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PROFILE

Steven Schussler, Chairman of Schussler Creative, Inc., in his showroom where he houses one-of-a-kind items like this Orange County Choppers motorcycle, built for him on an episode of *American Chopper*.





Secrets of Success

He's back! Steve Schussler explains why in the corporate world, "No" is just a "Yes" waiting to happen.

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER

THE MINNESOTA BUSINESS SCENE IS A hotbed of innovation, entrepreneurship and amazing creativity. It has been an honor to be a part of this incredible community for over 30 years, and it's always inspiring to learn and share the untold stories of emerging business leaders, as well as the stories of established business icons. No matter what stage in their careers these business mavericks are, I learn something new—there is always an “aha” moment that needs to be shared with others.

Minnesota Business has invited me to re-join them to share these little-known stories, incredible insights and new perspectives I've gathered by sitting down with entrepreneurs and picking their brains. As a previous guest columnist of *Minnesota Business*, I interviewed entrepreneurs from all walks of life—business executives, politicians, celebrities, sports figures, as well as aspiring entrepreneurs.

It is an honor to be back with the column, which will share wisdom and tips from some of the most

successful, highly visible entrepreneurs from all facets of business, as well as lessons from some of the unsung, under-the-radar heroes who have had an incredible impact on our business scene.

A BACKGROUND OF REINVENTION

As a nine-year-old with a paper route, I started my entrepreneurial career early, reinventing myself many times and holding more than a dozen jobs before my sixteenth birthday. My career in the restaurant industry began with the development of Jukebox Saturday Night, a nostalgic restaurant and nightclub with eight locations in Chicago, Des Moines, Springfield, San Francisco and Minneapolis.

Failure is a big part of success. Following a great eight-year run, Jukebox Saturday Night closed. Then I dreamt up the Rainforest Café—a family-oriented attraction that would appeal to a broad all-ages demographic. To sell this concept and raise money, I built the prototype for Rainforest

PHOTOS BY JEFF CARLSON

Café in my suburban St. Louis Park home and gave tours to potential investors (and anyone else that would come and see it). Many people thought I was crazy to live with 40 tropical birds, two 150-pound tortoises, a baboon, an iguana and a bevy of tropical fish housed in ten 300-gallon tanks.

It took five long, tough years before my dream of the Rainforest Café became a reality. My phone, electric and gas were often turned off during those years, but I always knew that the Rainforest Café was never a matter of if. It was simply a matter of when and with whom. The incredible entrepreneur, Lyle Berman, visited my Rainforest Café prototype 27 times over three and a half years, bringing his family, friends, business associates and even a busload of his employees. After each visit, he said, “No,” but remained impressed by my persistence and commitment (even telling me that I should be committed). But as I’ve learned, “No” is “Yes” waiting to happen. Eventually Lyle said, “Yes,” and became my angel investor.

The first Rainforest Café opened at the Mall of America in Bloomington in October 1994. We took it public with only one location—a first for the restaurant industry. Within seven years, we owned and operated 45 Rainforest Café restaurants on three continents, and sold the chain to Landry’s Restaurants in 2000.

PASSION AND AMBITION YIELD SUCCESS

Inspiring and educating aspiring entrepreneurs is a passion of mine. From time to time, I teach an entrepreneurial class at the Carlson School of Business Management at the University of Minnesota, where I share my belief that “Passion and Ambition Yield Success” (it P.A.Y.S.).

Many suggested that I write a book and share the lessons that I’ve learned, and I listened. It’s a *Jungle In There: Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring* was a labor of love that took more than three years to write, eventually becoming a national bestseller. Giving back to the community is also one of my passions, which is why 100 percent of the book’s profits are donated to Smile Network International, an organization that surgically repairs cleft lips and palates of impoverished young people around the world.

In 2000, Schussler Creative, Inc., Inventions, Ideas, Contraptions and Dreams was founded with this mission statement: “Schussler Creative is an innovative team that embraces imagination and creates theatrical hospitality venues, attractions and experiences unlike any other. Passion and imagination are two of the most powerful

engines of success. At Schussler Creative, the paths of free-thinking individuals cross each other. Unusual and natural talents are used in an open forum to bring collective, creative ideas to fruition. When this occurs, opportunities arise that pave the way for phenomenal events. The environment necessary for this to happen is simple: uncompromising standards to enhance the guests’ experiences and a working atmosphere that encourages creativity. Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go!”

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

A recent project, the restoration of the Goodrich-Ramus barn, has been a labor of love for almost two years. It is the oldest standing barn in Eden Prairie and an important part of Minnesota history. Although it was considered for demolition, the City of Eden Prairie and the Minnesota Historical Society stepped in to save it. After reading an article in the Star Tribune about its near demise, we at Schussler Creative were inspired to restore the barn.

Originally, the plan was to use the Goodrich-Ramus barn as a storage facility and laboratory for our creative endeavors. But upon seeing the beauty of the barn’s Gothic arched roof, rare glazed yellow brick and picturesque location, we knew we needed to make it so much more.

As an homage to its original purpose as a dairy barn, eclectic cow sculptures—artfully painted in themes ranging from Picasso to a baseball player to the big apple, alongside classic black and white Holsteins—now dot the landscape surrounding the barn. The restoration of the barn, along with the Parade of Cows, created a stir and the local community sent letters expressing their thanks and appreciation for returning the barn to its former glory.

In response to the overwhelming excitement from the community and requests to hold weddings, birthday parties, meetings and events at the barn, the idea of turning it into an event center was born.

PASSION AND POTENTIAL ABOUND

Life is great and full of so much potential that I can barely sleep at night. There have been challenging days, but I have been truly blessed and believe that with a good plan, communication, enthusiasm and passion, anyone can turn “No” into “Yes!”

Remember to laugh at yourself along the way. Laughing and passion are contagious and will always carry the day. I am looking forward to sharing the stories of many other passionate entrepreneurs in the months ahead. 



ON LOCATION

Schussler Inc.’s St. Louis Park showroom is a businessman’s playroom, an imagination emporium packed with vintage finds.





Current Schussler Creative Business Ventures

T-REX

A Prehistoric Family Adventure, A Place to Eat, Shop, Explore and Discover
Downtown Disney Marketplace in Orlando, Fla.; The Legends at Village West
in Kansas City, Kan.

YAK & YETI RESTAURANT

Disney's Animal Kingdom Asian Restaurant Experience
Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park in Orlando, Fla.

BETTY & JOE'S BAKER & COFFEE MAKER

You can't have one without the other
Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

HOT DOG HALL OF FAME

Frankly the Best Hot Dogs, Sausages, Dumplings and French Fries in the World
Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.



GALAXY DRIVE IN

Aliens, Humans and All of Our Four Legged Friends Welcome
St. Louis Park, Minn.

BACKFIRE BBQ FEATURING ORANGE COUNTY CHOPPERS

Bikes, Burgers, Barbeque
The Legends at Village West in Kansas City, Kan.

courage

(kūr'-īj, kūr'-)

n. M.E. corage, O.F. equiv. to cuer (heart)

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2. The driving force that propels you toward success, and draws you to a bank that is ready and willing to help you realize your dream.

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