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Hear Him Roar

RAINFOREST CAFE FOUNDER'S
ENTREPRENEURIAL ADVENTURES

WHAT DOES it take to make a successful restaurant? Steven Schussler ought to know. As the brains behind Rainforest Cafe, the brassy entrepreneur saw mega-success. But then the chain fell out of favor with investors, and Rainforest sold in 2000 at well below book value to national operator Landry's Restaurants Inc.

Now the team at Schussler Creative in Golden Valley, Minnesota, is back with a new high-concept restaurant: T-Rex. The interactive, dinosaur-themed eatery—a hybrid restaurant and museum attraction—opened its first unit last July at The Legends mall in Kansas City, Kansas, with local government footing more than half the \$15 million cost. Initial buzz is strong: Before T-Rex debuted, Landry's took an 80 percent stake.

ENTREPRENEUR: What did you learn from your experience with Rainforest Cafe?

STEVEN SCHUSSLER: We didn't have same-store sales increases because we already had three-hour waits, and I think we did a poor job explaining that to Wall Street. We took our eye off the ball—we opened a T-shirt factory to make our own shirts. We also ignored the educational aspect of the rainforests. I wanted to do things on deforestation and market vegetarian and vegan food. With T-Rex, we're building something more upscale in terms of food quality, and we're taking the education and entertainment to a different level. Here, everything's interactive—kids can dig for fossils. We're also open earlier so kids can come on field trips, and we have private parties. Rainforest never did either.

ENTREPRENEUR: What are the biggest mistakes that would-be restaurant owners make?

SCHUSSLER: The biggest mistake they make is ego. The second biggest is underestimating how much time, money and R&D they need to spend to make their concept a reality and take it over the top.

People get caught in their own box. When they hear things that are outside the box, instead of saying "How wonderful would that be?" they say "You're crazy." I take that as a challenge. I hate the word *no*.

Customers are tired of the same old thing. You need to change, whether it's the music or the color palette. How many restaurants have the same menu for five years? It becomes tired and boring. —CAROL TICE

42%
of entrepreneurs
launched their
first ventures
as children
(e.g., a lemonade
stand, a paper
route, etc.).



STATISTIC SOURCE: NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF TECHNOLOGICAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP
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