

He Went From Customer to CEO of a Rapidly-Expanding Dessert Chain By Following This Process

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Fresh out of an unfulfilling finance career, Neil Hershman was looking for something different – something he could build with his own hands. That search led him to 16 Handles, a New York-based froyo brand he frequented as a customer.

Astrophysics degree in one hand, finance resume in the other, Hershman found himself behind the counter of his first 16 Handles franchise, sleeves rolled up and running the store from open to close.

What started as a side project quickly spiraled into something bigger. “Open and close, every single shift I was working,” Hershman says. “I was able to advance the business [and] bring in additional revenue to the point where the profit was so great that I decided to leave all my other projects and just focus on 16 Handles.”

At a time when other entrepreneurs were retreating, Hershman expanded. He started building new stores across New York City during Covid-19, when retail leases were cheap and competitors were shuttering. “Instead of getting scared, I was the one coming in and building,” he says.

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Soon, he wasn't just running locations. He was leading the entire company.

Since acquiring the brand from founder Solomon Choi in 2022, Hershman has led a nationwide expansion of the froyo chain from 30 to 150-plus locations. His unexpected journey from customer to franchisee to CEO gives him a unique edge in today's crowded dessert market.

Hershman is behind some of the brand's wildest flavors, ranging from *Harry Potter* references to "french fry frozen yogurt" (a play on McDonald's frequently broken ice cream machines). "I am part of the customer base," he says. "My family, my friends, everyone is part of the customer base. So it's just ideas that we have."

The results speak for themselves. "Our sales growth has been phenomenal, like when we launched french fry, or the *Squid Games*-inspired flavor, or the butter beer out of *Harry Potter*," he says. "Our sales are up like 30-40% the week that we launched compared to prior years. So it really does make a difference."

But building a thriving brand takes more than flavor. It takes trust, consistency and loyalty – not just from customers, but from the team. That's why the first person Hershman hired was Lisa Mallon, who co-owned the Fairfield, Connecticut, location with her husband for 13 years.

"Who knows the brand better and believes in the brand more than people who have been successful with the brand?" Hershman says. "Somebody who's got 13 years of running a store open to close and knows customer interactions and [what] customers want, how to make the best bang for your buck on this business."

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This strategy helps the brand stay consistent, which are the callouts Hershman appreciates most in customer reviews.

“We used to have one girl who ordered every single day, and it would always come through around the same time, to the point where when you heard the printer printing at that time, we knew it was her order and what to do,” he says.

One day, she left a five-star review with a picture of her froyo on her coffee table. “Love this place, great chocolate,” she wrote.

For Hershman, these few words were a source of encouragement. “Even though it feels monotonous that we’re packing the same order every single day, there’s somebody at the other end who all day is probably looking forward to this moment of opening up this bag,” he says.

Hershman stressed the importance of paying close attention to reviews, whether positive or critical.

“[Loyal customers] know what to look for best,” he says. “Those are really important for us as a franchisor to know what’s going on with our locations, and for store operators to know what’s going on in the customer’s mind.”

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Hershman and his team keep a close eye on review platforms like Yelp to help refine operations and build trust while keeping in mind that not every critique is a call to action.

For example, one of the challenges Hershman identified is not getting the full picture of a customer’s experience based on their review. “You just get the edges, so it makes it a little hard to use those reviews as a long-term decision maker,” he says.

Nevertheless, critical reviews can provide clarity, and good reviews can build credibility. Both are opportunities to grow as a business.

Hershman's story is about seeing potential where others see plateaus and making truly special moments for customers, who will return for the consistent experience again and again.

After taking over as CEO and reimagining 16 Handles for a new generation, Hershman's advice to entrepreneurs is simple but powerful:

- **Obsess over the customer experience.** From staple products to add-on services, everything can be improved to build trust and cultivate repeat business.
- **Build customer loyalty at every turn.** Reading and responding to customer feedback lets customers know their voices are heard.
- **Innovate with purpose.** Not every business idea will see the light of day, but focusing on constant improvement will keep your business competitive.
- **See your business through the eyes of a customer.** Spending time on the front lines can give you a fresh perspective on what's working and what needs to be improved.

Listen to the episode to hear directly from Neil Hershman, and subscribe to Behind the Review for more from new business owners and reviewers every Tuesday.

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