



“ALWAYS BE ON
THE LOOKOUT FOR YOUR
NEXT BIG THING”

Steve Schussler is proof that the entrepreneur at age 35 can be seen already in the entrepreneur at 13. In his new book, *It's a Jungle In There*, the founder of the

Rainforest Café chain and Schussler

Creative tells how his career creating themed restaurants took off—and in these excerpts, how a knack for seeing opportunity took him to extremes.




Opportunity is waiting for you to find it! It is amazing to discover just how many of these opportunities actually exist once you get in the habit of looking for them. It's just a matter of training yourself to automatically scan your environment for what I call "enhancement gaps"—the difference between what you are seeing and what you could create to make what you are seeing better by providing some product or service.

My first chance to make use of this principle occurred when I was just thirteen years old. During summers, I worked as one of several cabana boys at the Silver Gull Beach Club in Breezy Point, New York. My official duty was to get the cabanas ready for use each day by putting the chairs and umbrellas out, and then clearing everything

away each evening. It was simple and straightforward, but certainly less than demanding.

However, during my first week on the job, I noticed there was a group of adult men who played cards around some makeshift tables near the swimming pool. Sometimes, one of the men would call me over to run an errand for him, such as getting him a sandwich or some extra ice for his drink. For this service, I would get a tip, sometimes as much as \$10. So I started hanging around the card players more often and, sure enough, once the guys saw me there on a consistent basis, they started asking me to run more errands and do them more favors. Hot towels, cold towels, pastrami sandwiches, umbrellas, sunglasses, it didn't matter: I never failed to honor a request.

I was making a hell of a lot more money being their gofer than I was as a cabana boy, as I'd generally score a \$5 tip for my efforts. If any of "my" card players wanted some-



thing, I made sure they got it. I became known as the go-to guy for anything. One time, a player got a flat tire in the parking lot. He told me to take care of it and I had it repaired within an hour. I never said no to any request.

The longer I watched the game, the more I realized there was a treasure trove of additional money that could be made. For example, I noted that some guys would fight for certain seats at the table (usually their "lucky" chair or a spot in the sun), so I started reserving their favorite chairs for them. Of course, the players showed their gratitude by giving me generous tips. I used my tip money to upgrade the playing environment. I purchased new tables and chairs and charged a "rental" fee to play. The men paid me a \$5 sit-down fee. What had started as a one-table game expanded, under my direction, to a three-table game. I was actually running a card room and all the players were happy because I was giving them what they wanted: a better playing environment and someone to run errands for them when they didn't want to get things for themselves. I was turning a tidy profit and providing a needed service at the same time.

There was more. I noticed that the guys could use up to seven packs of cards a day during their play. With three tables, that meant twenty-one packs of cards were needed to keep the action going. I decided I could make extra money if I supplied the cards directly to the players, rather than having them purchase the decks at retail at the local drugstore. I found out the brand of the cards and located the manufacturer's distribution point, which turned out to be in Far Rockaway, three bus rides away from the club. Every week, I would make the trip to the distribution point and buy several cases of brand-new cards. Because I bought in bulk, at wholesale prices, I was able to mark up the decks 150 percent and still charge the players less for the cards than they would have paid at the local drugstore. Plus, I saved them the trip to the store in the process.

Although the games were only played on Saturdays and Sundays, I found myself making about \$700 a weekend based on my card sales, table rentals, and tips garnered from running errands for the players. Meanwhile, amazingly, none of the other cabana boys had any idea about the kind of money I was raking in.

The following summer, I added additional money-making wrinkles to my card-table operation. I purchased a refrigerator, stuck it out near the tables with an extension

cord, and stocked it with iced tea, lemonade, and orange juice—I even tried to slip in some vodka (without success, as I was still only fourteen). I started selling the drinks directly to the players, keeping both the markup on the beverages and the tips I got for bringing them to the tables. I got to know each player's favorite drink and made sure I had enough stock never to run out. Every time I brought a drink to the table, it was another \$5 in my pocket, plus the profit margin I made between my cost for the refreshments and the markup I charged the player. (Remember, I had no help. This was a one-man show.)

I even concocted an idea for saving money on ice. In the early days of my operation, I used to pay for bags of ice from a nearby convenience store and haul them to the club. Then I realized it would be cheaper (and, by that, I mean free) and less hassle to just take ice from the kitchen at night when no one was around and use it to keep the drinks cold. I also started running errands for the families of the players, tapping into yet another income stream. The players started asking me to deliver drinks to their wives, and they'd tip me for doing so. The guys even began betting on how fast I could run an errand. I usually made money on that wager, too. The cash was rolling in at an extraordinary rate.

