

# One With Everything:

**ANATOMY OF A HOT DOG STAND &  
OTHER GREAT FAMILY BUSINESSES**  
*you can start.*



BY MIKE CHENEY

**AME** | The Nuts & Bolts of the  
Family Business

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# CHAPTER 1 - HOT DOG MAN: MY NEW CORNER OFFICE

*By Mike Cheney*

In 1998 our family lived in Scottsdale, Arizona. We had relocated from Denver, Colorado nine years earlier when I accepted a job promotion with the real estate company where I was employed. I resigned in December 1998, and we spent the next couple of months packing, getting our home ready for sale, and saying goodbye to our Arizona friends as we prepared for our move back to Denver. My wife, Roxie, and I were anxious to get back to our Colorado roots where our children could grow up around their grandparents and other relatives.

By February 1999 our home was sold, and we made the trip back to Denver. We had kept our Denver house when we had earlier moved to Scottsdale. My Dad managed the house and kept it rented while we were away. When we got back to

Denver, we stayed with Roxie's parents while I spent a few weeks fixing up the house so we could move back in.

So far so good. We had settled back into the house and the life we had left nine years earlier. We spent time visiting and catching up with friends and relatives and getting acclimated. All that remained was to find something at which I could earn a living. We were in pretty good shape financially having sold our interest in the Arizona real estate company, a self-storage project in which we owned an interest, and our former home there. I wasn't in a big hurry to take a job and wanted to think carefully about what to do next. I had been away from the corporate environment for only a few months, and my mind wasn't completely clear.

I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I had no interest in getting caught up in the same grind all over again. I wanted to provide for my family but not at the expense of keeping me away from them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. All of the reasons for leaving my former job in Arizona were still fresh in my mind.

Soon after our return to Denver, I spent quite a bit of time with my Dad driving around the city. We used those times to catch up with one another, and he would tell me what had happened with real estate in the city since we moved away. His family had lived in Colorado since the turn of the 20th Century, mostly in the Denver area, making me a 4th generation native. His dad, my grandfather, owned a string of breakfast and lunch cafe's during the 1940's, 50's and 60's and his uncle owned a car dealership, lumber yard, and significant land holdings during the same period. My mom's father owned a construction and masonry company and, with his sons, built a fair number of the brick homes and buildings in the south suburb of Denver during those years. So when it came to Denver real estate, we had a lot to talk about!

I told my dad of the thoughts I was having about what to do to earn a living now that we were back, along with my concerns about not falling into the same pattern



of too many hours worked, being apart from my family as a result. I loved the real estate business but was fearful of being drawn in too far. Dad told me I should not make a long-term decision until I was confident of the way forward.

He told me about the multiple restaurants his dad had owned and how he used to work there some of the time when he was growing up. He and my mom had talked about opening an ice cream shop over the past several years. For a while, he and I talked about opening some sort of a restaurant. It didn't take long to realize we would be signing up to work a lot of hours, putting a lot of capital at risk in an endeavor with a 95% failure rate. Neither of us was interested in that plan, so we kept driving around and talking.

On one of our excursions, we happened to drive past the location Mom and Dad considered for their ice cream shop. My dad wondered aloud how a food establishment with very limited hours would fare in that location. One idea led to another until we came upon the thought of opening hot dog stands -- low startup cost, low overhead, limited hours, high traffic locations, portable, one-man operations -- no long term commitment required. Perfect!

After a couple of weeks researching costs, locations, and other details, we formulated a business plan and launched our new venture. I cover the planning and start-up process in great detail in the later chapter "One with Everything: Anatomy of a Hot Dog Stand." For now, I'll tell you that we named our company "Dogs on the Run, LLC" and determined that our stands would be located on a main street in the downtown business district. After much planning and preparation, opening day arrived.

It was a weekday in May 1998. Roxie was excited about joining me on our first day, so our children stayed with my parents. Dad's stand was still in drydock and not quite ready to launch on its maiden voyage. The two main things I remember about our first day were 1) how much fun I had with Roxie beside me and 2) how strangely at home I felt standing behind the grill in my uniform (color coordinated

Bermuda shorts, golf shirt, wide brim hat, and chef's apron) talking with customers while cooking their lunch orders. Also, I distinctly recall doing \$180 in sales. Total overhead and operating costs for our business turned out to be 25% of gross sales -- just about what we had estimated. So, our profit before taxes on day one, came in at \$135. Not bad!

