

## IN CONVERSATION: Nadja Piatka: A taste for success

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There was a time when Nadja Piatka had to hide under her table when debt collectors came knocking at her door.

Since then she has turned a \$100 investment in herself into a multinational food supplier with more than \$20 million in sales.

Industry giants like McDonald's and Subway restaurants now carry products she launched with entrepreneurial spirit in her home kitchen. Having achieved so much without formal education in her industry and winning a battle with leukemia has made Piatka an inspiration to entrepreneurs across North America.

She now tours as a public speaker and has even been featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show.



**IN CONVERSATION: Nadja Piatka: A taste for success.** Nadja Piatka is the president and founder of Nadja Foods. Photo/COURTESY

Torontonian entrepreneurs will have a chance to hear her speak at Enterprise Toronto's Small Business Forum on Oct. 18 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. Toronto Business Times recently spoke with her to learn more about her amazing story.

Q) You grew your business from the confines of your kitchen to being an international supplier. How did that happen?

A) I did start in my kitchen. Good foods come from the kitchen as opposed to a laboratory by researchers. I was living in Canada and married with a couple of kids, but all of a sudden there was a change in my life and I went through a divorce. I was out of the workforce for too many years and was having difficulty getting a job. I soon realized that the only one that was going to help myself was me.

I was in a lot of debt and living a life I wasn't accustomed to but I think that sometimes adversity does bring out the best in people. I truly believe that people have these abilities that they don't even know they have until they are called upon. In my case, when I really realized that I needed to do something was one day when a bill collector came knocking, which they did often, and I made my daughter hide under the table with me so that he wouldn't see us. When I realized my problems were affecting my children like that I knew it was time for a change.

I started getting up at four in the morning and baking and selling my goods to coffee shops and small bakeries and it went from there.

Q) The initial investment you made was \$100. What exactly did that money go toward?

A) People think that because they don't have money or they can't get a loan that they won't succeed. I tried to get bank loans with no success and I made it. People think that they are stuck and there is nothing they can do,

but there is. If you are determined and you have a mindset that is very focused and have an unshakable belief in what you want to do, you can do it.

The first hundred dollars I spent was on basics like letterhead and business cards and a few ingredients for my kitchen. Sometimes you need to get creative and find other ways to make things happen. I soon began using the ovens in small bakeries instead of buying my own ovens because I didn't have the money to invest. I developed a lot of customers in that way and eventually I decided that I didn't want to keep getting up at four in the morning to deliver baked goods, which have a small window for delivery in the morning; you can't just drop them off at three in the afternoon.

What I ended up doing was giving the bakery my recipes and having them sign a confidentiality agreement. From that point on they would do the baking and I could focus on the marketing and that was such good value because I didn't have to invest money in equipment and I didn't have to train staff to do the production. It also freed my time to go out and market the business and develop new products. That was probably my first breakthrough as far as getting to the next level and it grew from there.

Sometimes people think that if it doesn't work this way then it isn't going to work, but you just have to find another way. There is always a solution to everything.

Q) When you take part in speaking engagements, what's the key message you want to leave an audience of small business owners with?

A) I think people are very interested in finding out the how-to. I'm not a motivational speaker that talks about others' stories. I talk about my own journey and through that I am able to honestly let them know that if I can do it they can do it.

I wasn't a rocket scientist or a brain surgeon. I didn't have a degree in economics and wasn't a professional chef or cook. I was just someone with a belief that I could do something that had value to other people and that is the message. I tell my audience how they can do it also, even in today's economy.

It is difficult to stay motivated and want to grow a business with so much negativity around, but what I truly believe and talk about is that they need to walk away from my speech with enthusiasm. In the most difficult times is when we create the most significant opportunities. I know that in the Great Depression there were companies that prospered so I think it is very important to look at the positivity of the situation and realize that even in today's economy there is room for growth. If you say to yourself that it is not going to work because there is too much going against us, then it isn't going to work. It is very easy to fall into that funk because every time you turn on the TV or read something it is talking about the negativity of the economy today. I find it really exciting to see opportunity to grow even in the most challenging of times.

Q) There appears to be an increasing trend for businesses to incorporate very visible acts of social responsibility. As a business owner, do you detect an increased consumer awareness of these kinds of issues? If so, in what ways?

A) Very much so. I see that as a very good thing. It has almost become a trend thing to do and that is great because there are a lot of charities benefiting from that. It is something that I think should be done regardless of whether it is a trend or good for business. It's so important to give back.

The second book I wrote, I donated my profits to the Ronald McDonald Children's Charities because I was a vendor for McDonald's a few years ago. What was so interesting was it was just something that was done because we had a good relationship and it was a good charity. What is incredible is that all of a sudden it comes back tenfold and it is such a surprise. I encourage everyone to be charitable in their personal life and in their business.

My event for women is called The Ultimate Girls Giveaway, which I have been doing for over 15 years. We donate to help sponsor women survivors of war and to this date we have 15 women we have sponsored for a year. We provide food, water, medical care and small business loans if they want to start a business.

I really hope that people will continue to do that far after any trend has passed. It is really a wonderful thing to

do and it is interesting how much you give and how much you get back.

Q) You've toured as a motivational keynote speaker. Who or what serves as your own inspiration?

