
The ingredients for building a business empire

Supermac's co-owner Una McDonagh shares her secret formula to building Ireland's largest and fastest-growing indigenous fast food restaurant group.

When a young Leaving Certificate student with her heart set on becoming a garda was too young to begin training, she instead started working part-time at a local fast food restaurant in Ballinasloe, County Galway. Now, over 40 years later Una McDonagh is the co-owner of Supermacs, Ireland's largest and fastest-growing indigenous fast food group, with over 116 restaurants across the country and employing over 4,000 staff, including franchises.

She puts the success of the chain down to hard work, good personal relationships with staff and staying ahead of the curve.

"Our success has come from hard work and from the great people we have working for us," says Una. "Some of those people are with us for 35 years. Pat (husband and Supermac's founder) opened his first shop in Ballinasloe in June 1978, I started working there part-time two weeks after my Leaving Cert. Going back 35 years, we had a good few people at a young age working for us, going to college to get their degree and coming back to us. One of our operations managers did engineering in college, he was working with us part-time and stayed on. Now he is one of the key people in the building of the new units. There are many more staff like that, who did accountancy or business and are still with us.

"We are very hands-on; we know a lot of the staff. We would try to visit every shop at least once a month and the franchisees three or four times a year. It's very important to be able to put faces to names. The fact that we are known to staff makes them more loyal, rather than a faceless company," she adds.

What were some of the challenges you encountered and how did you overcome them?

There were many challenges along the way, including our customers' tastes constantly changing. We need to be constantly coming up with new ideas. We overcame this challenge by always listening to the customer and coming up with new items on the menu. 40 years ago our menu was very small. We introduced many new items on the menu since. We brought in Papa John's Pizza about 15 years ago. We now have Papa John's Pizza in about 75 of our stores. We also introduced Super Subs, which has additional healthy options and we now have it in about 25 of our units.

The biggest challenge for us at the moment is insurance. It has increased so much; something

needs to be done about it. Some of our franchisees would struggle with insurance. Prices have gone up 300-400% in the last couple of years. Some of our shops that have no claims are paying up to €30,000 a year, it's crazy. It's causing problems for a lot of companies. The government will have to address it.

In the early years, we worked a lot of unsociable hours. The only day we had off was Christmas Day, it's around the clock, your phone is always on. That was difficult because sometimes we would work till 4 or 5 in the morning, which is difficult with young kids but that has changed now.

Have you any plans for further expansion?

We are looking at renewing our trademark to trade in the UK and Europe but in the meantime, we are busy here with four or five new restaurant openings planned for the next year. We are opening a new restaurant in Kinnegad in County Westmeath at the end of May. It'll serve people on the Sligo-Dublin road and we are close to the Galway road. We hope to open a restaurant on the bypass in Longford, we have applied for planning for that.

How have you managed to retain the family feel at Supermac's?

I feel Supermac's has retained its family feel because a lot of our staff and franchisees are with us since the start. A lot of our franchisees started working with us at a young age. They worked their way up and became successful managers and then went on to be franchisees. A lot of our staff live local to our stores and would be well known to our customers. We have three members of our own family working in the business and the franchises in Athlone and Moate. Our customers and staff are the two most important things in our business and we listen to them both.

What do you think the environment for women in business is like in this country?

I can only speak about my experience within Supermac's. Women play a significant role throughout our company. I feel that if you're good enough, it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. I know in certain sectors it might be different. I feel it's a bit easier now than when I started 40 years ago. There are more women in business now. Family units are smaller and men are more involved in the rearing of kids. Also, parental leave was introduced, which is a huge help in the home environment.

Do you have any advice to women in business?

I would say it's very important to make time for family. I would advise to join a support group, don't try and do it all by yourself. Get a good team of people around you, have a good child minder, a good accountant and a good business plan. Don't treat money as cash, just because it's in the till

doesn't mean it's yours. I would encourage all business people to be active members of the community.

Interview by Olivia McGill.