As the days and weeks went by, sales increased and I recognized quite a few of our customers as having been to our stand before. Some of them even started ordering "the usual." Business schools call these "repeat customers." I've not been to business school, but that's what I called them, too. This was great! People liked what we served and were willing to pay what we were asking, and they came back time after time. This thing was starting to work.

It didn't take long to get into a daily routine with our new business. Dad and I would leave our homes at around 9:30 AM in time to stop for supplies if needed. We then headed to the commissary to make preparations and hitch up the hot dog stands before heading to our street corners to set up for that day's business.

The commissary is sort of "Hot Dog Central" where vendors store their carts and supplies. There were a few commissaries located in warehouses around the city, and they tended to flourish because regulations required carts be maintained in this type of facility. It was also a lot less expensive to pay rent at an existing commissary than to start one up from scratch. Ours had a commercial grade kitchen, ice maker, refrigerators, freezers, space for food prep, and storing the carts. The commissary owner charged rent to use the facility. I think we paid about \$200 per cart per month. It was owned by two brothers who operated custom built carts from which they served oriental chicken and rice. There were a half dozen other vendors who sold Italian fare, gourmet sandwiches, pastries, veggie wraps, and kettle corn.

There were about eight to ten of us all together, and we got to be a pretty close-knit group. There was a lot of hustle and bustle in the commissary each morning

until 10:30 AM or so when everyone hitched up their rigs and headed out to their locations. The variety of trucks pulling all manner of carts rolling out of the warehouse each weekday morning must have been quite a humorous sight. At the time, I never gave it a thought. We were on a mission to feed the hungry gladiators in the central business district. The wheels of commerce could not turn without us!

Arriving at my location about 11am, I spent a few minutes getting the cooking surfaces fired up, setting out condiment trays and drink displays, and making ready for the day's customers. By 11:30am things were in full swing. For the next two-and-a-half hours I would cook and serve orders, chat with customers, clean and restock as I went. About 2:00pm, the foot traffic decreased to almost nothing as people made their way back to their offices. I would shut things down, hitch up the cart, and head back to the commissary. Once there, it took about 30 minutes to clean-up then complete initial prep for the next day. That was the Monday through Friday routine. Leave home 9:30 AM. Back home 3:30 PM.

Eventually, Roxie and I decided to experiment by having our then seven-year-old son, Corey, accompany me to work some days. Both he and his older sister, Annie, were homeschooled so we thought Corey could bring some of his school work along and also help me throughout the day. This would be the first step toward integrating our children into the family business. Corey would read and work on his school assignment on the way to the commissary, then help me finish prep work before we headed downtown. Once at our location, he would help me set up for lunch and then proceed to a seating area on the plaza where my cart was located, to continue with his school assignments.

At especially busy times, I would call him over to help me prepare orders or go to the bank a few steps away to fetch change. During inclement weather, he would go to the delicatessen across the street to tackle his school work with a cup of cocoa at a window table where I could see him from the stand. At closing time, he came back to help me load up, and we would go back to the commissary to clean and prep for the next day. Once back home he would finish the rest of his studies under

his mom's watchful eye.

Roxie and I gave only a little thought to what people might think of our having our young son accompany me to work several days per week. It turned out that most of our customers who said anything commented that they thought it was a great idea, especially when they saw him studying at a table on the plaza near the cart. I recall only one person directly asking why Corey wasn't in school. I was ready for her and said, "Well, he is in school. He is doing an extended study and lab on the free enterprise system." She replied "What a great idea!" "Is he home schooled?" "Yes!" I replied. She said "You people are so clever to teach your kids that way." She then ordered her lunch. Acceptance by society: chalk up another win! Plus, that was the first time I had been referred to as "you people."

Our family seemed to be enjoying our new lifestyle. I know I was much happier being away from the stress of my former career with the long hours and other demands. It also seemed I could feel layers of stress rolling off my shoulders and I noticed that I was beginning to think with more clarity. Further, it seemed we were starting to enjoy life together much more than before. The hot dog business provided a good income, and our living expenses were low so we had some discretionary income in addition to the proceeds from the sale of our Arizona real estate.

