

There's a Loneliness Epidemic – And These Co-Founders Are Tackling It With Pickleball

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Pickleball has swept the nation into a frenzy of friendly competition. One court in Charlotte, North Carolina, has taken the game to the next level, combining pickleball practice with first-rate hospitality. Established in 2021, Rally features indoor and outdoor pickleball courts, craft cocktails, elevated cuisine and a specialty coffee program.

Yelp reviewer Megan B. visited Rally to catch up with an old friend over a game of pickleball, but she was equally impressed by Rally's lounges and court-side service.

"The vibes are immaculate, with beautiful decor, cozy couches, cabanas and stylish merch," Megan says. "The food is also very tasty and well done. I came here for the pickleball but would come if I just wanted to have a bite and a snack and some live entertainment while others played."

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Surprising people with a memorable experience is what it's all about, according to owners Barrett Worthington and Meg Charity. They say first-time customers like Megan are often shocked by how Rally elevates the pickleball experience, on and off the court. Although visitors might not expect a gourmet meal when they walk in, they definitely remember Rally

as more than a pickleball court as they walk out.

“That was so intentional in creating this space that functioned more like a social club or a country club turned on its head, Worthington says. “We want it to be known [as much] for the food, beverage and vibe as the pickleball itself.”

Worthington and Charity’s careful design choices are responsible for so much of what sets Rally apart from an average gym or park. Even the courts have flair, painted a bright turquoise and pink.

“We were really intentional about designing the space to not feel like a sports venue,” Worthington says. “One of our design inspirations is The Hoxton, which is a boutique hotel brand. Their lobbies are known to be gathering spaces where you would come and have a drink, meet a friend, or work during the day. We knew we wanted the space to feel like that and to be a place [where] you could linger in and come visit whether you’re playing pickleball or not.”

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Rally customers clearly appreciate the intentionality behind every detail – which, in turn, inspires them to share them among their networks. For example, Megan says she was compelled to snap a photo and share it on social media and in her review.

“It’s a really beautiful space,” she says. “It’s easy to take pictures there. There’s a beautiful thing everywhere you look, whether it’s your cocktail, the outdoor pickleball courts, the interior design [or] a latte.”

Although aesthetics are important, it’s all in service of Rally’s founding mission: helping people socialize and form connections in a comfortable, safe space. Charity and Worthington are life partners as well as business partners,

and they first bonded over their shared interest in tennis. They founded Rally to provide a similar foundation of community to people suffering from what they call the “loneliness epidemic.”

“We wanted to create that experience for [people in the] 20s to mid-30s demographic who don’t always have easy outlets to make friends,” Worthington says. “Sports, in general, are icebreakers and help you make friendships. Pickleball is just so good at doing that. So we created Rally because we wanted a place where friendships could naturally blossom for ourselves as much as anybody.”

Rally’s mission of fostering connections applies to other local businesses, as well. Megan says she could sense the owners’ authenticity in their efforts to work with and uplift local artists. “I’m that type of person who’s like, ‘I’m going to support these people because they support other local businesses,’” she says.

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As a small business, understanding your “why” is essential for building on your successes and keeping your team motivated through the tough times. Charity and Worthington are transparent about the hardships they faced in the startup stage but said knowing their mission kept the business moving.

“Not everyone wants to work in a startup environment... [but] the people who are still with us today understand that it’s not just about the pickleball, and it’s not just about serving great food and drink,” Worthington says. “We’re all here to do something bigger and more meaningful. We want to be a catalyst for connection. We talk about that a lot and what that means to [the staff]. I think in this day and age, you only stick around in a job if you believe in the mission.”

The co-founders also collect proactive feedback from their team to ensure Rally is living up to its values for customers and employees alike. “We care a lot about internal culture,” Charity says. “We get those feedback loops going. How can we improve? How can we do better? I am very involved. I’m there every single day. We’ve got an incredible team. They are just living our mission.”

Feedback is key to earning the trust of both your employees and customers. For the owners, engaging with reviews shows customers they care. “When we ask for feedback, it’s not just to check a box,” Charity says. “We desperately want Rally to be the absolute best it possibly can be.”

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Rally’s founders have redefined the pickleball experience using these core principles:

- **Explore complementary services.** Although pickleball is Rally’s core service, the food and drink offerings bring customers back, creating a lively social scene that attracts both players and non-players. It also provides the business with multiple revenue streams.
- **Let your authenticity shine from the floors to the ceiling.** A unique design vision can set you apart from the competition. Plus, having a photo-worthy location provides free, organic marketing and can even inspire customer reviews.
- **Know your “why.”** Never forget why you’re pursuing this career. Rally around the mission to keep yourself and your team motivated during difficult times.
- **A cycle of feedback is a cycle of improvement.** Reading and responding to reviews and collecting feedback from your team ensures that your employees and customers feel cared for.

Listen to the episode below to hear directly from Worthington, Charity and Megan, and subscribe to Behind the Review for more from new business owners and reviewers every Thursday. Available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Pandora.

Editorial contributions by Erin Palmero and Emily Moon

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/how-charlottes-rally-pickleball-got-its-start/484424>