A) I love what I do and I have a feeling that I will work until I'm 100 regardless of the money or whatever. It gets you up in the morning and I also love the fact that my daughter Veronica now works with me. She graduated from the Schulich School of Business in Toronto and that makes me want to work hard and have a business to pass on to her. It's a combination of many things, but it seems like anytime it is going to slow down, something else comes on your plate.

Right now my biography is being written by a writer in New York who also wrote about Norman Rockwell and the family. He contacted me and is now writing my bio, so there is another project that is taking up a lot of time looking up old family pictures and going down memory lane. It will really go through how this business started in more details than I can give in a presentation. It seems that every time I turn around there is something new and interesting happening.

Q) You've lived in Toronto and will be the keynote speaker at a small business event here in October. What's the city like as an environment for small business growth and innovation?

A) I think Toronto has an amazing vitality. I have a lot of friends and my mother still lives there so I am here fairly often and also here on business a lot. I supply Subway restaurants with low-fat brownies and go to Toronto for meetings. I find it is just vibrant and there is an acute interest in entrepreneurship in Toronto. I see more and more women getting involved and I even see banks and loan institutions looking at women more favourably than they did years ago. I see a rise in family businesses in Toronto and it really is important to have that diversity and entrepreneurship.

There is also a lot of creativity and diversity in products and services offered here so it's not just multinational corporations making decisions on how we are going to eat or shop or dress or manage our businesses. There is a lot of interesting creativity happening in technology and it makes Toronto a very good business environment for commerce and very good for the life of the city. That's why entrepreneurship is so important. It would be pretty sad if we all just shopped at one big box store to buy our clothes or didn't have markets to go to for food.

Right now I supply a lot of products to grocery stores in Canada and I can give unique and different products. I sell cookies made with vegetables like beets and broccoli hidden in the ingredients, so as an entrepreneur what you have to do is not bring out 'me too' products. For example, if I come out with a cookie that is identical to Oreo, I'm not going to be able to compete. I have to bring out something different that people don't see on the shelf.

That's why entrepreneurship is important - to bring out creativity and diversity. That is the essence of what is exciting and why you can't keep a good entrepreneur down when they are always bringing out something new and creative that you haven't seen.

My definition of an entrepreneur is someone who creates something out of nothing and turns it into something of value that people want.

Q) As someone who also consults entrepreneurs launching their new products, do you find the advice you give varies significantly, or are there a lot of common elements with those looking to make their mark?

A) A bit of both. There are common elements and common answers, but there are also unique answers to specific situations that people are involved in. I'm always excited when I see individuals that I have consulted and seen them get into mass production or a level where they are seeing something they probably didn't think there was an opportunity to do. Everything is unique and individual to some extent, but there are also blanket answers to many things if the variables are the same.

Some people have come to me with ideas and after some time talking to them I quite often realize they have come to a level where they are serious and committed, but sometimes I also recommend they keep their day job because I see they don't have the passion and commitment to develop it and so it won't be successful.

After I did the Oprah show, I had a lot of people calling me saying that they had this recipe and they wanted to sell it for a million dollars, wondering if Quaker would buy it.

Q) Someone comes to you and says they have a great idea for a product. What's the next step they take?

A) People come to me with ideas they have already started working on and want to grow and others come to me with something totally new and want help getting it started. It has been everything from food to someone who has a great idea for a closet organizer or something.

They have to realize that there is no overnight success and if there was then we would all be jumping on the bandwagon. If you are willing to do the work and you really believe in your product or service and have your heart in it, it can work. If you are in it just for the money, if you have got something and you really don't care about it but just want money, that will eventually fall off the rails and won't get anywhere. You really have to feel you are doing something of value and are proud of it and can stand behind it.

Right now things are very transparent. If someone is creating something that doesn't have the benefits they claimed or doesn't operate the way it should or doesn't taste good, then guess what? The consumer will make decisions for you. You really have to be excited about it and make other people excited about it, too.

If you do have an idea, the beautiful thing about social media today is that you can really bring a lot of attention to something much easier than you could 20 years ago. That is a tool that will only get more powerful as time goes on. There are new ways of doing business that weren't here 15 years ago.

Q) Setbacks and big obstacles can be difficult. Many start-up businesses will fold at the first sign of trouble. How did overcoming major challenges such as your battle with leukemia affect your resolve?

A) There isn't anybody who that doesn't happen to. That is life. With my leukemia...I didn't put that in my business plan. Things happen and challenges happen that you aren't prepared for and with the economy there can be many different things.

What is really interesting is that in my business career, every time I had a problem it really made me have to think about how I can fix a problem and quite often put me on another path. If there is nothing happening and things have flat lined or if you are passively going along, whenever I had problems I found that finding their solutions would put my company on another level for growth. Sometimes you might get discouraged, but it is an opportunity and if you fix it, it can be better for the business in general. It can feel like at times they all come one right after another and you feel like a fighter taking so many left punches that you are just praying for a right one once and a while. It is something that you have to look and figure out how to solve problems and stay positive in your mental game.

My mother gave a really good expression that helped me. She said, "Everything passes, both good and bad."

So when something bad is happening, like the leukemia, well it did pass. Challenges in business did pass. This isn't the end, it is just the situation that I am in and it will pass one way or the other.

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