One of the pastimes our family enjoyed during that season of life was camping and fishing. Roxie's parents had purchased a second home in the mountains near some lakes that offered good fishing. On many Friday afternoons when Corey and I arrived home, Roxie and Annie had already gathered up some mountain clothing along with our fishing gear and were sitting on the front patio. We would load the truck and head to the mountains to meet Roxie's parents for a relaxing weekend at the lake. Sometimes, we would extend the family time by staying through Monday or leaving early on Friday. I told my customers the day before when I would not be at the corner on a Friday or Monday. They wished me good fishing and, I'm sure, wished they could go with us! What a wonderful time we had making up for all the time lost to the corporate grind. It was a time of healing that we all needed.

Once we had been in business long enough to decide we enjoyed it and were-making enough money that the investment of time was worthwhile, we decided to expand the business by adding some weekend venues and special events to our schedule. Our downtown locations provided a few “built-in” events. These came in the form of seasonal parades: the National Western Stock Show Parade and two Super Bowl parades when the Denver Broncos won back-to-back Super Bowl championships! I think our favorite events were the softball and little league baseball tournaments held at the city’s major location for such gatherings. We were able to secure the contract to be the food vendor at that venue. These were crazy busy events that required our entire family, including my Dad and Mom, to work together. We even hired friends and other relatives to help at the larger events. The work was physically demanding and sometimes we would still be at the commissary cleaning and putting things away until midnight after rolling out of bed at 6 AM. Nonetheless, we had a great time working together, cleaning up after, and resting together once the events concluded. We found that working hard to achieve something together drew us all closer to one another. We’ve been out of that business many years though we still tell those “Remember when . . .” stories around the dinner table. The memories of those days are just as vivid in our minds now as they were at the time.

When we had moved back to Denver, I didn’t make an effort to reconnect with my colleagues from my former career. I wasn’t interested in going back to that world, and I think I was afraid of allowing myself to get sucked back in. It must have been a year or more after we started Dogs on the Run that my old boss stopped by to say hello. I had no idea what to expect as I noticed him walking up to the stand. We talked for a few minutes, sharing with one another very abbreviated versions of what each of us had been doing the past few years. I learned that he was divorced, was no longer with the company where we had both started many years before, and had started a landscape business where he, his sons, and brother worked. After we said our goodbyes, I realized the main reason I had not looked up my former colleagues was that I wondered what they might think of my turning from corporate real estate executive to hot dog vendor. Not exactly the story of the

upwardly mobile executive that you read in the industry publications.

It didn't take long to get over those feelings once I took inventory of what God, in His mercy, had given to me. He had taken me out of a work life that had destroyed the families of many of the people around me, spared my marriage, allowed us to harvest the financial gain from all of the work I had done, and brought me, Roxie, and our children back home to our extended families. Further, He established me in a business that would allow me to earn a living sufficient to abundantly take care of our needs, and to do so in only a few hours per week working with my wife and children. Finally, all the while our new life allowed me the time I needed to think and pray through the path I would take for the future. All of this from a business selling hot dogs.

God's timing is indeed perfect. It wasn't long after realizing what I had been given that several of my pals from the real estate business began showing up at my new corner office. With only one exception that I can recall, they all thought it was great that I had made the next upward career move. They were curious to know how it came about and I was happy to share my story. With those conversations came the end of any doubts or regrets I had about where I was going and Who was in the lead. I was finally free!

In addition to those visits from former colleagues I became somewhat closely acquainted with several of the prominent downtown businessmen. I think our relationships must have been similar to those of the barber and his customers who get to know one another a little at a time over a long time. Some of them would tell me of their business challenges and stresses and then muse aloud about getting away from their businesses to start something small and completely different from what they were doing at the time.

This was during the stormy economic times of 1998-2001. Even so, I was a little surprised at the number of guys who told me they wished they had the guts to just walk away from the law firms, oil companies, internet businesses and other ven-

tures they had started years before. A regular customer who was from Oklahoma and owned an independent oil company, liked to stand around and visit while he ate his hot dog. One day he finished his lunch, wiped his mouth with a napkin and exclaimed in his Okie accent “Mike, you are the only guy I know down here who gets paid actual cash money every day! The rest of us are just trading promises and the hope of makin’ a profit and it ain’t lookin’ too good right now.” I realized a little while later how well our little enterprise was being protected by God. We were doing fine and were not participating in the rough economy.