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LOS ANGELES

WINTER 2015 | VOL. 10, NO. 6



@SmartBiz_LA



Smart Business
Los Angeles



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ONE

CHIP AT A TIME

With a steady hand and an open mind, Barry C. Levin has turned Snak King into one of the snack industry's top innovators

BY MARK SCOTT | MSCOTT@SBNONLINE.COM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERESA TAYLOR

Barry C. Levin was cautiously optimistic when he was asked to take over at Snak King Corp. more than 30 years ago. In those days, the company produced pork rinds in a cramped, 1,200-square-foot facility, had two employees and was struggling to make money.

A 21-year-old ready to take a chance on getting the company turned around, Levin was employee No. 3.

"I figured I'd give it a go and if I didn't make it, I didn't make it," Levin says. "It was low risk because I wasn't supporting anybody at the time. I was living at my parents' house and I'm one of those people who doesn't say no or give up very easily. But it was a real challenge."

Levin did it all in those days, making sales calls, running the fryer and operating the forklift. When day turned to night, he turned his attention to finances and soon found more efficient ways to run the company.

His goal was very simple.

“Something happens, you have to figure out how to fix it and you move forward.”

—BARRY C. LEVIN, CHAIRMAN AND CEO, SNAK KING CORP.



SOCIAL MEDIA: To learn more about Snak King Corp., like its Facebook page <http://on.fb.me/1Acxzj7> and follow on Twitter @kingofsnacks.

“I just wanted us to be really good at what we did,” Levin says. “I felt if we did a good job, we would get business. We’d listen to our customers and build a business that serviced their needs.”

More than three decades later, the results demonstrate Levin had a good plan. Snak King soon expanded into a 50,000-square-foot plant and then expanded once more in 1994 when the company purchased its current 177,000-square-foot facility.

Today, the 950-employee company has the largest single-oven tortilla chip line in the snack food industry and its production capacity has doubled. But along the way, Levin has faced more than his share of challenges and obstacles, which would have led many less committed leaders to

give up and try something else.

“Companies often spend a lot of money to go on team-building experiences,” says Levin, Snak King’s chairman and CEO. “It could be river rafting or rope climbing or a trip out to the wilderness or whatever it might be. Our team-building experience was that roof collapse.”

Dealing with disaster

The “roof collapse” at the company’s plant occurred in 2004. It came 10 years after Levin and his family lost their home in the 1994 Northridge earthquake, which struck on Jan. 17, 1994, and caused widespread damage throughout the west San Fernando Valley.

As Levin tried to get his own family back on its feet, he simultaneously went

to work helping Snak King win over new customers and recover from its own challenges brought on by the disaster.

Ten years later, the collapse of a 12,000-foot section of the roof at the company’s plant presented another challenge for Levin and his team to overcome. Debris crashed down onto \$13 million worth of equipment in the company’s production area.

“It was a monumental task,” Levin says. “We had so many things working against us. The health department didn’t want us to operate because we had a hole in the middle of our building. But we pulled together. Our team pulled together and worked to figure out how to get up and running with as many products as we could, as quickly as we could. Then we spent the next 2½ years rebuilding.”

Levin says there was never any question about making a comeback with the business.

“I never felt like there was a decision that had to be made,” Levin says. “I did have the opportunity to take the insurance money and run, but it wasn’t something I ever considered. Something happens, you have to figure out how to fix it and you move forward.”

His immediate reaction to both the roof collapse and the loss of his family’s home was the same.

“My first thought was, ‘Is everybody safe? Did anybody get hurt?’” Levin says. “Once the answer was no for both of those, it was just a matter of fixing it. Once it’s not affecting anybody’s life or personal well-being, the rest of it is just money. It kind of makes you reflect a little on what’s important in life.”

At the same time, Levin recognized that there was a lot at stake for his employees and their families. These people very much needed Snak King to get back to business as soon as possible.

“I was concerned about the safety of the people that I work with and also the fact that they needed jobs,” Levin says. “They needed to do something. We had always been there to provide them work. I felt an obligation to continue to provide an opportunity for them to work if they wanted to. I felt that burden of responsibility. We’re not just feeding the people we had working for us, but it was all the people and the mouths that they were feeding that weighed on me.”

When you’re in a tough spot and you bring that spirit of strength and resilience to your work, you stand a much better chance at leading your team back to where it wants to be.

“It was a phenomenal team-building experience,” Levin says. “Everybody just jumped in and was willing to do whatever it took to keep the ball moving forward to get the company back on its feet.”

