

## Steven Schussler: 'I'm not one who gives up'



David Brewster, Star Tribune

Steve Schussler

Creative stunts helped Steven Schussler launch his career and later get Rainforest Cafe off the ground.

By **WENDY LEE**, Star Tribune

Last update: January 15, 2011 - 10:29 PM  
Before Steven Schussler created and sold the Rainforest Cafe, his neighbors thought he was into black magic.

Schussler spent nearly \$400,000 turning his St. Louis Park home into his concept, with sound systems, waterfalls, 40 tropical birds, two 150-

pound tortoises and other exotic animals.

He painted his ceilings black, so that when the greenery couldn't cover all parts of the wall the rainforest facade would look more real. He spent nights crying and at times, even he questioned whether he was psychotic.

But he didn't give up. The Rainforest Cafe was sold in a \$75 million deal to Landry's Restaurants Inc. in 2000. Now Schussler, who continues to create restaurant concepts, has added author to his résumé. His book, "It's a Jungle In There," came out last fall.

In an interview last week, he discussed some of his experiences.

**Q**It took years of courtship to persuade investor Lyle Berman to put money into the Rainforest Cafe. Is it true you walked into his office with a sign that said "Lyle made me do it?"

**A**I walked in with the sign. I said, "I've had it. I'm done. Today, I've given up if you're not an investor. I've spent 3 1/2 years showing you the concept. You've visited 27 times. You had your parents [over] and your relatives. I built three restaurants for you ... I've proven myself. Today is the day. I'm putting a line in the sand. If you're not investing, I am jumping off the Hennepin Avenue Bridge and I'm going to blame you."

That could have gone either way. He could have said, "Get the hell out of my office, you kook!" But after 3



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1/2 years of sharing my passion and life with him, I figured it was time to cut bait here.

**Q**What would have happened if he didn't invest?

**A**I don't know if I would have jumped, because I'm not one who gives up. But I made my point.

**Q**The economic downturn caused a lot of changes in the restaurant industry. What's your advice to restaurateurs out there?

**A**Right now, the most important thing is quality, food and service. People come for the wow factor, but you only come back for the quality, food and service. You only come once for the wow factor.

**Q**In your book, you discuss how you landed your first job selling radio ads. Police officers delivered you to the station manager's office in a barrel, and you popped out dressed up as Superman. How did you come up with that idea?

**A**I decided that I was going to be their super salesman. The only way to set myself aside from everyone else was to do something totally outrageous. I took what I call a calculated risk. I already interviewed with him two or three times before. It wasn't a blind risk. I knew the guy had a sense of humor. He would appreciate my passion (and) appreciate me actually thinking outside the box.

It was a risk, but that's what entrepreneurs (do). There's a saying, "What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?" I use that all the time.

I went for television after radio. I decided to send a chairman of the board of a television rep service in New York a toy boat. The boat was almost as big as this room and it had smokestacks in it. I put my résumé inside the smokestack and sent it to him and said, "Please welcome me aboard."

He sent me back the boat a week later, and said, "Your boat has leaks in it, but keep trying." So I went around and bought life preservers. I put life preservers all around the boat, and I sent him the boat back and said, "I am your life preserver. Welcome me aboard your boat and we'll float again." He sent me an airline ticket and I went to New York to interview for the job. I got the job and moved to New York.

**Q**Has anyone ever tried a similar attempt at your office?

**A**I had a homeless woman who got (inside) a refrigerator crate and had herself delivered to my office. First of all, the crate was disgustingly dirty. She slept in it. I gave her money, and I counseled her on what she could do. We gave her a ride home (and) we cleaned her up. We couldn't give her a job because she wasn't qualified and we didn't have a job available, but we encouraged her and made her feel good. She heard my Superman story and figured she would do a Superwoman story. We gave her a standing ovation as a company.

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