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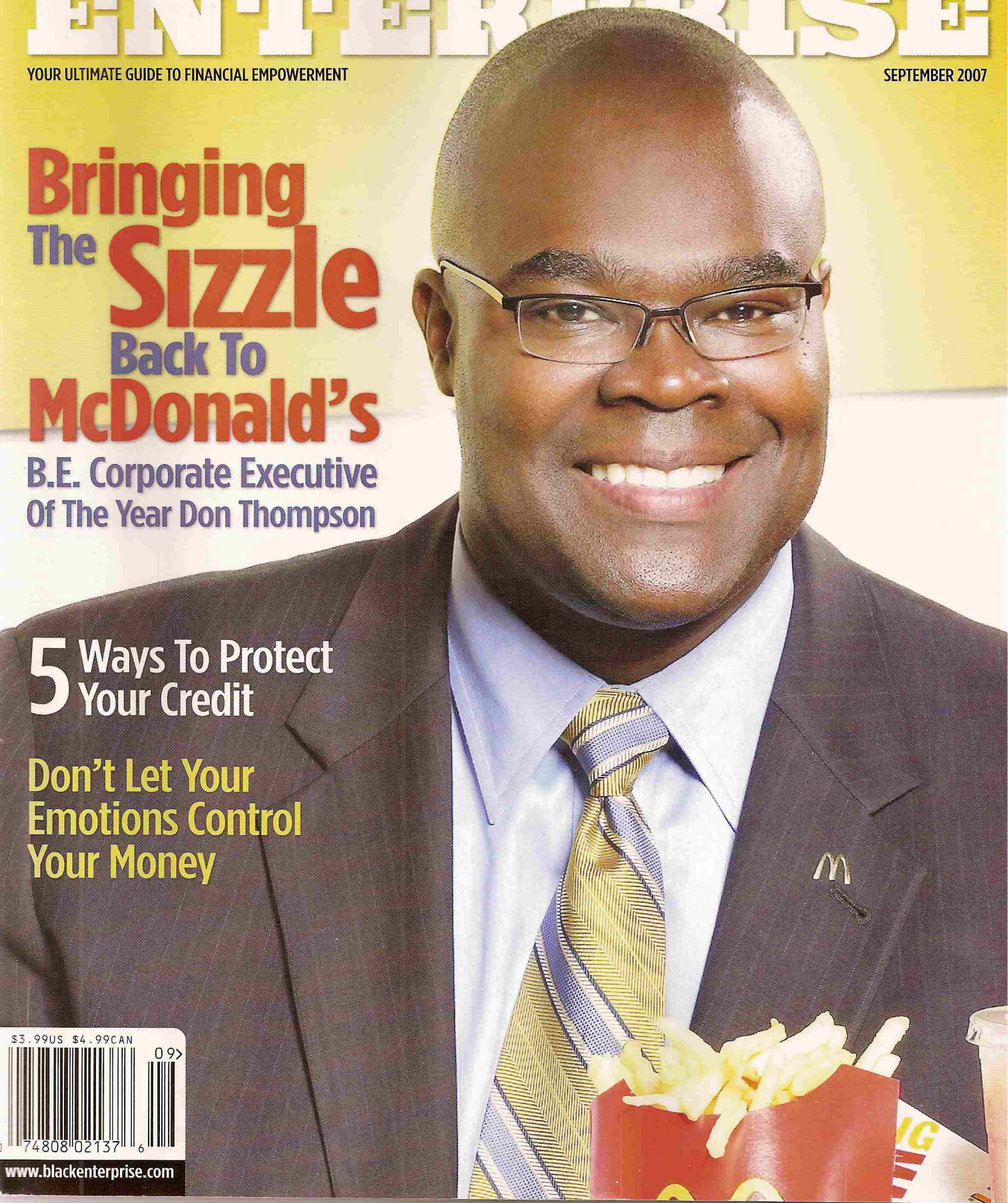
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[MAKING IT]

MAKING THE GRADE

Test-prep company helps students score big

EACH YEAR, THOUSANDS OF PROSPECTIVE POST-secondary students take entrance exams—ACT, SAT, GRE, GMAT, and LSAT—seeking admission to the nation's top educational institutions. For these academic aspirants, obtaining a high test score is a must.

"Test preparation is an imperative for educational success in a society fixated on test taking," says Akil Bello, co-founder and vice president of educational development for Bell Curves L.L.C., a New York City-based test-preparation firm that helps thousands of clients score well on placement and standardized exams. As a result of their service, the firm has posted \$250,000 in gross revenues for 2006. By the end of this year, Bello projects gross sales to increase to \$500,000, based on the strength of speaking engagements, technology enhancements, and direct marketing campaigns.

Bell Curves, however, was not a textbook startup. Bell says that after he failed to convince his former employer, The Princeton Review—one of the nation's oldest and largest test-preparation firms—to provide services to an overlooked student population, he struck out on his own. "There is an enormous opportunity to help underserved students who do not have easy access to test-prep assistance. Test preparation is a booming phenomenon," he asserts.

In 2003, Bello, 35, enlisted support from his family and fellow educators—brother Hasheem, 37, and father Yahaya, 59—to launch the venture. With a minimal \$2,500 in startup costs for renting classroom space and printing training materials, Bello recounts how they applied the use of sweat equity: "We camped out in libraries and in front of computer screens for weeks at a time conducting the necessary research to develop the test curriculum and software."

Today, the company has six full-time employees and 15 part-time staff members to fill the gap in servicing the educational needs of underserved and disadvantaged students.

In a high-priced market where classes can typically cost \$1,000 to \$2,000 and personal tutoring can sell for as much as \$50 an hour, Bell Curves offers an affordable alternative. Its clients can choose self-study programs, classroom training, private tutoring, and online sessions at discounted prices ranging from \$30 for self-study to \$999 for a 40-hour course—almost half the price of programs offered by rival companies. The firm also offers workbooks and learning aids, as well as staff development and instructor sup-



port to independent tutors, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Bell Curves partners with historically black colleges and universities as well as minority associations to conduct free workshops aimed at making students aware of test preparation services. It also caters to organizations such as the PhD Project, Jack & Jill of America Foundation, the National Black MBA Association, and Management Leadership for Tomorrow. "We have focused on researching and understanding the deficits that exist in our target communities, and we specialize in creating solutions that supplement existing services to leverage and maximize educational attainment," Bello explains. "Many of our clients achieve scores that get them accepted into Harvard, Yale, and Princeton."

Although competing against well-heeled industry titans like The Princeton Review and Kaplan, Bello contends that his firm's mission has differentiated itself as a burgeoning niche-market test-prep firm. Bello anticipates introducing a host of new products and services and expanding into the K-12 student market, as well as growing a roster of interactive learning exercises accessible via cell phone, PDA, and iPod technology. By doing so, Bell Curves will stay ahead of the class. —Marcia A. Reed-Woodard

THE BELLO BROTHERS MAKE TEST PREP AFFORDABLE.

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