When upstarts take on older vendors, sweetness fades

PAILIN WEDEL – STAFF PHOTO

Independent vendors Jeanetta and Ronen Yeller hand out ice cream to Girl Scouts after day camp at the Girl Scouts Hornets' Nest Council building on Idlewild Road in Charlotte. The Yellers prefer special events to cruising neighborhoods.

Ice cream clash

BY MIKE DRUMMOND
Staff Writer

Jeanetta Yeller cruises her gleaming ice cream truck through a Burger King parking lot one recent afternoon for a playful game of chicken.

The provocation works. A competing vendor selling ice cream outside the restaurant shoots her the evil eye.

Yeller smiles, waves at her adversary and drives away.

"Oh, he doesn't want me here," she laughs.

Underneath the happy, tinny tunes and erstwhile good humor in the local ice cream truck business exists bad blood, bitter competition and at least one alleged case of hit-and-run.

The ice cream truck season ends in the Carolinas in a few weeks. With the clock ticking, hundreds of licensed and unlicensed vendors in the area are scrambling before they melt off to winter jobs or return to school.

Larger ice cream truck companies, burdened with insurance and other costly overhead, increasingly are divesting their vehicle fleets, often contracting with newly minted independent owner-operators. Some of these independents, like Jeanetta Yeller, split from their former motherships, and buy supplies from competing distributors. Although state-of-the-art ice cream trucks cost upwards of $78,000, a beat-up

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T.ORTEGA GAINES – STAFF PHOTO

Southern Ice Cream and Gourmet Foods, the giant in ice cream truck vending in the Carolinas, faces increasing competition from upstart independents.

The Modern Ice Cream Truck

16-channel music boxes, rather than one monotonous song. Standards include "Turkey in the Straw," and diddies with horse whinnies or greetings like "hello."

Loudspeaker embedded behind the front grill.

Diesel power saves fuel.

Air conditioning because a cool ice cream truck driver is a happier ice cream truck driver.

Safety alarm chimes when the truck is in reverse.

Convex mirrors mounted atop front of vehicle help drivers see kids.

Swing arms similar to those on school buses help slow passing traffic (not legal in all states.

Treats'll run ya 50 cents to $4. Kids favor goodies with cartoon figures; adults like Haagen-Dazs and Ben & Jerry's.

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