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Opening a Brick-and-Mortar Store in Brooklyn: Is It Worth It?

By: Nikita Richardson



Ask any small business owner and they'll tell you that doing business in New York City is both a dream and a nightmare. This city boasts a massive, ever-changing consumer base of people with a decent amount of money in their pockets, but they can also be fickle in their taste; if you

find a good location, you'll never want for foot traffic, but you'll have to pay sky-high rents; and if you're not ready for a permanent location, you try your hand at any one of the city's markets or sell products online, but the slower you move, the more likely it is that the competition will catch up. Even so, new businesses are opening (and closing) all the time, and many of them want or need to open a brick-and-mortar location. Here are the stories of four Brooklyn businesses and how they've transitioned (or not!) into the brick-and-mortar world.

Beehive Oven



**Beehive Oven
John and Treva Chadwell**

The Approach: Test the Waters, Trust the Results

John and Treva Chadwell, owners of Smorgasburg favorite [Beehive Oven](#), and transplants by way of Texas and Louisiana, are in the process of opening a permanent space. The husband-and-wife duo moved to the city in 2012 and began discussing the possibility of opening their own Southern eatery. Initially, they played with the idea of opening a barbecue joint, but found the market was saturated. So instead, they narrowed their focus onto one of the more basic and infinitely popular parts of Southern cuisine: biscuits.

“We try to stay away from the word ‘artisanal’ as much as possible,” says John. “We felt that by doing biscuits and heritage recipes, we were making a more emotional connection to our consumers.”

The Chadwells rifled through Treva’s collection of family recipes and cobbled together a solid menu before submitting an application to the ultra-competitive Smorgasburg. Beehive Oven made the cut (according to the *Wall Street Journal*, only 8.5-11.4 percent of applicants are accepted) and their booth, which features treats

like ham-and-brie biscuits and homemade jams, was an instant hit.

“In June [2013], we kind of realized this has strong enough legs to be able to go to the next step,” John says, and by August, the Chadwells were searching for locations. They settled on a well-sized and affordable space at 743 Driggs Avenue in South Williamsburg and found a great architect who connected them with an experienced contractor. Further research led them to the [New Business Acceleration Team](#), a service of the [Department of Small Business Services](#) that helps people like the Chadwells take control of the rigorous inspection process new restaurants undergo.

“It is a big decision to commit to opening a small business,” says Robinson Hernandez, the Deputy Commissioner of Business Acceleration at the DSBS. “Not only is it a lot of work from setting it up, but just from a personal investment. You’re going to be working a lot of hours once you have your own business.”

“Due diligence,” is Hernandez’ mantra. The DSBS expedites inspection processes with the

Department of Buildings, the Fire Department, the Department of Health and other city inspection units and can shave as much two and a half months off the opening process, which amounts to major savings, especially in New York City. What's more, the service is completely free.

"When you're building a restaurant, you bleed green," John says, laughing. "Every time you talk to somebody, it's expensive."

Still, the process has been less expensive than it would have been without the help of the DSBS. "You have to rely on people around you for support, for encouragement, for advice, for direction, for challenging and critique," says John. "[The DSBS] wants us to be successful. Their success is based upon our success."

The DSBS has been a savior for the Chadwells, but it doesn't cover every aspect of opening a permanent location. The program won't pay your rent and they won't negotiate with your landlord. They're not menu specialists or real estate experts and they specialize in food and drink rather than retail. Still, the Chadwells feel

prepared to face whatever challenges may come their way.

"We have to discipline ourselves to slow down and make a more intelligent decision [and] find out what our gut is telling us," says John.

This measured approach has made the building out experience exceedingly positive and Beehive Oven is coming together, notwithstanding the usual hiccups new businesses experience. The restaurant is on track to open its doors by Mother's Day weekend. The eatery will compete with Southern food behemoths Briskettown and Pies 'N' Thighs, which are both a few blocks away, but the Chadwells are proud of what they've done no matter how the cards fall.

"The number one piece of advice we received from everybody was don't do it," says John. "If it fails, which I don't think it will, it's been the best year of my life. Exciting and challenging and exhausting. And I've been happy the whole time."

Robicelli's



Robicelli's Bakery **Allison and Matt Robicelli**

*The Approach: Learn From Bad Experiences,
Go All In*

“Owning a brick-and-mortar is having a series of failures and trying to recover from them constantly,” says Allison Robicelli on a warm Sunday afternoon at the LIC Flea. “It’s so hard for me to tell people to do this.”

Before Robicelli and her husband, Matt, opened [their extremely successful bakery](#) in Bay Ridge, which has led to a book deal and appearances on *The Today Show* and *Chopped*, they were burned by a failed business. After five years of catering, the couple buckled under the pressure to have a

permanent location despite having major reservations and opened up a gourmet shop in the fall of 2008. Most of the nightmares that come with opening a store happened to them. They had their tip jar stolen multiple times. Customers mistreated them and one even tried to fight Matt “because he’s tall.” And for three months, no one could access their store by car because the city tore up the street in front of the shop. A few weeks later the recession hit, most of the catering clients lost their jobs and their business opportunities dried up along with the job market. Within a year, the store went under.

