction under any Franchise Agreement, and, to the Knowledge of the Company, no current or former Franchisee is currently in violation of any non-compete covenant under any Franchise Agreement to which the current or former Franchisee is or was a party.

18. Enforcement. The Company has consistently enforced the terms of the Franchise Agreements, including enforcement of all required operating standards set forth in the operations manuals of the Company.

19. Franchisee Employees. The Company has not issued policies relating to or otherwise exercised control over any Franchisee's relationship with its employees, including hiring, firing, disciplining, compensation, benefits, supervision, and scheduling. The Company has not been alleged to be (or has not received any formal or informal complaint, allegation, or notice of inquiry or investigation from Franchisee, any employee of a Franchisee, third party, or government agency that the Company is or may be) joint employers with or subject to joint employment liability with any Franchisee. To the Knowledge of the Company, no allegation has been made since [Reference Date] that any Franchisee or any of Franchisee's employees have been or are employees of the Company or are or have been improperly classified as independent contractors in accordance with applicable Laws. To the Knowledge of the Company, no Franchisee is a party to or bound by any written or oral collective bargaining agreement or any other Contract with any labor union or other labor organization, and no union organizing or decertification activities are underway or threatened with respect to the employees of any of the Franchisees, and no such activities have occurred since [Reference Date].

20. Insurance. Each Franchisee has provided evidence to the Company that it has complied with the insurance requirements of the Franchise Agreement. The Company has been named as an additional insured on each Franchisee's insurance policy, as required by the Franchise Agreement.

**EXHIBIT C**

**SAMPLE VIRTUAL DATA ROOM STRUCTURE**

## I. Financials

- A. Audited Financial Statements
- B. Unaudited Financial Statements
  - i. Income Statements
  - ii. Balance Sheet
  - iii. State of Cash Flows

## II. Operations

- A. Organization Chart
- B. List of Franchisees and Area Developers
- C. List of Company Operations
- D. Property & Equipment
- E. Training Materials
- F. Marketing
- G. Operations Manuals

## III. Legal

- A. Corporate Records
  - i. Certificates of Formation/Articles of Organization
  - ii. Operating Agreements, Shareholders Agreements
  - iii. Company Resolutions
  - iv. Certificates of Good Standing
- B. Franchise Matters
  - i. FDDs
  - ii. Registrations
  - iii. Franchise Agreements
  - iv. Area Development Agreements
  - v. Terminations
  - vi. Transfers
  - vii. Disputes
  - viii. Governmental Investigations/Actions
- C. Property
  - i. Real Estate
  - ii. Leases
  - iii. Other
- D. Litigation
  - i. Pending
  - ii. Concluded
  - iii. Threatened
- E. Intellectual Property
  - i. TM Registrations
  - ii. Copyright Registrations
  - iii. Domain Name Registrations
  - iv. Patents
  - v. Proprietary Information
- F. Material Contracts
  - i. Supplier/Vendor Contracts
  - ii. Broker Agreements

- iii. Software and Technology Agreements
- iv. Lease Agreements
- v. Rebate Agreements

G. Licenses and Permits

IV. Insurance

- A. Insurance Matrix
- B. Worker's Compensation
- C. General
- D. Key Man
- E. Loss Summaries
- F. Other

V. HR/Benefits

- A. Employee Census
- B. Payroll
- C. Health Insurance
- D. 401K Plan
- E. Employee Agreements
- F. Employee Terminations
- G. Carrier Invoices
- H. Other

VI. Tax

- A. Federal Tax Returns
- B. Personal Property
- C. Sales Tax
- D. Other
- E. Tax Workpapers
- F. 1099s

Special Supplement to  
Basics Track: Franchise-Related Mergers & Acquisitions

**ESG CONSIDERATIONS**

Environmental, social and governance (ESG) has impacted mergers and acquisitions involving franchise systems. This supplement addresses key principles and practical considerations in the M&A process involving franchise systems.

**Key Principles**

1. Assessing ESG risk and opportunities.

Forming a good foundation of an ESG plan will include considering and understanding the values, standards and best practices that are important to your business. Franchisors should carefully consider how to formulate, implement, and cultivate ESG measures into their business aligning those metrics with the company's broader strategy. Taking a risk-opportunity approach will afford the franchisor the ability to reflect on the overall impact and return of its ESG policies, practices and procedures on its operations and stakeholders.

2. Understanding and balancing stakeholder priorities.

Integrating ESG into a business can be challenging where many stakeholders exist with varying views on what is important. Franchisors should develop an ESG roadmap with a focus on balancing versus equalizing stakeholder priorities. Businesses, and franchisors in particular, should understand the magnitude of the stakeholder's impact on the business and align its ESG framework to address short and long-term ESG strategies.

3. Prioritizing high value ESG factors to the business.

ESG encompasses a broad range of disparate matters that may vary in importance depending on a company's business and operations. Accordingly, franchisors should be thoughtful in how to incorporate ESG strategies into their journey. In doing so franchisors should periodically assess how resources are being allocated to address ESG matters that have a material impact to its business (whether on its operations, financials or corporate culture) and adjust their ESG plan objectives to focus on those with the greatest impact.

