

# minnesota BUSINESS

INSPIRATION FOR GROWING COMPANIES

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THE NETWORKER

# Uncommon vision

Behind the success of Common Roots, Danny Schwartzman's firm beliefs **BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER**



**D**anny Schwartzman has achieved tremendous success with Common Roots Cafe & Catering, located in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis. But his

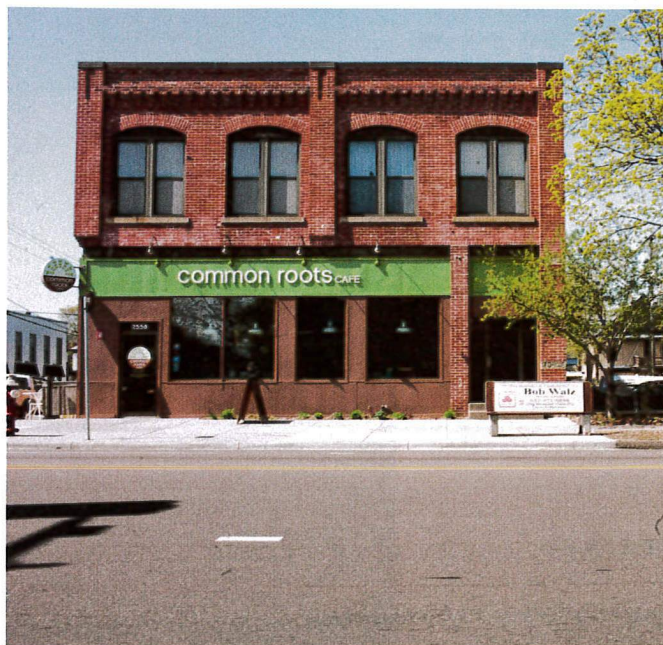
success wasn't automatic.

His initial challenge was that he had no restaurant experience. I was curious about how he broke into the business, as I have years of experience in the restaurant and entertainment industry and know firsthand that it is no easy task. I discovered that in lieu of experience, Schwartzman had something better: vision.

"My concept for Common Roots was to serve great organic food made from scratch and sourced locally," he says. "I wanted to work directly with farmers to help support the local economy and to offer guests the freshest seasonal foods available. From a global perspective, I felt it was important to serve certified fair trade coffees. I envisioned a gathering place for the community, where they could exchange ideas and contribute to the vibrancy of the city."

Armed with a solid business plan and a firm idea of what Common Roots would be, Schwartzman began his quest for financing. As all entrepreneurs know, it's one thing to have a great idea, but it's another to sell the idea to the bank and secure funding.

"I presented my idea and business plan to eight banks before finding a banking partner that understood my vision," he says. "Most bankers did not see the potential in the idea. But I kept going and didn't let the naysayers



**Uptown hit:** At the Common Roots Cafe — and in its related catering business — both the food and the concept have proven popular

take me off course."

Persistence paid off, and in 2007 Common Roots Cafe opened. It was not an automatic success, but the response was good and the reviewers were enthusiastic about the food, the concept, and the staff. As word spread about the cafe, more and more people flocked there.

"After we were open for a few years, a guest asked if we did catering," says Schwartzman. "We had never done catering before but agreed to cater an event and then evaluate whether this was a facet of the business that we wanted to pursue."

It turned out to be a brilliant move: Today the catering service accounts for half of the business and has doubled in growth over the past three years.

Schwartzman is in the process of expanding and is building a separate 5,000-square-foot catering kitchen to accommodate the huge demand for catering. The catering business services a wide variety of events, including weddings, corporate events, and even box lunches.

The cafe has also grown tremendously, serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner with an increase in business of 15 to 20 percent year

over year. There is free meeting space for nonprofit groups, which has been a big hit in the community.

Schwartzman shares office space with his wife, Elana, who owns Fontlove Studio (a letterpress, design, and communications studio) and is also an important part of Common Roots team, providing her graphic design expertise on everything from the signage to the menu and "look and feel" of the restaurant.

The company employs 60 people, as well as a team of on-call hospitality professionals who assist the full-time team when the need arises. "Our team is phenomenal," he says. "I believe they are a key factor in the success we have enjoyed and I am grateful to be surrounded by such amazing, talented people."

His team is also on board with his vision. "Common Roots is unrelenting when it comes to doing things the right way," he says. "Whenever possible, we source our foods locally and buy organic. When that isn't possible, we buy from a distributor that primarily sources from a 250-mile radius and delivers fresh, organic foods from farmers in areas outside of the Twin Cities."

Curiously, little about Schwartzman's life

## BIZ BRIEFING

### COMMON ROOTS CAFE

**Headquarters:**  
Minneapolis

**Leadership:**  
Danny Schwartzman, founder; Andy Jung, general manager

**Employees:**  
60

**Revenue:**  
Not disclosed

**Description:**  
Restaurant and catering company focused on local, organic, fair-trade ingredients


**Web:**  
[commonrootscafe.com](http://commonrootscafe.com)



before Common Roots suggested he would become the visionary restaurateur he is today. He grew up in Maryland, outside of Washington, D.C., where he did show an entrepreneurial spirit early in life. In his teens, he ran his own mini-business shoveling snow and walking dogs. He made the leap to importing goods when he was only 14. His mother, an international lawyer, brought Schwartzman along on a business trip to Russia and Ukraine. He became enchanted with Russian lacquer boxes and exported them to the U.S., where he sold them at a profit.

Living close to D.C., he became interested in politics, and his first career was working with nonprofits and grassroots political campaigns. But he dreamt of creating a restaurant. He began to pursue that dream in earnest after he and Elana relocated to the Twin Cities, where his mother was from and much of his family still resides.

Aware of his own lack of experience, he says, "It was key for me to surround myself with experts who could teach me the restaurant business and give me feedback on my concept. I did not limit my research and development to reaching out to business consultants. I interviewed people of all backgrounds and ages to learn what appealed to them in a restaurant. What types of food would they like? Did it matter to people if the food was sourced locally and served fresh? I talked to everyone and anyone who was willing to share their thoughts and expertise with me."

One key piece of advice from Schwartzman: "Be open to try new things, be willing to listen and learn," he says. "Don't be afraid to get feedback and evaluate it with an open mind. And most of all, don't be afraid to be different." 



**STEVEN SCHUSSLER** is CEO of Schussler Creative, the founder of the Rainforest Café, and the author of *It's a Jungle in There: Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring*.

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