It was true even in the midst of long days and working out of a temporary facility as the roof was repaired.

“It was a massive challenge, but we came out much stronger in the end because of it,” Levin says.



THE LEVIN FILE

NAME: BARRY C. LEVIN
TITLE: CHAIRMAN AND CEO
COMPANY: SNAK KING CORP.

Born: Los Angeles

Education: Bachelor’s degree in business, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

What was your first job? I’ve picked avocados from a neighbor’s tree — with their permission — and sold them on the street. I’ve done everything from selling newspapers to teaching swimming to working as a lifeguard to driving a delivery truck for my father. I also worked in a warehouse with my father.

Who has been the biggest influence on your life? My father was a great mentor. Everybody I meet has been a great influence on my life, including my wife, Wendy, and my two children.

Who is someone whose words have inspired you? Winston Churchill. He said, ‘Success is not final. Failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.’ That applies directly to part of our history with the roof collapse and pushing forward.

Levin was honored in 2011 as one of the Champions of Change, a program initiated by the White House. *Smart Business* asked him what it meant to receive this honor and what responsibility entrepreneurs have to give back and help their peers

It was an amazing experience to go to the White House and be in a room filled with other Champions of Change and be asked questions about what we thought and what as a businessperson did we need to be successful.

Entrepreneurs are in a fraternity of their own and we have a responsibility to help each other, whatever the issue is. It doesn’t matter what you do. We all have issues with regulatory things, with insurance, with legal, with employee and HR issues and we have a responsibility to help each other out.



“If we’re doing it right and we’re focused on that, the growth will come.”

—BARRY C. LEVIN, CHAIRMAN AND CEO, SNAK KING CORP.

Dare to be different

As far back as his first days working at Snak King, Levin says he’s never concerned himself too much with the distant future.

“I’ve always just been driven by trying to do it right,” Levin says. “We moved from a 1,200-square-foot building to a 50,000-square-foot building. I had a vision of using all 50,000 feet, but we only used 20,000 of it and sublet the other 30,000. We’ve always got aspirations to grow and be better. But the bigger aspiration is to be really good at what we do. If we’re doing it right and

we’re focused on that, the growth will come.”

The most important thing for any business leader should be making sure that your people feel like they are an integral part of whatever your plan is for the business.

“One of the keys for us has been to build a team where everybody feels part of the success when something good happens and feels some responsibility when something hasn’t gone well,” Levin says. “It’s the team that makes it happen, good or bad. It’s all about the people.”

Snak King competes in a multibillion-dollar industry with a number of well-known competitors. It’s not easy to stand out from the competition, but Levin and his team have still found a way to do just that.

“We always try to be a little bit different,” Levin says. “Quality is No. 1 and consistency is super important. Food safety is paramount. But it’s also good to do something with a twist, something innovative. We are in a space dominated by massive players. The only way we can grow and survive is to be a little different.”



One way Snak King did that was when it came up with a way to infuse flavor into its tortilla chips.

“We put avocados and spices into the base so it’s built into the chip,” Levin says. “That had not been done before. People were making a plain tortilla chip and putting seasoning on top. We were cooking flavors into the dough and doing the topical flavoring. Our Guacachip was green and our Salsita was red. The flavors were cooked in with the corn.”

Levin says the idea came about through a group discussion that Levin encourages at all levels of his business.

“The crazier, the better,” Levin says, when asked about the criteria for new ideas.

Taking risks is part of the game when you’re in business. Levin recalled a time in the late 1990s when the company wanted to make a corn stick product.

“So we did our research and we thought, ‘OK, well if this doesn’t work, what else can we use the equipment for?’” Levin says. “We found out you can’t really use the equipment for that many products. But if you add an oven to it, you can make these other products as well. What we ended up doing was buying a system bigger than what we needed for the one little product we wanted to make.

“That was a risk, but we were protected because if our original product failed, we had a line that could make several other products.”

It ultimately proved to be a lucrative move and led to the development of product offerings that make up 50 percent of the company’s business.

“We’re very aggressive and innovative, but we’re also cautious at the same time,” Levin says. “We never bet the whole farm, but we’re not afraid to bet part of it.” ●

How to reach: Snak King Corp., (626) 336-7711 or www.snakking.com



Takeaways >>

Focus on the small steps and you’ll cover a lot of ground.

Don’t put any limits on employee creativity.

Be ready with a backup plan if your first idea doesn’t pan out.

