

FINANCE & COMMERCE

Schussler shares successes, failures in new book

Posted: 3:49 pm Tue, October 5, 2010

By Scott Carlson



Scott Carlson

In the world of business, plenty of entrepreneur wannabes have found it's a jungle out there.

There can be numerous obstacles to reaching business success, from lack of money to plain old envious naysayers conspiring to torpedo a promising product or service,

So it's not surprising that Steve Schussler, the irrepressible creator of Rainforest Café and other notable restaurant concepts, is weighing in with his perspective on what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur.

Schussler, head of Golden Valley-based Schussler Creative Inc., has just released his first book, "It's a Jungle In There: Inspiring Lessons, Hard Won Insights and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring." He plans to hold two inaugural book signings Wednesday in downtown Minneapolis: The first from noon to 1 p.m. at the IDS Crystal Court; the second from 4:30 to 8 p.m. at the Barnes & Noble bookstore.

Although the book is an intriguing, fast read of Schussler's entrepreneurial escapades served up with business lessons learned from his successes and failures, the semi-autobiographical tome was anything but a snap for him to write.

With the help of Marvin Karlins, a Florida business professor; Schussler spent weekends and nights the last three-and-a-half years working on the book. Karlins interviewed more than 150 of Schussler's business associates and friends for the book.

"I never realized how difficult or hard it would be," Schussler told me Monday. "I never thought it (the book) would take this long."

That Schussler, the author, would be a stickler for details as author isn't surprising given his reputation for paying attention to the myriad small things that can make or break a restaurant.

Also no surprise: Schussler's willingness to bare his soul on some of his biggest struggles and failures, including the long, arduous journey he traveled before Rainforest Café caught fire.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Schussler spent three years and nearly \$400,000 to transform his suburban home into the prototype for Rainforest Café. Among the elements of his "jungle" (hence the name for "It's a Jungle in There,") were 40 tropical birds, two 150-pound tortoises and a "bevy of tropical fish housed in 10 300-gallon tanks." Oh, and don't forget the 50 different robotic creatures in the house, including mechanized alligators, gorillas and monkeys.

Aside from raising his neighbors' concerns about what he was doing, Schussler found his entrepreneurial endeavor so expensive that he fell way behind paying his utility bills. That, in turn, resulted in him getting his phone, electric and gas service cut off repeatedly for a couple years.

"That was humiliating and embarrassing," Schussler told me. "I wanted to crawl in a hole. But I never thought about suicide or giving up."

Instead, the brash New Yorker tells how his tenacity paid off in wooing Lyle Berman, the CEO of one-time leather retailer Berman Buckskin. After he visited Schussler's home more than 20 times over two years, Berman still hadn't pledged to support Schussler's Rainforest Café concept.

Schussler finally won Berman over when he visited Berman one day with a sign around his neck threatening to jump off the Hennepin Avenue bridge if his friend didn't sign on as a financial investor. It was a tongue-in-cheek ploy that ended with Berman becoming one of Schussler's biggest financial backers and mentors.

Schussler went on to open his first Rainforest Café at Mall of America, then expanded the concept to more than 30 U.S. locations.

Schussler's book is chock full of other interesting stories, including how he once landed an advertising account after wearing a Superman cape to prospective client's office.

Much of Schussler's business advice isn't new. But what is different is how he conveys that information in an engaging and often humorous fashion. Schussler won't tell you what business to start or how to start a business but he does share what kind of stuff an entrepreneur needs to be a success.

Throughout the book, Schussler maintains there are five Ps that are essential for a successful entrepreneur: personality, product, persistence, passion and philosophy (or giving back to your community).

While you can read Schussler's book in few sittings, you'll probably want to re-read many of the chapters to let his advice really sink in. That's when you'll get the inspiration to pursue your own dreams, whether or not they are entrepreneurial.

Steve Schussler at a glance

Company: Schussler Creative Inc.

Title: Chairman and CEO

Business: Creating theme restaurants

Notable concepts: Rainforest Café, T-Rex: A Prehistoric Family Adventure, Hot Dog

Reason for writing: Requests from business students after conducting a talk at Carlson School of Management.

A favorite saying: “No is a yes waiting to happen.”

Profits: All of the author’s earnings dedicated to the Smile Network International, which provides free surgeries to fix cleft lips and palates of impoverished children.