

# The Mad Science Group – Taking off!

## ENTREPRENEURS OF CANADA



Business Development Bank of Canada  
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Who knew that entertaining children with oozing slime, bubbling potions, and fiery model rockets could be the basis for an international, multi-million dollar business?

Ariel and Ron Shlien, two brothers from Montreal, that's who.

Today, the two oversee 150 franchises in 20 countries, along with six touring shows and a permanent installation at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida. It's all part of the Mad Science Group, which with the help of 28 head office staff, 150 franchisees and 3,000 presenters, last year entertained – and educated – some 5 million children through after-school programs, birthday parties, and amusement park shows. "We show them that science is cool, and it's amazing how that opens up their world," says Ariel, 33.

It all began with a boyhood fascination with model rockets. When they were 13 and 14, the two brothers told their father about the cool

new toys they were going to buy. He somewhat disapprovingly told them it sounded like a silly way to spend their paper-route money. So they thought of a way to make it more "serious" – they'd get the neighbourhood kids to chip in, they'd all get to "have a blast", and Ariel and Ron would get to keep the rockets.

Their love of science-filled fun grew, with Ariel soon plunking down the then princely sum of \$300 for a laser. The brothers began putting on laser light and smoke shows, quickly found themselves overwhelmed by enthusiastic demand, and Mad Science was born.

They kept the business going as a fun-filled part-time venture for years, even while they were studying business at McGill. But it was getting Mad Science shows onto cruise ships after they graduated that was the real turning point. "There were kids from 55 different countries, and they all loved it, even though many of them didn't speak English," says Ariel. "That made us realize

Mad Science had potential all over the world."

When the brothers decided to franchise the concept, business really took off. But they aren't just in it for the quick fees franchising can bring. They invest a lot of time, energy, and money into ensuring the quality of their product. Franchisees get help in setting up their own Web sites, have access to over 200 hours of content, and can trade tips and enhance their business skills at an annual conference. "If you want to build for the long-term, you have to build an environment of value so

franchisees stay with you," says Ariel. Their hands-on approach to franchising is just one way they maintain the quality of Mad Science offerings, and enhance the value of the name. For example, when they went looking for a book publisher to partner with, they picked Scholastic, the world largest children's book publisher. "All the deals that we do are about building the brand."

Given their track record, it's no surprise that the brothers won the BDC Entrepreneur Award in 1999. "We were thrilled," says Ariel. "Entrepreneurs who own and run

their companies don't get a lot of recognition, so when you get a pat on the back it makes you feel great."

In fact, the BDC had played a very early role in the Shliens' success. Back when Ariel and Ron wanted to run Mad Science programs as a way to earn money in the summer, they couldn't afford to buy the rockets, chemicals, containers, and other tools of their trade. They tapped into a BDC loan program, which gave them an interest-free loan of \$3,000 – plus an extra \$100 bonus if they paid the money back in the fall. The money was important, says Ariel, not just for buying supplies, but also for boosting their self-confidence. As he says, "How many banks will lend money to fifteen-year-old kids based on an idea?"

Equally valuable was that the program introduced them to an older business mentor. "Sitting down with someone with real life experience who guides you gives you a better chance of success," he says.

And their continued successes in turn kept opening up further opportunities. For example, when their rocket supplier had trouble keeping up with demand from their franchisees, Mad Science started making its own rockets. That solved the

supply problem, and produced some impressive costs savings. Franchisees used to pay \$3.50 a rocket, but now that they're made in-house, the price is just \$2.50, yet Mad Science protected its margins. "Now we have a whole range of products that are higher quality and fully branded," says Ariel.

Their ever-expanding empire recently prompted the company to buy its own 3-story, 22,000-sq. foot building. When it came time to finance the purchase, they once again turned to the BDC. "They put together a fantastic package, and it was good to build the relationship," says Ariel.

Finding good partners is apparently something the Shliens excel at. Their latest milestone? They've just finalized a major deal with a Hollywood studio to produce a Mad Science television show and a line of retail products. It's just another step towards their long-term goals, says Ariel. "We want to make Mad Science the biggest and best it can possibly be."



Ariel and Ron Shlien won The BDC Entrepreneur Award in 1999. Today they have 150 franchises in 20 countries. Next, they're taking on Hollywood.

For more information on the Young Entrepreneur Awards visit [robtv.com](http://robtv.com).  
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