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Upsize

PEOPLE, IDEAS AND STUFF TO HELP GROWING COMPANIES

By Beth Ewen

RETAIL

Rainforest Café founder rolls out T-Rex chain, shops eight more big ideas

"We just look at life a little bit different," says Steve Schussler, CEO of Schussler Creative Inc. in Golden Valley and the creator of Rainforest Cafe. "It's not that normal for people to go this far."

He's pointing out the twirling whirligigs on the high ceiling of the office/showroom space, the giant dino statue with a crown, the hundreds of photographs on the entryway walls, the Mickey Mouse statue, and so many other geegaws that it's difficult to take in.

Then you go through the closed doors, where his staff has created a display of animatronic dinosaurs that roar and snort and follow visitors with their eyes, along with shooting lava and spewing ice crystals. It's the model for T-Rex: A Prehistoric Family Adventure, which Landry's Restaurants Inc. bought in February from Schussler Creative and opened in July.

And then you go through the next doors, where there are statues of horses

» Steve Schussler



ERIC MOORE

[Quote o' the month]

"Why try to control something that's out of control?"

— Steve Schussler, Schussler Creative Inc., on fostering a creative work environment: 763.746.3702; steven@schusslercreative.com; www.schusslercreative.com

and knights brought in from China in thousands of pieces and reassembled. He figures he'll sell the works for a high-end, one-of-a-kind restaurant in Las Vegas.

And then you go through the next doors, where there's a model for a restaurant concept he calls AeroBlue. He envisions a jazz club with a giant airplane descending from the ceiling and a saxophone player walking on the wing. "I want to put saxophones for the urinals in the men's room. I want to put tubas for the toilets in the women's room," he says, his voice getting louder and louder as he paints the picture.

In all, Schussler Creative has developed nine concepts for restaurant/entertainment/retail centers. He's sold two, T-Rex and Yak and Yeti, and says he has "more

than heavy interest" for the other seven. The concepts follow his creation of Rainforest Café, which he developed in his home complete with live exotic birds, took public with only one restaurant in 1995, and sold in 2000 to Landry's.

Right after the sale he started Schussler Creative, and has been developing these new concepts since with 11 full-time staff. "For five years we didn't make a dime," he says.

In February 2006 he sold the T-Rex concept, a joint venture in which Landry's Restaurants holds 80 percent and Schussler Creative holds 20 percent. Landry's paid \$7.6 million. If combined profits of all stores exceed \$20 million, Landry's can buy out Schussler's 20 percent for up to \$35 million more.

He also sold his "Build-a-Dino" concept to the founder of the popular Build-a-Bear Workshop, and her company is operating that at T-Rex.

Schussler says it's in his nature to think big. "Why would you want to make \$850,000 a year in a pizzeria," when you could use the same amount of hard work and passion for something much more? "We are interested in places that do a minimum of \$15 million," the initial annual projection for T-Rex in Kansas City.

"It's a matter of thinking larger, and I think we think pretty large," he says.

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