

Would You Go This Far To Win A Project Or Job?



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Would you ship yourself to a prospective employer in a crate, dressed in a Superman suit? “Hi, my name is Steve Schussler and I’m your new salesperson.” The stunt nearly killed this ambitious entrepreneur, but the risk paid off: He eventually became one of the most successful creators of theatrical experiences in the restaurant and retail world.

Several weeks ago I had the chance to interview Steven Schussler, the famous creator of the Rainforest Café who has also created, built and owns *T-Rex Cafe*, *Yak & Yeti Restaurant*, *Betty & Joe's*, *Hot Dog Hall of Fame*, *Galaxy Drive In*, and *Backfire Barbeque*. He’s also written the book *It’s a Jungle in There* that chronicles his experience in building businesses from scratch for aspiring entrepreneurs. Today, in addition to the development of his restaurants and his role at the helm of *Schussler Creative*, he shares his stories of early entrepreneurship through his book and through keynote addresses in an effort to influence other entrepreneurs, and young people, in particular, to never give up.

Schussler was willing to go all the way to the brink to achieve his first career-level job (and multiple of his subsequent projects, as he shares in his presentations and book). In our visit he recounted the details of his childhood and early entrepreneurial life. Schussler grew up scrappy and poor. His parents divorced when he was eight and he moved from a 10-bedroom house to a one-bedroom apartment with his two brothers and his mother, who stayed in the kitchen. He started working early to pay for extra curricular sports. He lied about his age and got a paper route and had held between 16 and 20 jobs before the age of 16. Then he did bricklaying, worked at a beach club, and started his own painting company. He served hot chocolate at Shea Stadium when he was 16.



Steve Schussler is the creator of multiple award-winning restaurants including the T-Rex Cafe

So back to the job application story. As a college student, Schussler desperately wanted a career in radio. He worked for the phone service, climbing telephone poles each day as a full-time job and went to college at night. He had developed a ritual. The telephone staff would meet for a picnic at 11:30 for lunch. While they did, he’d climb back up the pole and plug into other people’s telephone lines and interview for jobs. After six months, he’d been given a commitment by a local station that he was the next person they’d hire. The job didn’t come.

But the one thing Schussler couldn’t do, he decided, was quit. He determined that the best guy he could work for would be Don Hamlin in Miami.

“I decided I was going to do something he’d never forget,” Schussler recalls. “All out.” He decided to have himself delivered to the WGB radio station in a crate, and he’d leap out dressed as Superman. “I saved up \$50 bail money just in case... found two off-duty police officers and paid them \$100 apiece to deliver the crate. I had packed a can of Coke and a salami sandwich, got into costume, bent over and got inside. But you can’t fix stupid--I forgot to put holes in the crate. I think I lost about 20 pounds in 15 minutes. The Coke exploded and the sandwich rotted. You can imagine what it smelled like inside of the crate.”

The crate arrived at the radio station...people started milling around... but the general manager wasn’t there. He was in a board meeting. The staff had him called and informed him there was an expensive piece of furniture arriving that he needed to sign for, Schussler recalls. So out he came, bringing the board of directors, the newspeople, the salespeople and even the receptionist. “They couldn’t hear me, but I was praying for my life,” Schussler says. “He kicked the crate, used some four-letter words, ‘You ruined my board meeting!’ And I came flying out of the crate--the empty soda can hit a kid in the head – “My name is Steve Schussler and I’m your new salesperson’.”

The GM was stunned for a moment, then said “You’r the sickest person I’ve ever met. You’re hired. And he sat me in their leather chair and poured me a cocktail.” It worked. Schussler admits to now being both lucky and proud to be at the helm of the multiple of the top attractions and restaurants in the world in addition to his executive roles in television and radio.

Schussler’s daring nature paid off, but how would an approach like this play for others? I posed the question to the career and business universe this past week to discover the most creative and outrageous things other entrepreneurs and executives have done to win a job or a critical project, and most importantly, to find out whether their efforts paid off. When it comes to winning a competitive challenge in business, how far is too far? U.S. entrepreneurs and job seekers are more creative than I would have believed.

From Randi Reed, founder of *MusicBizAdvice.com*: “I’d been trying to land a job with this person at a well-known music industry company and we just couldn’t connect. But I knew concert season was coming and he needed an assistant. Finally, figuring I had nothing to lose, I bought a ticket to one of the company’s smaller concerts, and stood in line. When my potential boss walked by I introduced myself and said ‘We seem to have trouble connecting. I know you’re overloaded right now, so I just wanted to give you this,’ and handed him my resume. He liked my initiative and told me to come in at noon the next day. The interview was five minutes long and he hired me on the spot.”

I’d do that. But would you do this? Says Danielle Saladino-Evans, who works for advertising agency *Fingerpaint* (www.fingerpaintmarketing.com) in Saratoga Springs, NY: “The most outrageous thing our founder ever did to win a business pitch was to charter a bus and take the whole company (70 people) to the pitch. He wanted to demonstrate to the prospective client we had the ambition and size to handle their account. After presenting creative concepts, we told the panel we had one more thing to show them, but they had to look outside. When they did, they saw everyone waving signs reading ‘we would love to work with you’.”

They won the account, which is worth \$5 million in annual business. When I inquired they told me the cost of the gambit had been \$80,000 for the bus, the day’s wages for everyone involved, and food. It was a risk worth taking.

Here’s a risk that didn’t pay off: Bob Myhal, CEO of *NextHire*, says “While I’ve seen a lot of creative job seekers try interesting things to get the attention of hiring managers and recruiters, the wackiest one of all time has to be the time I was running a start-up in the health and fitness space and a candidate came in with a tattoo of the company logo on his arm. He was applying for a position in sales and marketing and I have to admit the tattoo certainly caught my attention. Mind you, this was a pure start-up, so the tattoo was not well-known or recognizable. In fact, I’m sure we switched logos about five times that first year.”

“As I recall, the interview went fairly well, but later that night I remember wondering whether this candidate was tremendously dedicated to our vision or just completely insane. Ultimately the candidate didn’t get the job because there were other more qualified applicants. While I can’t recommend taking the corporate tattoo route, it certainly did make one he** of a lasting impression.”

This effort ultimately failed as well, as relayed to me from Roy Cohen, a career counselor and executive coach who’s appeared on *The Today Show*, *CBS CBS-0.32%* *This Morning*, *CNN* and *HuffPost Live* (and was official career coach for the movie, *Lee Daniels’ “The Butler.”*) He is author of *The Wall Street Professional’s Survival Guide*.