



Franchise Focus: Owner of 59 Jimmy John's attributes success to empowering employees to working for themselves



Dan Vansteenburgh, a former school teacher, was one of the first franchisees of Jimmy John's when he opened in Roseville, Minnesota. That was 16 years ago, and the 46-year-old leader is now the second-largest Jimmy John's franchisee with 59 stores spanning from his home state to Boston.

Vansteenburg, who has averaged four openings a year since 2011, turns in higher than the company average when it comes to AUVS, and his same-store sales have been positive 14 out of the 16 years he's been in business.

"(It's) a record that I am proud of and one I will continue to work every day to earn," he said during an interview with FastCasual about how he built his business into a sandwich powerhouse that now employs 1,100 people.

His philosophy for success is simple: "It's the people you hire and how you treat them, and that ends up being what helps you make it or what holds you back."

And that means employees share in the company's success.

"I give bonus checks to the managers that have earned them every 28 days," Vansteenburg said. "I've done that since I started in 2001. It's not enough to wait until the end of the year. Share the success regularly and often."

His people-centric approach applies to both his employees and his customers.

"I build my organizational structure upside down," he said. "I put the customers at the top and then the people who are interacting with the customers next. That's how I'm able to grow this quickly. The people that come to work for me aren't really working for me, they're working for themselves."

Read below for more insight from Vansteenburg

FastCasual: Why did you decide to stop teaching and become a franchise owner?

Vansteenburg: I loved teaching and had a great time with the kids, but there were so many internal politics involved and I didn't agree with how the school was handling the children. At the same time, my wife and I started talking about having a family, and I wanted more income. I went to work for a tech company and one day my boss asked me to order lunch for some clients. My co-worker said, 'Just get Jimmy John's, they deliver.' When I went to the website, there was an announcement about Jimmy John's looking for franchisees and that planted the seed. When the tech company went out of business, my wife and I decided to pursue the idea.

FastCasual: Why did you choose Jimmy John's?

Vansteenburg: Jimmy John's is an extremely organized company. They have a structure and a process in place for everything. Starting your own business is never easy, but the process of opening up a Jimmy John's was extremely straightforward, which I really appreciated. Plus, I loved the product. I still remember my first Jimmy John's sandwich — the No. 4 Turkey Tom.

FastCasual: What's a typical day like for you? Are you in the stores, doing paperwork, etc.?

Vansteenburg: I do not have a typical day. I am a little ADD and switch activities frequently during the day. I spend a few hours in the office, a few in stores. I still make sandwiches, and am frequently on the phone. I support my COO, CFO and HR manager. I work closely with the Jimmy John's management team to test various strategies, products, and best practices. I help remove obstacles and I high-five my rock star staff. In addition, much of my day is training my replacements so that many people know how to do what I have done since 2001.

FastCasual: What is your growth plan? Where and when will you open?

Vansteenburgh: I opened my first Jimmy John's in Roseville, Minnesota in August 2001. Following our initial success, I set a goal to build 30 locations. Now I have 59, so you never know where life will lead you. After I built 30 Jimmy John's in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, I wanted to expand and started to look elsewhere. We bought locations in Duluth, Minnesota, Rochester and Syracuse, New York and Boston. My growth plan is to continue to expand, especially in the Boston area.

FastCasual: Who is someone in the industry that you admire? Why?

Vansteenburgh: In kindergarten, we learn the game, "Follow the Leader." In my world, that leader is Jimmy (John Liautaud). As a franchisee, my number one rule is to do what Jimmy is doing. In Jimmy, I have a successful leader and one who always speaks and acts from a place of genuine authority because he is doing what I am doing every day. People ask me who my biggest competitor is, and frankly, I just don't have an answer. I am not focused on who is down the street or building next door. I am focused on my operations and on serving my customers better than I did yesterday.

Topics: Franchising & Growth



Before joining Network Media Group as director of Editorial, where she oversees Network Media Group's nine B2B publications, Cherryh Cansler served as Content Specialist at Barkley ad agency in Kansas City. Throughout her 17-year career as a journalist, she's written about a variety of topics, ranging from the restaurant industry and technology to health and fitness. Her byline has appeared in a number of newspapers, magazines and websites, including Forbes, The Kansas City Star and American Fitness magazine. She also serves as the managing editor for FastCasual.com. [www](#)

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