

Recipe for Success: MOD Pizza Execs Dish Out “Secret Sauce” for Growth

Totem Report May 9, 2018

By Jeanne McKnight

In calling the May 9 meeting to order, **President Mark Wright** confessed that his wife, while “an excellent baker,” doesn’t really like to cook all that much—and so, he said, the Wright family frequently dines at their local MOD Pizza. Joking aside about who can and cannot cook in the Wright household, President Mark made it clear that meeting attendees were in for a treat for the main program, Ally Svenson, co-founder and Chief Purpose Officer at MOD Pizza—a homegrown Seattle business that proves the adage that one can do very well by doing good.



For the first course of the day’s program, **Past President Cathy Gibson** gave the inspiration, a recommendation to watch the recent documentary on Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, “RBG.” “She isn’t a Rotarian,” she observed, “but she talks like one.” Recalling one of the more memorable lines from the documentary, Past President Cathy urged us all to pay attention to RBG’s words: “Be the inspiration.”

Next on the menu: **Mike Colbrese**, with **Marli Iverson** on piano, led us in singing the old Dean Martin classic, “That’s Amore,” a new song choice for Seattle #4. Visiting Rotarians and guests were then introduced, along with prospective members. President Mark thanked **Past President Tim Bendokas** for his excellent work keeping track of member anniversaries.

Following the anniversary segment, two impressive new members, **Eu-wanda Eagans** (proposed by **Tom Betts** and **Lisa Mayfield**) and **Nicole Klein** (proposed by **Mike O’Byrne** and **Kim Moore**) were introduced by **Jan Levy** and **Gerry Maurer**, respectively. Seattle Fire Department Chief **Harold Scoggins** then gave a preview of next week’s program, which will honor the heroes in our midst who put their lives on the line day in and day out to save others. We were then reminded that next week’s program will start 30 minutes early.



President Mark then walked us through proposed bylaws changes and introduced **Lacey Clark**, who invited members to attend the upcoming Search & Rescue Night with the Union Gospel Mission. This event is a unique opportunity to see the vital work of UGM in Seattle, she said. **Cody Fritz** then invited members to an upcoming Young Rotary Leaders (YRL) Cocktails & Conversation event.

Then, the *pièce de résistance*: The story of [MOD Pizza](#) as told by MOD Squad leader Ally Svenson. She was accompanied by Recruiting Coordinator Sophia Arellano and Mary Douglas, Director of Community Engagement.



Some MOD-est facts: Started in Seattle in 2008 “during the recession” by Ally and Scott Svenson with the concept of offering “fast-casual pizza,” today the chain is one of the five fastest-growing restaurants in America, adding 100 stores in 2017 alone. The company, which now operates at 335 locations in the United States and the UK, was also added to Fortune’s “Best Workplaces for Diversity” in 2017.

In an industry where more businesses fail than succeed, clearly something’s happening here. So, what’s the secret sauce that propels MOD’s growth and popularity?

For starters, “This is *not* a pizza place,” Ally said, adding that the company’s success and growth “are not the ‘WHY’ of MOD.” Rather, “MOD exists to serve people, using our business to positively impact as many lives as possible.”

It didn’t start out that way. But after a few years, Ally noted, “our potential was revealed to us.” That potential was “developed organically for MOD by the people of MOD.” The pricing strategy and decision to offer fast-casual pizza were ideas that took shape as the company grew. On pricing, she said, “we started to think about price—just one price.” Why? “We didn’t want people to feel that they were being nicked and dined” by adding toppings, and so, she said, “our pizzas are shockingly cheap.” How cheap? “Our first price started with a five,” Ally noted. In addition, “we wanted to pay employees as much as possible and charge as little as possible,” she said. Given the fact that the restaurant business is a very risky undertaking, how could such a Model make sense? “Three years into it,” said Ally, “we knew it was a business we could scale.” The business “needed to matter; the last thing the world needs is another soul-less restaurant chain.”

As we would learn listening to Ally and her two team members, MOD Pizza is anything but soul-less. Their motto says it all:

Love your pizza or let us know. We’re all about second chances.



For many of MOD Pizza’s employees, a second chance in life, working for an enlightened restaurant chain, has made all the difference. As they refined their “Why,” noted Ally, “we literally saw lives being changed.” She joked, “pizza has become a ‘front’.”

A few other points about this unique chain:

- All 7,000 employees get a free meal when they come to work—and for many, this may be their only real meal of the day.
- On opening day in every new establishment, profits are donated to a local charity.
- MOD is passionate about ending childhood hunger and participates heavily in food backpack programs.
- At its heart...MOD is a platform for doing good. The idea? “If we take care of our employees, they’ll take care of you (the customer), and our business will take care of itself.”

Prior to introducing Recruiting Coordinator, Sophia Arellano, Ally quoted from poet Mary Oliver’s “Life Lessons”:

Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

Sophia started her remarks with a story about meeting second chances. She described the first meeting with a man who seemed to have nowhere to go in his life. After being asked back for a second interview, and hired, he later wrote that “It changed my world completely.” He wrote, “I needed just one chance; I’ve been clean since then and haven’t looked back.”

Sophia herself knows all about second chances. Released from prison after four years in 2013, with a five-year-old son, MOD Pizza threw her a lifeline. She grabbed hold and never looked back. After two years, she said, the opportunity to move up was offered to her and she took it—coordinating recruiting efforts in prisons and tossing lifelines wherever she goes. As she noted, “Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not.”

Director of Community Engagement, Mary Douglas, spoke next. With MOD since the beginning, Mary talked about the company’s focus on “impact hiring,” the intentional hiring of people with barriers to employment. She pointed out the importance of networks and also discussed the MOD Pizza focus on hiring from three categories:

1. Youth 18-24 who do not have jobs or prospects;
2. People with disabilities – 80% of whom don’t currently receive a paycheck
3. “Second chance” hires – those re-entering society from the justice system

Mary then talked about the importance of partnerships with organizations such as Fare Start, Pioneer Industries, Work Source. “We hire for attitude,” she said. “Anybody can be taught to make a pizza...I hire for personality. I can teach you how to make a pizza, but I can’t teach you how not to be a jerk.”

