

Foodpreneur

(Food + Entrepreneur)

Jer's Handmade Chocolates - Have a Ball!

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Foodpreneur: Jerry Swain

About the Foodpreneur:

I was in my parent's kitchen, my hands covered in chocolate and all-natural peanut butter, hand-rolling ball shaped treats as gifts for my friends back at school (University of California Riverside). I wasn't sure if it was my uniquely crunchy peanut butter center, or if I'd stumbled upon just the right rich chocolate coating, but one thing was for sure: the chocolates were a hit. They quickly become a tradition around the holidays and they even won first place at a local Southern California festival. I realized I had something fun to do as a side project.

After graduation from college, I went on to work as a Sales Manager with IBM, and Vice President of Sales, Marketing and Business Development at two more companies. The entrepreneurial bug got the best of me, and I started my own business consulting firm where I provided training and coaching and was asked to give public speaking seminars throughout the U.S. and abroad.

Although I had a great career, the chocolate business which began as a hobby seemed like a great challenge as I began to realize I was really on to something. I wanted to follow a dream and build something from concept to fruition.

I had a "big" job offer which I decided to turn down in order to follow my dream. I took the leap and gave up a successful and comfortable professional career. Many people ask how I made the final decision to take such a risk. In 2000, I was home for the holidays. I sat down with my parents and talked to them about starting another business. My father gave me some wise words. He said after he made the decision to do what he really

dreamed of doing, he had never been happier. He only wished he had done it 20 years earlier. He told me to think of the worst-case scenario and if I thought I could live with it, then I should follow my dream and passion. He said if it didn't work out, I'd have gained a lot of experience and knowledge. My father's words sent me home with a final decision, so the following year I started the project.



About the Jer's Handmade Chocolates Biz:

Jer's Handmade Chocolates was founded in 2001. Using all-natural ingredients, we focus on gourmet peanut butter and chocolate varieties. When I found out that more than 75% of all candy bars purchased in the United States are a combination of chocolate and peanuts or peanut butter, I decided to be the first to take it to a gourmet level. I created this company to deliver a fun and memorable experience to our customers through delicious, unique products.

We decided to stick with all peanut butter variations based on initial focus group research. When the company was started, I conducted 3 focus groups where we had 14 different chocolate balls of all different types. All 3 focus groups voted the peanut butter pretzel combination as their favorite. That eventually became our Pretzo Change-O flavor.

We made a decision to be the best as what we do, not necessarily trying to offer everything to everybody. There are plenty of wonderful chocolates out there, but we've pioneered the only all natural peanut butter collection.

Our initial focus was on the gift-giving purchase. Mostly because the premium ingredients we use along with the handmade process makes it a higher priced decadent chocolate. We therefore developed packaging to support this buying pattern. However, much to our pleasure, we have a group of loyal customers that love the taste of our product and buy it for their own consumption. As we grow our business, we will look to package our product a bit differently for the different markets or distribution channels and to continue to develop new and unique flavors.

Marketing Strategies:

One of the most important strategies is the recruitment of good people. Good people don't necessarily have to come from industry, but they must have good, "can-do" attitudes about the company and be proud of what they're doing. We strive to create innovative flavors for a niche market. We take American's favorite combination and make it gourmet. We are all about taste.

We conduct periodic focus groups to make sure we are satisfying our customers. We maintain our focus of providing outstanding products and high end appeal as well as conveying the fun nature of our brand, story and flavors.

Fun Food Story:

Every week we host "Jer's Chocolate Party." Our first annual party was in 2001, only a few months after we started the business. The party brings us back to our roots and provides a great marketing opportunity in a fun way.

This party brings people together to have a great time, eat great chocolates and give back to a worthy charity. Each year, we donate 100% of the net proceeds of the party to a benefactor. We have supported charities such as the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and the Boys & Girls Club.

The night is a blast – there's food, chocolates, melted chocolates, chocolate martinis, dancing, information on the beneficiary and a "buzz" in the air of people having a great time! It is an event not to be missed, and we hope it grows each year.

Jerry knew Jer's Handmade Chocolates was a hit when:

We've been fortunate to win an award for each of our centers. Jer's Handmade Original IncrediBall took "Best First Time Piece" for a new company. Pretzo Change-O took "Best New Piece" and "Best of Show" the next year, and Cara Mella took "Best of Show" the following year after that. A threepeat! What makes it really special is that the contest was voted on by my peers in the industry. Over 700 people representing gourmet chocolate companies from Europe, Canada, Latin America and the USA were the judges.

In The News:

Food Network's "Food Finds"; The New York Daily News; Gourmet Retailer; Specialty Food; San Diego Daily Transcript; North County Times; Fancy Food Magazine; Entrepreneur Magazine; The San Diego Union Tribune; The Nibble.

Why is Jerry in the Chocolate Business?

Creating this business has allowed me to parlay my personal interest in community goodwill and involvement with something that always reminded me of good times. In this case, chocolate. The greatest thing is to see the look on the face of a new customer trying my confections for the very first time!

Words from the Wise:

As in any small business, the challenges can be tremendous and seem overwhelming. Each area of need has its own twist and issues from production to packaging, from resources of both time and finances to personnel and marketing. I share many of the business and personal challenges in my key note speeches and could spend a tremendous amount of time sharing stories with you; however, it is the learning from these challenges and looking to the positive things that come from overcoming them that make it all worthwhile!

A Final Note from Jerry:

My inspiration comes from people. The people that believe in me and my dream; the people that assist me daily in achieving that dream; and the people that take a bite of my chocolate and fall in love. In addition, it is my belief that sticking to something you believe in, no matter how difficult it seems at the time, will grant you an amazing experience and/or result.

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