4. Setting realistic timelines for achieving ESG goals and objectives.

As is typical with the implementation of any new business plan, you must walk before you run. Setting realistic timelines that are achievable for the organization's ESG journey will ensure that you stay on track, however these timelines should not be rigid. Franchisors should create an ESG framework that is easily modifiable, and that can be adjusted based on changes to its ESG objectives along the way.

5. Expect and prepare for criticism of ESG initiatives.

ESG is not a set-in stone concept and will change and develop given the composite of distinct matters involved. Whether because of political, social or regulatory shifts, ESG draws differing perspectives on how and what should or should not be a focus. Franchisors should consider how its ESG plan may impact their franchisees. Franchisors should also be prepared to address criticism from its franchisee base of its ESG initiatives by adopting well-reasoned and consistent policies that reflect its corporate values.

**Practical Considerations**

1. **Environmental Considerations.** When addressing environmental considerations in ESG, management should consider whether:
  - a. Ingredients and furnishings can be sourced responsibly and/or locally;
  - b. Products can be manufactured or designed in a more Earth-friendly manner;
  - c. Sites and outlets can be constructed with more natural and sustainable building materials;
  - d. Sites and outlets can be constructed in a more energy efficient manner and equipped with more energy efficient lights and appliances;
  - e. Sites and outlets can begin to use or use more renewable energy;
  - f. Organizations can reduce amount of waste going to landfill;
  - g. Trash and waste products (including of cooking oil) can be recycled;
  - h. Water use can be reduced (e.g., automatic water valves can be installed);
  - i. Potential environmental justice (“EJ”) and EJ-related risks that could result in reputational harm and operational disruptions through the supply chains can be mitigated:



- Review any EJ or “climate justice” requirements that might be in place in relevant jurisdictions, to understand whether permits will require consideration of specific-facility impacts;
- Understand any environmental and health-related impacts of facilities, to determine whether they can be mitigated and what legal or other risks they might present;
- Ensure that benefits from company operations or programs are distributed equitably;
- Revisit community engagement processes with an EJ lens, to develop relationships with neighbors in advance of conflict;
- To the extent that suppliers have sizable industrial footprints in EJ communities, consider supplier screening and selection that avoids indirect negative impacts; and
- Consider proactively incorporating EJ-related topics as part of ESG and sustainability reporting.

2. **Social Considerations.** When addressing social considerations in the ESG context, management should consider whether:

- a. Training and education are designed to produce aware and responsive employees;
- b. Diverse, equitable and inclusive environments exist—including an appropriate code of conduct;
- c. Community involvement in specific activities can reenforce your brand and raise awareness of your brand in a variety of communities;
- d. Training and awareness of human trafficking is needed for franchisees and employees, particularly in the hotel segment;
- e. Steps can be taken to improve DEI in their organizations as the regulatory landscape continues to develop and evolve. Best practices to consider may include:
  - Employing a diverse workforce comprising individuals from a variety of backgrounds who bring differing life experiences, views and perspectives to the table;
  - Ensuring product designers and safety staff are educated on cognitive bias and how to combat it;
  - Undertaking testing with a diverse group of consumers;
  - Relying on data sets relating to diverse populations to mitigate the risk of biases creeping into product development and ensure they are identified and rectified when they do;

- Ensuring appropriate warnings and limitations are incorporated into transparent instructions to mitigate product safety risks; and
- Listening to customer feedback and continually assessing user needs.

3. **Governance Considerations.** When addressing social considerations in the ESG context, management should consider whether:

- DEI initiatives satisfy legal requirements and these requirements change from jurisdiction to jurisdiction where the company has operations;
- Any aspect of the DEI programming (or proposed programming) is prohibited by law;
- Proposed action or policies have any potential negative impact on non-diverse communities;
- Reporting and due diligence obligations are required in certain jurisdiction, such as in the EU;
- Internal compliance controls are adequate and in place and whether the following needed:
  - A written integrity and ethical standard policies;
  - An internal team hotline for reporting violations;
  - A social media policies – one for corporate-owned outlets and one for franchised outlets;
  - A non-fraternization policy;
  - A conflict of interest policy, including an express prohibition on kickbacks;
  - An insider trading policy; and
  - A lobbying and political contribution policy.

4. **Franchising Industry Considerations.** When addressing franchise specific considerations in the ESG context, management should consider whether:

- Modifications are needed in the recruiting process to recruit and retain diverse franchisee and whether the following may be useful:
  - Financial incentive and discount programs;
  - Community outreach programs, including partnerships with industry organizations to find and support prospective franchise owners from diverse communities;

- Ensuring marketing and advertising are targeted to specific communities; and
  - Creation, growth and operation of diverse management/ownership programs.
- b. Creation, growth and operation of franchisee associations or councils focused on diverse franchisees, ESG issues and engagement with franchisor leadership can further ESG goals.
  - c. Franchisor supplier diversity programs can provide a framework for cost savings.
  - d. Establishing and recruiting minority and woman-owned certified franchisees to pursue government set aside contracts is a viable option in the U.S.
  - e. Creation and operation of DEI programs for the franchise system (including providing scholarship, education and mentorship opportunities for diversity franchisees and prospective franchisees) would address concerns.
  - f. Proposed legislation would affect DEI/ESG programs and initiatives.
  - g. Developing DEI training modules would create a more inclusive environment and experience for customers.
  - h. International systems to accommodate local ESG issues in foreign countries should be adapted.