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The Art of Running a Small Business

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Finally, a Business That Is Too Busy

By JAY GOLTZ

I recently read a very interesting article about a pizza place in Chicago that is too busy. It's called Great Lake, and now that it's been **named** the best pizza in America by GQ magazine and been **written up** in The Chicago Tribune, it can take hours to get a table and up to 90 minutes to get your pizza.

The owners, a married couple named Lydia Esparza and Nick Lessins, say they do not want to work more than four days a week. They are so busy that they cannot take phone orders. They just want to make incredible pizza, every time, no matter the expectations. Every pizza is made by hand by Mr. Lessins. "No man is slower," wrote GQ's Alan Richman. "He makes each as though it is his first, manipulating the dough until it appears flawless, putting on toppings one small bit after another." Sometimes they run out of dough by 8 p.m. and just close the restaurant. Ms. Esparza estimates that 30 percent of the customers get mad waiting. They also say that Chicago has some of the worst pizza in the nation and some of the worst customers.

Here are a couple of excerpts from Great Lake's **reviews** on Yelp: "The perfect crust. Wonderful fresh toppings. The man is an artist." But there's also this: "I went to Great Lake last night and I was disgusted with the rude, unhelpful staff ... The sooner this nasty little hole is out of this neighborhood, the better." There were many more, at both extremes. Most of the reviews agreed that the pizza was somewhere between great and incredible. Most of the comments revolved around whether it was worth putting up with bad service and attitude. If you read the reviews, you will see this place is as close to the "**Soup Nazi**" on Seinfeld as you can get — and is often referred to as such.

As a businessman, I cringe at the owners' attitude toward their customers. At the same time, I appreciate their artistry and their desire to live the life they want. There are far too many stories of what I would call successful losers, people who find financial success but mess up their lives in the process.

The question is, can you have it both ways? Can you do what you want, pay attention to every last detail, make a good living and not have to fight off customers who want to buy a product that you cannot make fast enough?

I have a suggestion. The couple has been in business since February 2008. I doubt they are rolling in dough (sorry). It appears that they charge \$22 for a pizza. I would suggest that they raise the price to \$30. This is Economics 101, supply and demand. Some people will be turned off by the higher price and go somewhere else. The wait times will go down. Many people will be happy to pay more if they don't have to wait as long. The restaurant's net income will

probably double. Maybe they will be able to hire someone with a happy attitude to assist.

The customers are not right or wrong. The owners are not right or wrong. It is all about free choice. The customers are free to eat wherever they want and certainly won't have to look far to find a restaurant that will treat them with respect and gratitude. The owners are free to do whatever they want, and they seem to have no shortage of customers. They do, however, seem a little stressed. Maybe a lot.

Art and business can make strange bedfellows. Even pizza art. Great art costs thousands of dollars. Can a great pizza cost \$30? Or even \$40? I can tell you this: Treating customers the way the reviews suggest Great Lake is doing is bad business, even if it is incredible pizza.

Charge more, chill out, treat people well. This husband-and-wife team has had a lot of pressure thrown at them with all of the news media attention. They have been in business for only a year and a half, not a long time to get used to the game. I hope that people can cut them some slack and that they get what they want from their business.

In business, you usually get what you deserve, one way or another.

Jay Goltz owns five small businesses in Chicago.