

It's Easier to Succeed Than to Fail



Truett Cathy's simple commitment to God, people, and hard work have been the keys to his success.

By Leslie L. Nunn

He looks like anyone's favorite grandpa, a man who might be content to sit on the front porch on a lazy summer afternoon. But S. Truett Cathy is not one to let life pass him by. Sixty-one years ago in his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, he learned the value of diligent labor and hard work. And he learned his first lesson in making a profit—a lesson which, combined with his acute business sense and strong desire to succeed, has propelled him to the top of one of the nation's largest privately-held restaurant chains, Chick-fil-A. Last year sales approached \$264 million.

Truett's approach to life is simple: "The difference between success and failure is often about five percent more effort, because it really is easier to succeed than it is to fail."

One day while running errands for his mother, Truett noticed that he could buy a six-pack of Coca-Cola for

a quarter, and sell the bottles to his neighbors realizing a five cent profit.

"Soon I had enough to put a little stand in the front yard," he says, "flag down the Coke truck, and buy a full case for eighty cents. I made a forty cent profit on each case." Truett was proving to be a shrewd businessman at the ripe old age of eight.

"I grew up during the depression when life was difficult and money was scarce," says Truett. "My father established a rural insurance route and worked hard but could not make an adequate living for his large family of seven children."

To help make ends meet Truett's mother took in boarders. In the midst of her work, she instilled in her children a strong faith. Every Sunday afternoon she played the piano and sang old hymns with the family. Together they listened to Charles E. Fuller preach on the radio on "The Old Fashioned Revival Hour."

"When I came of age," says Truett, "I got a route with the *Atlanta Journal* and sold papers for seven years. All you had to do was wave a t-shirt in my face and say, 'Go out and get six new subscription starts to get the t-shirt.' That really challenged me."

After serving in the army during World War II, Truett and his brother Ben decided to go into business and open a coffee shop. With \$4,000 in savings and a \$6,600 loan, they purchased a piece of property and began to build their restaurant. What they hadn't bargained for were zoning changes and fees, equipment delivery delays, a shortage of building and food supplies, and very little sleep.

"One principle I've learned to believe in is this: *Every problem has a solution*," recites Truett. "That may sound pretty strong, but if we stay at a problem, keep thinking, and don't quit, one day we will find the answer." Through hard work and some

creative thinking, the brothers finally opened The Dwarf House. Both Truett and Ben worked twelve hour shifts, six days a week to keep the twenty-four-hour restaurant in business.

"I'm glad I didn't know the problems we would face," Truett says. "I probably wouldn't have had the determination to start." Yet the brothers' commitment to their customers made The Dwarf House a success.

But two years after its opening, Ben was killed tragically in a plane accident with another brother and two friends. Truett was left to carry on alone. "My tears gushed out," he remembers, "I couldn't stop them."

Truett eventually opened a second Dwarf House which later burned down—the second in a series of tragedies during the next few years which forced him to question whether or not he'd be able to stay in business.

What Truett didn't realize during this time was that he was on the verge of the greatest business idea of his life. He experimented with the chicken entrees on the menu and eventually created a boneless chicken breast sandwich which began to outsell the hamburgers. It became known as a "Chick-fil-A" and was trademarked. By 1964 Truett was ready to promote the product to independent restaurants.

"People remind me there's nothing great about taking the bone out of a chicken breast, putting it between two pieces of bread, and serving it as a sandwich," he says. "I say, 'I realize that. That's why I was able to do it.'"

By 1967 Truett dedicated the first Chick-fil-A restaurant in a shopping mall in Atlanta. Today there are 420 Chick-fil-A units in operation across the country. And the business maintains its commitment to its employees and operators. According to Truett, "My wife Jeanette says we're really in the people business, not just the chicken business. She's right."

Truett met Jeanette when he was eight years old. She lived two doors down from him and attended the same church. But a decade-and-a-half went by before they tied the knot.

Together they started a family, believing that love and respect could not be bought for their two sons and daughter but had to be earned. The Cathy household lived by "Truett's Rules." First, *It's better to demonstrate than to dictate.* "If you set the

example," he says, "you won't need to set so many rules." Second, *50 percent of the battle ends when you make up your mind.*

"Although I feel at times I neglected my family because of my business," he says regretfully, "I always spent time with them on Sunday."

Truett hasn't forgotten about God's gracious involvement in his life. Since the opening of his first restaurant, he has not opened his stores on Sunday, in honor of the fourth commandment.

"How could I teach my children to observe the Lord's day if my cash registers were jingling at my restaurants?" he asks. All grown up now, both of Truett's sons work with him at the Chick-fil-A headquarters; his daughter and her husband are missionaries in South America.

For thirty-five years Truett's soft-spot for children has kept him teaching a Sunday school class of thirteen-year-old boys, one third of whom come from broken homes.

"As marvelous as material blessings can be," says Truett, "the greatest gift to children is loving parents living under one roof. People at all financial levels can provide that."

Frequently he invites the boys to his 262-acre farm to ride his two dozen three-and-four-wheelers and dirt bikes. What's amazing is watching Truett strap on his own motorcycle helmet and ride his Honda Gold Wing along the roads near his ranch.

Though his hard work and determination seem to have paid off, Chick-fil-A has not been without financial stresses and difficult times. The company hit bottom in 1982 due to inflation, high interest rates, and delayed mall openings which forced the restaurants to delay operation.

"I felt squeezed," says Truett. He

was afraid of debt, yet had signed a lease on some properties and couldn't walk away from them. No matter what he looked at or where he turned, the situation became worse.

So Truett got the executive committee together for a weekend meeting. There they spent time thinking about why Chick-fil-A was in business. Then they came to an agreement.

They wrote down two statements as their corporate purpose: *To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us; and, To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A.*

Within a year from the time they drafted the purpose, Chick-fil-A changed direction. Sales increased 29 percent. "Maybe that's how life works for many of us," says Truett. "We face a crisis and do everything we can, but we also call on God for help."

One of the reasons Chick-fil-A has been a success is its commitment to young people. The company has established college scholarship programs for employees which have contributed more than six million dollars to students.

To help shape children into winners, Truett and Chick-fil-A support the WinShape Centre Foundation, which operates foster homes for displaced children, and WinShape camps for boys and girls. Each summer the camps challenge more than 1,000 children from across the country to develop a positive attitude. The camp motto is "I am Third," setting a priority of God first, others second, and self third.

It's not a surprising theme, since that's been Truett Cathy's motto all of his life.

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Truett and Jeanette (seated in rockers) thank God for their children and grandchildren, the Whites and the Cathys, and friends, the Faulks.