

Feasting With the Sharks

By Tom Kaiser

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Through reporting, networking and Franchise Times' own events, I get to see a lot of companies pitch the virtues of their concepts to industry experts, developers and financiers. This morning, I got another taste of that chum as part of a local event modeled (and named) after ABC's popular [Shark Tank show](#).

The entertaining breakfast event was organized by the [Minnesota Shopping Center Association \(MSCA\)](#), a local group that I've recently tagged along with. The crowd is a great group made up of commercial brokers, developers, property owners, shopping center managers and concepts that recognize the importance of real estate in their own success. It's a fertile networking grounds, and I love the programming.

Pitching before the sharks were four business people, Barry Zelickson, owner/president of [Big Thrill Factory](#), William Niemer, chief experience officer [THAT Cooking School](#), Kim Ellis, chief development officer at [Piada Italian Street Food](#), and Stuart Gray, founder of [Hospitality Rocks](#).

The ravenous sharks ready to pass snap judgments were Kris Schisel, senior retail associate at [Colliers International](#), David Carland, president of [Venture Pass Partners](#), and Kent Carlson, partner at Inland Development Partners.

First at bat was Kim Ellis, of Piada, who pitched the non-franchised, fast-casual concept's roots, food quality, the presentation of its high-end storefronts and rapid growth trajectory. It was a solid presentation, with only one cringe-worthy moment when [she compared the concept to Chipotle](#).

"It is a customizable food experience, but with Italian food," she said. "The food we serve is unlike a typical Italian restaurant—you're not going to find a lot of pasta."

One of the sharks, Carland, interjected that he's had 54 serious development inquiries lately, 48 being food concepts. "Aren't you worried there's too many people in that category right now?" he asked. Ellis responded confidently, adding that there aren't many new retail concepts (outside of food) to compete with, and that Piada lacks a direct, nationwide competitor at this time.

The sharks loved it.

Round two was led by William Niemer and Stuart Gray, pitching THAT Cooking School, which seeks to fill the void left by some of the dearly departed cooking schools, like Le Cordon Bleu, that closed its U.S. operations last year. The center of their pitch revolved around the value of creating culinary professionals for restaurateurs, but some in the audience objected to the planned \$10,000 tuition required for the certification.

Nationwide expansion plans for the concept are ambitious, but funding remains uncertain for the initial buildout—and Niemer said part of that relied on winning funding for the first build in similar idea-based competitions.

Somehow, the sharks liked this plan, too, which seemed awfully shaky to this reporter.

The final presenter was literally the most amusing, as owner Barry Zelickson pitched expansion plans for his one-unit Big Thrill Factory, an indoor/outdoor amusement center that includes amenities for adolescents and adults that get dragged along for the fun.

Likening the arcade portion of the biz to a "mini casino," Zelickson made a truly solid pitch for the type of customers (and developments) this concept appeals to. The first location took over an abandoned Kmart, which worked well due to the need for generous outdoor spaces.

"We're always looking for our next location; they're hard to find," he added. "We're confident with what we have created, and we've seen double-digit growth every year since this has been created."

Slam dunk, the sharks concurred. I was also on board with that. You'd really have to be anti-fun not to see the appeal of this one...

I enjoyed the format of the MSCA's Shark Tank: Season 2 event, and always enjoy the opportunity to network with local professionals both in and outside of franchising. Never hesitate to expand your own network, as networking can be a lot of fun, even if you hang out in the back, furiously typing notes and snapping pictures.

I hoped for a little more blood in the water, but that's just me—and I'm a tough sell.

