

7 Tips for Startup Food Entrepreneurs

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An entrepreneur's dream includes freedom and flexibility to create their own rules and success. It also includes seeing goals and objectives fulfilled, impacting a community, and advocating for what they are passionate about. What most entrepreneurs fail to consider, however, is there is much more to entrepreneurship than what meets the eye.

In my personal experience, what I thought entrepreneurship was when I decided to pursue this career and what it really is are two different realities; building a company and working for a company is different. The required focus, responsibilities, skills, and expertise levels are not even close.

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A highly-rated chef could leave the restaurant they work for and fail because being a Culinary Artist and Culinary Entrepreneur isn't the same. A Food and Beverage Director also has a totally different job function than that of a CEO. I tell people that "Artists must learn the art of business to be successful." Confusing your ability to produce fantastic food with the knowledge and skills to own and operate a successful foodservice business, is in my opinion, the main cause of failure in the food industry. Most people believe that they will be successful in business once they can prepare and serve

delicious food and beverages. I've witnessed businesses owned by and/or with celebrity names that still failed also. A big name on your company doesn't guarantee success either. Everything has to be in sync, just like the widgets of a clock. If you have all the passion for your product but don't know how to reach, serve, and maintain your clientele this is a recipe for disaster.

The vision I have for my life continues to develop as I carry on with this journey. Some things were fulfilled, and others, I realized I no longer desired over time and removed them off my list of priorities. A good example is that I knew that if or when I became a mother, I would have liked to stay home with my child for at least the first year of my child's life, which I did. I accepted, rejected, and created opportunities that allowed me to live according to my terms and conditions. In the same way that I am methodical in my personal life, I am in my professional life. I don't live by default, but my vision keeps me focused and gives me something to look forward to, especially when there seems like there is nothing good going for me. In business, we must do the same—methodically plan, revise, and be intentional about the growth of our companies and our employees. Otherwise, things may go out of hand, making it hard to make up for the losses and regain traction.

With food innovation being at an all-time high, many new concepts and trends are out in the market. The way the products come off makes it seem like these companies are mind readers knowing what I want and when I want it. I even find myself sometimes uttering, "I never thought about this but, it would make my life so much easier!" The truth is product creation is fun and exciting, but designing the company's systems to function smoothly and replicating products, services, and experiences is quite frustrating and tedious for the creative person.

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What's Next?

As a business consultant and strategist, I love my work. I have found that providing consulting, project management, and other professional services are essential to a business's success. Still, clients don't always understand why or how to maintain the work done in their business and create and maintain success. As a result, I have decided to combine what I know into a hybrid program (teaching, coaching, and consulting) that empowers and guides entrepreneurs to succeed when building their businesses and throughout the lifespan of their companies.

Here are 7 tips that I would share with budding entrepreneurs in the food industry:

1. Have your ultimate vision clearly defined first

Before I work with clients, I always ask them for the ultimate vision they have for their company. To build a good company, you must know and understand your purpose for making your product or service come to life and bringing it to the marketplace for others to enjoy. My suggestion is that even if what you desire is inaccessible to you because of your experience and resources, believe in the reality that you will grow in stages and establish these as goals as time passes by so that your work will become strategic.

2. Hire legal counsel

Before you legally register your business, agree to partnerships, or accept money from investors, it would be wise to have sound legal counsel to avoid common pitfalls. These include minimizing misunderstandings and clarifying and defining expectations. For example, verbal contracts are legal in some states but what is agreed to and signed for in writing

is harder to deny.

3. Have your menu completed first before writing a business plan

Before you select, lease, or purchase a commercial property, it would be helpful to have a completed menu of products and services that will be available to your clients and customers. What you can do varies according to that area's local regulatory authority. I have watched businesses never open throughout the course of my career because their desired location has a history of not getting permits approved in a timely fashion, or using certain equipment or special food handling processes that required special permission that had an application process of its own that needed to be reviewed and approved before the business could open. As a result, the owners were not financially prepared to pay for a place that they could not immediately use and generate sales.

4. Write your business plan based on your menu of products and services.

A business plan should always be customized and not crafted from generic templates. Reviewing a few to get an idea of what you need for your plan is acceptable but they shouldn't be relied on because they aren't specific to your business. Decide on ways to give your company a distinctive difference in the marketplace. Explore newer funding options, creative marketing strategies, and growing a healthy company, employees, and a loyal customer base that craves what you have to offer.

5. Create your policies, systems, and processes before you launch your business

Doing business with entrepreneurs who are more proud of their physical product or service than their actual business shows. I can list experiences where I paid for products and services but was left disappointed and it damaged or destroyed professional relationships. So while having the best “sauce” or whatever you make and sell, please ensure that you create essential systems and processes because every business needs standardization.

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6. Have a plan for personal and professional growth for both you and your employees

It's great to have a business that has customers who keep the numbers coming in. However, to have the same level of skills and expertise years after establishing your business means that you have not grown, and what you know may no longer be as relevant as you think. Clients who have multimillion-dollar companies and refuse to invest in professional development and training don't realize that this seriously hurts their business. I have found that when working with these types of clients, you cannot best serve them because they don't understand the importance or value of what you are doing for them and suggesting to them. In addition, they are also the same ones who wonder why their customers are no longer satisfied with them after years of loyalty.

7. Have a written succession plan

Neighborhood favorite cornerstones, especially those that have served several generations that close down, wildly unexpectedly leave a void that many times could never be filled. Common reasons are that it was a family business and no one wanted to work in it; business partners who disagreed; the owners who started it as a couple are divorcing. The list goes on, however, planning for these things would preserve the business and function as it should regardless of personal matters.

I understand that business and life can be unpredictable because I have not worked on any project that has been similar to another. However, we must be prepared and plan the best possible for common challenges in our respective niches. I have also learned that seeking out feedback from other entrepreneurs comes with significant risks. I'm a group member for restaurant professionals online where people ask questions to other industry professionals; very rarely do I see sound advice shared, and frequently when it is, it is rejected. I view it the same as receiving relationship information from someone that's not privy to the details of your life. Don't listen to everybody's advice.

I don't believe that culinary school prepares you for culinary entrepreneurship. I learned more about the food industry while working in the industry. Study your business more than you study anybody else's, and that to me is the key to success.

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