

Some Small Businesses are Family Affairs

By Bruce A. Love

*L*ike many small business owners, Travis Smith got his start working for someone else. He did this in a business he would eventually call his own. Unlike most other business owners, Travis got his chance to become a business owner early in life - shortly after graduating high school at the age of 18.

Last week I had an opportunity to sit down with Travis, at his OIP Pizza restaurant in Claysburg, to discuss his experiences as a young business owner. Over the years, I have met with hundreds of business owners, and people who were interested in becoming self-employed. Few, however, have demonstrated the determination, drive, and poise I see in this young man. Travis Smith is truly motivated to make his restaurant succeed.

Since re-opening the OIP restaurant "under new management" on August 1st, Travis Smith has had to make a series of tough decisions – any one of which would be challenging for many seasoned business owners. In the brief time Smith has owned this restaurant, he has refined his menu, improved some recipes, hired all new personnel (except for one exceptionally talented pizza chef whom he retained from the previous owner), dealt with disputes with neighboring businesses, dispelled stories spread by a local rumormonger, cut expenses while supporting local suppliers in Blair County, discovered the importance of inventory control, and developed strategies for future growth.

Travis Smith's familiarity with business cycles, revenues, and expenses indicates to me that he knows this business from top to bottom. This insight comes from his experience working in the business before purchasing it, observing what worked and what didn't work, and studying the financials of the business. Travis also acknowledges the value of a business skills course he took in high school while enrolled in the Ag Prep curriculum at Central High School in Martinsburg. Of course, he also learned a thing or two by watching and helping his father with the family's construction business, Smith and Sons.

Business ownership comes with a price. While friends were making the most of their summer vacations

(hanging out, having fun and wasting time like most teenagers), Travis was spending about 70 hours per week with his business, ensuring that everything would work, and that he would be able to build a successful business to meet his career goals while serving the needs of the community.

The OIP in Claysburg is something of a family affair. Travis Smith benefits from the labors of his a sister, Kelly, and brothers Brian, Henry, and Dorsey. Travis' biggest lift in business, however, comes from his father, Lowell Smith, whose small business experience is an invaluable resource for the younger Smith. Lowell also made it possible for Travis to secure the necessary funds to purchase the business from the previous owner (lenders typically don't like to make loans to young, unproven small business owners lacking collateral).

Before opening for business, Lowell offered his son this advice: "Stay on top of things, stay focused, anticipate problems, and work your [buns] off!" This is great advice for anyone starting a business. When asked if Travis always takes his father's advice, Lowell replied, "Most of the time." Judging from my conversation with both father and son, the two enjoy a great relationship and share a mutual respect for one another. A supportive family is very important when launching and running a business.

The OIP in Claysburg (814-239-8900) offers dine-in, take-out, and delivery to a wide area. It is open seven days per week, and looks to expand its services to include breakfasts. Their most popular menu items are pizzas (in my opinion, excellent), wings, and steak subs. In researching this business, I discovered that Lowell Smith also enjoys participating in some culinary aspects of his son's business. Regrettably, after thoroughly enjoying a large pizza at the OIP, I lacked the capacity to try the German chocolate cake (\$0.75 per slice) and the chocolate cheesecake (\$1.50 per slice), which Lowell makes for the restaurant. I think this will require another visit over the mountain to rectify that oversight!

When I asked Travis Smith what advice he would offer to other young people who are thinking about starting a business, he replied, "Age does not matter. If you put your mind and heart into it, you will succeed."

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