THREE ALUMS AND LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR CREATE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

BY JO ANN LLOYD

ONE SIMPLE IDEA, two simple words, hundreds of locations, thousands of employees, and millions of satisfied customers.

Blend in one entrepreneur and three Cal Poly alumni.

The Jamba Juice recipe for success was clear from the beginning. The first store – known then as the Juice Club – opened in April 1990 on Foothill Boulevard near campus, thanks to the combined efforts of Kevin Peters ('91 BUS) and Joe Vergara (BUS), who joined Kirk Perron a tenacious young San Luis Obispo entrepreneur and former Cuesta College student, who had the idea to open that first Juice Club.

Though Perron had the requisite vision and determination, he realized he needed help planning menus, creating drink recipes and blending the icy fruit drinks. So he hired Vergara, then manager of another local fruit juice store.

Peters was hired to help open and run the first store, eventually documenting the systems and training personnel for expansion.

The explosive growth that resulted is now legendary.

So how does the original team explain the sweet success of Banana Berry, Berry Lime Sublime, Peach Pleasure, Razzmatazz and Strawberries Wild?

“Our visions were pretty grand, but our initial focus was on the first store,” Peters said.

Dedication, attention to detail and a passion for people were also key factors. “From the first store, from the very start, everything mattered – from the cleanliness of the store to the shape of the poured smoothie. There was a fanaticism on every level,” he remembers.

Then, as soon as expansion was considered, the trio hung up a map of the United States to plot potential sites.

And it wasn’t long before customers were clamoring for more locations. Tourists began asking for stores in their hometowns. Fast-food executives starting arriving in groups, and the competitors started popping up.

The company, still known as the Juice Club, began to franchise in 1992, and the response was phenomenal. “We were giving presentations in huge ballrooms,” Peters recalls. “People were flocking to hear how they could open a Juice Club. We went from simply recruiting good people to a strict process of qualifying and disqualifying the many interested parties.”

The Juice Club needed more staff members to handle the burgeoning business, and Linda Ozawa-Olds (MBA ’92) was brought on board, eventually rising to vice president of marketing.

“What attracted me to Juice Club was not only the concept, but the people,” Ozawa-Olds said. “After a three-hour interview with Kirk, then meeting Kevin and Joe, I knew this was where I wanted to be!”

But in 1994, the franchising stopped when the Juice Club hit the radar screens of venture capitalists – including Howard Schultz, chairman of Starbucks, and John Mackey, chairman and CEO of Whole Foods Market. Perron recruited both to serve on the board of directors.

A search for a new name and a new “brand” began.

Although the Juice Club was a trademarked name, it was composed of words that were not totally proprietary, Peters explained. Numerous competitors with the word “juice” in their names were diluting the Juice Club brand. It was decided that a new name and logo were needed to help differentiate it.

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The visual icon, the trademark Jamba Juice whirl, came first. “During a brainstorming session, we were discussing the actual whirl created inside a blender as a smoothie is being made,” said Ozawa-Olds. “If you saw the whirl, you knew the smoothie was just right.”

This image was conveyed to an agency in Seattle, which developed the now-familiar logo.

Creating a new name proved a bit more complicated. “After hiring professionals, hearing rounds of names that didn’t resonate with us, and spending thousands of dollars, we decided to take matters into our own hands,” Ozawa-Olds said.

Perron, Ozawa-Olds and Peters each went to a different section in Cal Poly’s Kennedy Library, agreeing to meet three hours later with lists of potential names.

“I ended up in the languages section looking up the word ‘celebrate.’ I had the word ‘jama’ on my list, and ‘jambalaya’ and ‘jamboree’,” Ozawa-Olds recalls.

Perron also had a j-word on his list – ‘jambu,’ a type of fruit. “Eventually I came up with ‘Jamba,’ and the word stuck,” Ozawa-Olds said.

It now appeared that all the details were in place.

“But we still had a big job ahead of us,” said Perron. “We had to grow Jamba Juice into a brand of many choices: breakfast, lunch, dinner, snack. We had to carve a niche in the marketplace and get people to understand that a smoothie is a healthy alternative to fast food.”

No problem for the hard-working team. Today, Jamba Juice has some 600 locations throughout the United States and plans to go international.

A part of American pop culture, it has even appeared in a skit on “Saturday Night Live” and on an episode of “The Sopranos.” Perron himself has been featured on “Oprah” and in a concept to purchase, allowing the blank-check company to use its resources to capitalize on the new concept’s potential. Jamba was that concept – and, roughly speaking, it became public upon the successful merger of the two companies. 

Perron and Peters now have varying degrees of involvement with the company. Perron, who left a few years ago, acts as a consultant for Jamba Juice and served on its board. He is currently spending much of his time traveling. Peters left Jamba Juice in 2001. The San Francisco resident now runs the business side of one of the West Coast’s largest private residential interior-design firms.

Ozawa-Olds and Vergara, now both living on the Central Coast, were partners until recently, in 10 Jamba Juice franchises from Paso Robles to Camarillo.

One thing hasn’t changed, though. The four original partners still have the same respect and admiration for each other they had when the Juice Club was just starting out.

“Kirk, Kevin, and Joe were my partners in crime;” Ozawa-Olds said. “They pushed me, pulled me, appreciated me and loved me. Together we shared a passion and a vision that had kept us united through good and bad times.”

The Cal Poly alumna is also quick to credit Perron’s vision and leadership.

“It was Kirk’s initial vision, focus and determination that took us beyond one store,” Ozawa-Olds said. “Jamba Juice would have never gotten off the ground if it weren’t for Kirk and his ability to build a strong team.”