

What I Learned: Norman Love

BY LORI JOHNSTON AND KEITH STILL



Norman Love

President/Founder, Norman Love Confections, the Fort Myers-based purveyor of specialty and artistic chocolates. The company has about 70 employees.

Startup tip

Cultivate and use your network. Love had no intentions of becoming a chocolatier when he began dabbling with artistic chocolates. But the Food Network guest judge and former Ritz-Carlton corporate executive pastry chef's global network soon discovered his side project, and he began producing fine chocolates in 2001.

Biggest challenges

Finding the right partners and retailers to ensure the integrity of his product. "We have been extremely selective in determining who will extend our brand and what their competency levels are, and do they understand our short shelf-life, ultra-premium product?" he says. "This isn't chocolate you put on the shelf and you keep them there until you sell them. Because of the freshness of them, bacteria growth and mold and all those things can happen because we don't put anything in the chocolates to prevent that. That's why they taste so good."

Top trait

Love's self-confessed Type A, tireless commitment to doing things the right way, without compromise, has been a driving force behind his company's growth and accolades. In 2012, Love received the inaugural Distinguished Entrepreneur Award for the Small Business Development Center at Florida Gulf Coast University, and in 2013, Love was named head jury member for World Chocolate Masters, a premier culinary competition. In 2014, he was named a Business Hall of Fame laureate by the Junior Achievement of Southwest Florida. The product, he says, dictates the growth, not money. "I always say it's not about how much, it's always about how good," he says. "Focus on the product and focus on service."

Best decision

Hiring a great group of professionals, allowing them to be creative, and rewarding and empowering them is what grows his business, Love says.

Next steps

In recent years, Love has focused on developing the infrastructure for Norman Love Confections, building a factory and surrounding himself with a team proficient at making and moving large amounts of premium product to wholesale, retail and e-commerce customers. He now has three Chocolate Salons in Fort Myers, Naples and Estero (it opened in 2015 at Miromar Outlets) and Artisan Gelato by Norman next to the Chocolate Salon in Fort Myers. His chocolates and desserts are offered on 18 Princess Cruise ships and at independent retail locations throughout the U.S. Love plans in the next three years to open six to 10 stores in Florida (he's looking at Sarasota, St. Petersburg, Tampa, Orlando and the southeast coast.)

"The hard part is done," he says. "Now, we're going to grow the company."

Final advice

"Success is every day. If you go to work to be successful every day, every day exert and want to be better than yesterday, the future is called reward; and instead of thinking that success is something in the future, you have to be successful every day to get the reward. This is how entrepreneurship works in my world."

This article appears in the March 2016 issue of Gulfshore Business

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