“We ended up losing everything and it was awful,” says Robicelli as locals lazily stroll by the booth. “I’m still paying off loans for a business I haven’t owned in over five years and I’ll be paying it off for the next 25 years.”

It was four years until the Robicellis, now full-time bakers, felt comfortable enough to open a new store and the second time around, they were more careful, spending a year searching for a new space. Over that time they developed a set of hard and fast rules.

“If you’re opening up a brick-and-mortar shop, get to know your landlord,” says Robicelli.

“That’s the best piece of advice I can give. You gotta think of it as a marriage.”

On top of that, Robicelli says it’s important that business owners realize that your rent will most likely increase when the five-year lease is up. Most landlords are loathe to see a tenant do well and not get a cut of their success. Second, she warns that owning a business is extremely time consuming. On this particular Sunday afternoon, her children aren’t with her or her husband because both parents are working, one at the market and one at the bakery.

“If you’re okay with working seven days a week for the rest of your life, then you should go brick-and-mortar,” says Robicelli. “If this is a hobby, do a market. And if you’re insane like me, do both.”

Urban Chandy



Urban Chandy Cassidy Brush

The Approach: Create Success Online, Proceed with Caution

The Robicellis and the Chadwells are both involved in the food industry and have faced challenges unique to that field, which is why some people choose retail. It’s significantly easier to sell clothing, jewelry or furniture than it is running a restaurant. The Department of Health rarely gets involved, businesses can easily be supported by internet sales and there are, generally, less hoops to jump through—once you open the store—but what about the before and after?

Cassidy Brush of [Urban Chandy](#) is all too familiar with the challenges of getting a product in front of a customer when you don't have a storefront. In August 2011, Brush was operating a clothing and jewelry store in DUMBO and needed to photograph her products. Annoyed by the harsh fluorescent lighting in the space, she decided to craft a chandelier of her own using salvaged wood and some wiring expertise. The result was a charming urban chandelier that changed the entire feel of her space. It was a hit with everyone who came through the store, so she posted a picture of it on Etsy. Within six months, she had 75 orders for her chandies, each retailing at \$595.

These days, Brush is running Urban Chandy out of a mid-sized workshop near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. She and two employees fill orders listed on a dry erase board that leans against one wall, grabbing wiring, hardware and antique-style light bulbs from industrial shelves. Piles of wood have been carefully leaned against walls and the floor is forever covered in sawdust. On this Tuesday afternoon, they have nearly a dozen orders to fill.

"It's really frustrating to have this kind of scenario and not have a storefront per se for customers to come see," says Brush during a brief respite from her otherwise busy workday. "But at the same time, retail space is damn near impossible. We're constantly in that battle of how do we showcase product?"

Urban Chandy is going through growing pains. The business is hugely successful, but Brush has had more misses than hits when it comes to putting the product in front of people in Brooklyn. Currently, the only way to see a Chandy in person is by visiting the chaotic workshop or heading to By Brooklyn in Cobble Hill. Otherwise, attempts to sell chandies in person have been short-lived or inconvenient.

"It's way high maintenance," Brush says, adding that no one wants a dusty chandelier that's been sitting in a store window for months. "There's been a lack of motivation to actually get out there and figure out the brick-and-mortar part."

Still, she knows that a permanent location is in their future and lately, she's been entertaining the idea of opening a hybrid store that's part-

workshop, part-retail. Her dream location for the store?

“Downstairs from my house,” she says, laughing.

Catbird



Catbird

Rony Vardi

The Approach: Trust Your Gut, Build Your Base

On the other side of the retail argument is Williamsburg’s [Catbird](#), which has turned strong online and in-person sales into a highly successful business with a cult following. Since 2006, the “mecca for all things sparkly and exciting” has operated out of an absurdly small

space on Bedford Avenue’s main drag, but that never deters eager customers from crowding in to try on the delicate rings and necklaces for which the store is known.

“I feel like that location is who I am,” says owner Rony Vardi. “The night that I got it into my head how much I wanted the space and how I could envision what it could be, I remember not being able to sleep.”

Though she wasn’t at all ready to open Catbird (she had another store on Metropolitan Avenue at the time), she went ahead and signed a lease for the 220 square foot storefront. It was a gamble, but eight years later, Vardi’s gut feeling has paid off, and the store turns a profit despite a steadily increasing rent. At this point, she’s been a small business owner for ten years and has two bits of advice for those aspiring to open a brick-and-mortar location, whether they’re selling rings or chandeliers.

First, be a low-maintenance tenant.

“If something is wrong, I take care of it myself,” says Vardi, describing how she recently upgraded the building’s electricity without

involving her landlord. Like Allison Robicelli, she emphasizes the importance of having a good relationship with the person who ultimately controls your fate.

And second, don't get ahead of yourself.

“Start as small as possible at every stage,” Vardi says, stressing that good products, good customer service and a great location should come first. Aesthetics (i.e marble counters, expensive shelving, pricy retail software) shouldn't be a top priority. “You should save money where you can, so if it doesn't work out, you have much less far to fall.”