Robert Hagopian - Bellacino’s Pizza and Grinders - Harrisburg, NC

**Tell me about your background.**

I went to school for refrigeration and worked for a guy for about 13 years. Then I went to work on my own for about 12 years. Before I move to NC from New Hampshire I ran a restaurant equipment service business for 12 years. We did equipment sales, installation and service. We also did some auctioneering as well. It started to grow too big and I got out of that business before it killed me. We had a 19000 sq ft warehouse and it kept growing and growing and I kept working on call at nights and on weekends. I came to North Carolina to take some time off and then I started this business.

**What industry are you in?**

The restaurant business

**What motivated you to start this business?**

I came to this restaurant with my wife and we thought the food was excellent. One day I found out the business was for sale so I bought it.

**What do you look for in good employees?**

I’ve become better over time with picking good employees. I don’t judge a book by its cover, but I’m looking for a clean appearance and someone who’s, bright and articulate.

**What keeps you up at night?**

Nothing really. All of the employees do what their supposed to do. I am a little concerned about the downturn so I want to get my numbers up.

**Do you have a target market? If so who are they and how do you reach them?**

Anyone who loves food and anyone who loves pizza. Pizza is the number one food in America and I think we have the best pizza. As for reaching customers our business is located off the beaten path. If we were closer to the road all of our problems would be solved. Some of my customers come in and ask how long we’ve been here. I’ll say 5 years and they say they didn’t know I was here all this time. We’re trying to overcome that we starting giving out flyers, stuffing mail boxes, giving away free food via coupons, email ads, and partnering with schools to have school nights here. Our biggest challenge now is staying active in the community so people know we’re here.

**How long did it take you to break even?**

Because it was an existing store it was already profitable when I bought it.

**How much time do you spend working in the business?**

It’s funny you ask that. That was the problem I had on the last business I had. Too much of my time was spent working in the business instead of running the business. There was a time in the last business where I would have 5 or 6 employees and then I would go back to just me. Then I’d rehire 5 employees because of the work load and then go back to just me. I was hard to find people that could get the job done right. I would send a guy out to fix something 2 or 3 times and then find I had to fix it myself anyway so I would have to fire them. I also didn’t want to keep upsetting the customers. In this business it’s different. I have my wife helping me run this one and I opened a second location in Cornelius. My daughter runs that location. I work about two days per week per location.

**Is this a franchise?**

Yes this is a franchise. We had over 100 stores nationwide and since the downturn we’re down to about 85 stores.

**I noticed that there is another pizza place in the next building over and one more down the street. What is your strategic advantage?**

Our food is our advantage. We used fresh baked bread in our grinders. Our pizza sauce is a secret recipe from the original founder.

**What are you passionate about?**

Faith and Family.

**What advice do you have for aspiring business owners?**

You’ve gotta know your business before you get into it. You have to be confident in your product or whatever you are trying to promote. You have some sense of the market and whether they will accept or reject you. You have to believe that you have the best product because if you don’t no one else will.