

Portable Oddity

If you were to ask the average American to name the beverage they associate with Nascar, they would probably say, "Beer." But parked at the main entrance at a recent Nascar race in Bristol, Tenn., was a mobile coffee van from Bearclaw Coffee, and as attendees filed into the race, many stopped for a specialty coffee experience.



Bristol was just one stop made by the Bearclaw vans, proving that specialty coffee can be sold in several unusual locations. The Mercedes Benz Sprinter vans have been retrofitted to include three-group espresso machines, full-sized ice machines, grinders and under-the-counter refrigerators. There are currently three on the road, with five more on the way.

The vans embark on planned routes five days a week—with stops including office buildings and car dealerships—but then head off to unexpected locales on the weekends. "With the mobile espresso truck, you have your bread and butter on Monday through Friday, and the weekend events are your sugar and cream," says Debi Scroggins, president of Michigan-based Bearclaw. Weekend events have included the National Blueberry Festival in South Haven, Mich., and a variety of Michigan high school football games. In November 2007, Bearclaw vans mobilized in the middle of the night to cater to shoppers lining up for once-a-year sales on Black Friday. "Everybody was trudging out to get in line, and we had all of our trucks there at midnight," Scroggins says.

Another benefit of taking the van to a crowded event is the amount of exposure it generates. Scroggins says that when the Bearclaw crew returned to the office following the Nascar race, they were inundated with wholesale orders—so much so that they had to hire extra people for the week to meet the demand. Bearclaw's mission to head into uncharted territory proves that specialty coffee customers are everywhere. "When you go to unusual places with espresso, you never know what's going to happen," Scroggins says.