Sadly, it was around this time that I made my major mistake: I started bragging to my cousin about how much money I was making. He had worked at the club for five years as a cabana boy, and when he heard about my \$700 weekends, he bounced off the wall. "Seven hundred dollars for two days work?" he said with disbelief. "You've gotta be kidding me!" He spread the news around, bragging as a very proud relative about my business acumen.

It was a very short time later that the general manager pulled me into his office.

He was nice about it, but he made it clear my gravy days were at an end. "You make more money than I do," he explained. "I've been in business a hell of a long time and you're one hell of an entrepreneur. We love you and would love you to stay on and be part of our team, but we're taking over the card tables."

I, of course, wanted no part of it. I had built the business through my purchasing skills, sweat equity, and great service. Now the club wanted to take over what I had created. When I didn't accept the club's offer, the manager hired one guy and two girls to do what I had done by myself... and my card-table management days were over.

But the lesson I learned would last a lifetime: observing your surroundings to see what you can do to make things better is a surefire formula for turning a profit.



Steven Schussler's collection of "inspiring lessons, hard-won insights, and other acts of entrepreneurial daring" is out October 5 nationwide from Barnes & Noble's Sterling Publishing. **He's donating all of his proceeds from *It's a Jungle In There* to Smile Network International**, a nonprofit that does no-cost reconstructive surgery for children around the world born with cleft palates and other facial deformities. Schussler is one of Smile Network's founding board members.

Facing page: Steve Schussler (right) with his father and brothers a few years before he turned "cabana boy" into a lucrative job title. **Next page:** As Superman in Miami at age 20, about to let friends pack him into a crate and deliver him to WGBS Radio so he could sell himself to the station manager as a "super salesman" of advertising air time.

W

hen you are passionate about a project, anything is possible.

As an example: for years, I wanted to create a themed restaurant based on the tropical rainforest. It started back when I was a teenager. I loved parrots and fish, and I wanted to have a restaurant where they could be displayed for interactive, educational purposes. I also wanted to create an environmental awareness of these beautiful creatures and educate people about what they could do to save the rainforest. The problem was getting investors interested in my idea. Just talking about the project was getting me nowhere. I had to do something far more dramatic and impactful if I ever

wanted a shot at financial backing for my idea.

My attention-grabbing idea? I turned my suburban home into a tropical rainforest. I created a jungle home smack dab in the middle of my residential neighborhood. Over a period of a few years, my standard split-level home was transformed into a jungle dwelling complete with rock outcroppings, waterfalls, rivers, layers of fog, mist that rose from the ground, a thatched hut covered with vines on the roof, tiki torches, a twelve-foot neon "paradise" sign, and a full-size replica of an elephant near the front door.

It wasn't easy to create this life-size prototype. I had to knock out rooms to create a greenhouse and I purchased 3,700 bright orange extension cords to hook up to the twenty different sound systems, lights, and fog pumps that provided the jungle noise and mist that floated through the house. Then I had to learn to live with forty tropical birds, two 150-pound tortoises, a baboon, an iguana, and a bevy of tropical fish housed in ten 300-gallon tanks. There were also fifty different animatronic creatures in the house—a collection of mechanized alligators, gorillas, and monkeys.

At least I didn't have to feed or clean up after them, but changing their batteries was a real chore. I finally devised a way to get them to run on electricity.

In the bedroom, my bed was constructed to look like it was suspended in a tree. It had waterfalls behind it and mist was rising up in different places throughout the room. Birds and animals moved freely through the area during showings of the house. There were tortoises in the kitchen, parrots in the bathroom, fish everywhere. The humidity from the pumped-in fog and mist destroyed my wallpaper, but I didn't care. Every room, every closet, every hallway of my house was a "scene," an attempt to present my idea of what a rainforest restaurant would look like in actual operation. My house became one huge theatrical set, a life-size stage to visually present my entrepreneurial vision. Overall, it took me three years and almost \$400,000 to get the house developed to the point where I felt comfortable showing it to potential investors.

Several of my neighbors weren't exactly thrilled to be living near a jungle habitat. They started a watch group. They even bought walkie-talkies and would update one

another on what was happening. When, one day, I heard the front entry chime, I opened the door to what looked like a full-scale crime scene. There were cop cars and officers all over the place. One guy put me up against the door and said he was with the Drug Enforcement Administration and they were going to search the premises for drugs. Because of my huge residential electric bill, they assumed I was growing marijuana in the house. They were astonished when they discovered the tropical rain forest.

Let me tell you: it's not easy to live in a house filled with jungle creatures and surrounded by angry neighbors, all on the off chance that it might help get funding to realize an entrepreneurial dream. What got me through was passion, pure and simple. I knew no venture capitalists were going to invest their money in my far-out concept without actually seeing it, so I transformed my house into my vision of what a rainforest restaurant would look like in order to make them believe in my dream.

