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Entrepreneur

Good Leadership Is a Lot Like a Bag of Golf Clubs, According to the CEO of Hooters

Hooters of America CEO Sal Melilli talks about moving from working at the kitchen sink to in the C-suite, diversifying income streams, and celebrating 40 years of Hooters Girls.

BY [SHAWN P. WALCHEF](#) • DEC 5, 2023

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Key Takeaways

- ▶ For the 40th anniversary of Hooters in 2023, the company began the I AM initiative (standing for “Image, Attitude, Memorable”,) which is about how the more than 500,000 Hooters Girl alumni are not merely defined by their iconic Orange Shorts, but by their many achievements in life.
- ▶ Owning and operating a business in this day and age is not just about a physical location, although Hooters is well-known for its experiential dining. Often it’s also about finding new ways to invest in your business, like live events.
- ▶ Try new things but don’t deviate too far from your core business model. At one time Hooters had a casino and even an airline. Both worked until they didn’t. Now after 40 years, Hooters is finally ready to see their famous products be available for everyone on grocery store shelves.

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Quality leadership is like a bag of golf clubs, says Hooters of America CEO Sal Melilli.

A golf bag full of top-notch clubs — from putter to driver — gives a golfer the essential tools they need for a great 18-hole round.

Being a good leader also means having a lot of available tools, people, and ideas around you at all times to make it easier to navigate the countless situations that occur every day as an executive.

"You got different clubs in the bag," explains Sal Melilli to Shawn Walchef of [Cali BBQ Media](#). "Here are some of the tools that we can look at or things you could possibly consider to help get you through the point where you are today."

The "clubs" you can wield might come in different types of inspiration — mentors, media, memory — just like in golf there are woods, irons, wedges, and more.

Sal never thought he'd get into social media, but eventually he gave in to that new form of communication, and discovered certain key people who have influenced him.

"I also keep different notes around my desk for inspiration," Sal Melilli added about the ways he finds inspiration as the chief executive of a legendary restaurant company. "It comes in different places."

The Hooters Story

Hooters was founded in 1983 on April 1. Yes, that is April Fool's Day, but this was no joke.

As legend goes, the brand was born in Florida when "six businessmen with no restaurant experience whatsoever got together to open a place they couldn't get kicked out of."

They call it the happiest accident in restaurant history.

Humble origins led to monumental growth. Four decades have passed, but the mentality remains the same as it was in the '80s.

The Hooters brand was created from day 1 to be about fun — to "rescue people from the ordinary."

Eventually Hooters with its comfort food and comfortable surroundings — and the fashionable and cheery Hooters Girls — became cultural icons. The brand continues to grow in new ways, including globally.

These days, Hooters franchises and operates more than "420 restaurants" in almost every state in the US, and 29 countries.

Hooters grossed \$860 million in 2022, according to Technomic's Top 500 Chain Restaurant Report published by Restaurant Business Online.

Hooters of America (HOA) Brands also operates Hoots Wings, an emerging QSR franchise with lots of different styles to offer chicken wing fans.

Sal Melillis said Hooters has learned to diversify within its strengths. The International Miss Hooters Pageant was a big success for the brand and has even inspired similar live events at a local franchise level.

You'll also be able to buy Hooters products in the grocery store. "We're on the cusp of some pretty exciting opportunities that we're building in the licensing part around this brand," he said.

Though live events and retail products are becoming a way to continue developing the brand around the globe, it's the dining room Hooters experience that is the core of the company. Because of this Hooter is investing in sports betting.

With more than half of all states in the US allowing legal sports gambling, there is lots of revenue to be earned from tapping into the customers' desire to bet on sports while eating wings and drinking beer in a fun environment.

Hooters has launched live betting at dozens of restaurants in multiple states and has also partnered with brands like DraftKings.

With new opportunities to bring the company into the future, Sal said the core of the Hooters has always been the people who work there.

40 Years of Hooters

Sal Melilli's ascent at Hooters took him from sink to c-suite. Starting as a dishwasher and intern, he found himself mastering job after job within the organization until landing at the top.

The chief executive's astronomical rise is not an uncommon occurrence at Hooters.

The company publicly prides itself on providing workers with the skills and training to succeed and move up. Or employees can move on to other career paths but still retain with them what they learned.

During its 40th anniversary year in 2023, Hooters leaned into spotlighting the essence of their brand — the Hooter Girl.

Especially important to the Hooters I AM initiative (standing for "Image, Attitude, Memorable") is how the more than 500,000 Hooters Girl alumni are not merely defined by their iconic Orange Shorts, but by their many achievements in life after donning that classic outfit.

"You know, the Hooters Girl has been, is now, and will be the absolute essence of the business," the CEO said. "40% of our management staff is female. So some of them move on to great careers with us. They move through the management ranks.

"We've really tried to put a focus on celebrating the empowerment of women."

Former Hooters Girl Cheryl Whiting-Kish, who is now Hooters Chief People Officer, said the 40th anniversary was a chance to honor those who personify the most important part of the brand.

"I think it's time to honor who she is as an individual," [she said in FSR Magazine](#). "I also hope to give the women of the brand again a spotlight to say, 'Hey, I'm a leader of myself. I'm choosing to work for this brand. I choose to wear these orange shorts. I choose to leverage my time here whether it's to make money while I go to school or to learn communication skills,' or whatever it is."

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