My plan succeeded. It turned out that a fellow Minnesotan, gaming executive and venture capitalist Lyle Berman, bought into the concept and raised the funds necessary to get Rainforest Cafe up and running.

I remember the first time Lyle visited my home. It was early morning and he stopped by on his way to work. I came out to greet him wearing jeans and a khaki shirt, like a safari guide, with a parrot on my shoulder. I led him inside, where he was greeted by forty tropical birds in cages and a baby baboon named Charlie wearing a dress. Jungle foliage, including all kinds of plants and vines, was hanging everywhere. There was a thirty-five-foot waterfall, too, which emptied into a river that snaked through the house and out into the yard. It was filled with pink anti-freeze so it wouldn't stop flowing in the winter. To top it off, I created a mock-up of a retail store with various kinds of rain forest merchandise that looked like a Florida souvenir shop on steroids.

After giving Lyle a tour of the house, I asked him what he thought of it. He told me I needed a psychiatric examination and there was no way he'd invest in my idea. He then asked if he could bring his kids by to see the house, to which I of course agreed. On his next visit, after I gave his kids the grand tour, I again asked Lyle what he thought of my idea.

"Well, your dedication and passion are off the chart," he admitted, "but I'm not buying into this," he claimed. Then he asked if he could bring his parents over.

By the time Lyle's parents had completed the tour, Lyle and I had developed a little ritual. Once the visit was over I'd ask him what he thought. Then I'd anxiously await his answer. This time I re-



“

When the DEA agents found out what was really in the house, several brought their kids over to visit the place and some even purchased stock in the company.

”

minded Lyle how committed I was to the project, and his response was: "I think you should be committed!"

Lyle found additional reasons to visit my house. I guess my tenacity and passion for the Rainforest Cafe idea kept growing on him. He kept visiting my house, bringing over other investors for their reactions. Finally, after about two years, Lyle decided to back my idea, and the rest is history: the Rainforest Cafe chain became one of the most successful themed restaurant concepts ever created, and continues that way today under Landry's Restaurants and Tilman Fertitta's leadership.

These days, of course, I create my restaurant concepts in warehouses far from residential neighborhoods, but back then there were no warehouses. I sunk every dollar I had into making my house a themed rainforest restaurant, because I was passionate about the concept and I wanted to see it become a reality.

Being passionate doesn't totally shield you from moments of doubt, unfortunately. There were nights I'd go to bed and have trouble sleeping. I remember looking in the mirror and wondering if I really was crazy. I told myself I was neurotic. It was an emotional time for me. I didn't know how long I could keep things going; I just knew the Rainforest Cafe was a great idea, and I couldn't let it go. I wanted to share my passion for the tropical rainforest with everyone.

Of course, the DEA raid didn't help matters, but it wasn't my biggest headache. (In fact, when the agents found out what was really in the house, several of them brought their kids over to visit the place and some even purchased stock in the company.) No, the worst moment for me involved a disagreement with the gas company. It was over bills. I hadn't been paying them and, even more troublesome, I connected up the gas meter a few times after the company had turned it off for nonpayment.

Things came to a head one Friday night when a convoy of trucks showed up in the cul-de-sac where my house was located. It was the gas company. I guess management was tired of me finding ways to turn the gas back on. The workers dug a twenty-five-foot-deep hole in the road and shut off the main gas valve to my house. Then they covered up the hole and prepared the road to be repaved.

I was desperate! It was the beginning of winter and the gas supplied heat to the house. Without it, my animals would die. Luckily, it wasn't too cold yet and I was able to get by with electric heaters. I called the gas company and begged its representatives to turn the gas back on. It took me three days to raise the money to get the workers to come back. I ended up having to pay the bill plus the cost of digging and repaving the road. The neighbors were none too happy, either. Believe me, that was one time that even my passion flagged a bit. But, in the final analysis,

I picked myself up and moved on, reminding myself of the words penned by Arthur Buddhold: "Follow your passion, and success will follow you."

That's how the Rainforest Cafe was born.

And that's why I make no apologies for living passionately, and neither should you. **TCB**



At 19, Schussler tried a modeling career. A few years later, he'd take the inventory from his failed business collecting and restoring jukeboxes, slot machines, and other memorabilia and use it to create his first theme restaurant and night club: Juke Box Saturday Night.

24th Year of Service

STOP SLIPPERY FLOORS & STEPS

Sure Stop Floor Safety
"your fast and dependable solution to any slippery floors and steps"
call **763 571-1769**
We do machine shop floors to pool decks...we do help!

www.surestop.com

INDUSTRY EXPERTS

LEAVE AN IMPRESSION



You expect results. We deliver them.

Immedia specializes in retail & restaurant environments. We provide remarkable custom design, prototyping, printing & fabrication of displays.

612.524.3400 // IMMEDIARETAIL.COM

immedia
DESIGNED TO DELIVER