

FEARLESSLY

Creating a Movement

BY NONA PHINN



&pizza and its Tribe
impact communities by
throwing out the rules
and building custom
pizzas - and a business -
from scratch.

A few years ago I was in a marketing meeting listening to my boss motivate our team on creating a movement — a following, if you will. He showed us a video that depicted a crowd at a concert being held outside in a grassy field with people all over. They were lying out on blankets, sitting under tents, and walking up and down the hilltops of the field. Folks were



Tribe (def.): a group of people that are connected to each other, connected to a leader, and ultimately connected to a purpose.



The first rule of &pizza is that **there are no rules.**

engaged with the music and just taking it all in. It was your typical concert, nothing out of the ordinary.

The lens soon began to focus on a skinny, balding male wearing a white tank top and navy blue running shorts. I perked up to watch him as he took center stage and began to dance. Now this video had my attention. I was completely entranced as I watched my newfound friend get into the zone.

He continued to dance, and not well, I may add. His face pointed downwards as he stared at the movements of his feet. His arms flopped and flung from left to right as if he had lost all feeling in them. In the midst of his groove, a young lady joined in. The most amazing aspect of this dual dance was that this young woman was mimicking the same moves as the gentleman who kicked it off. A few minutes in, a crowd began to gather around these two brave souls. It was not a spectator sport. Oh no. The people in the crowd became active participants, and before long the field was full of individuals dancing. The best part was the lack of choreography. Every single dancer had their own style and contributed their own flair to this group performance. It was amazing to watch.

The thing that stayed with me was how powerful one dance can be. One man began to dance when no one else would, and by the end of the video hundreds of individuals were moving to the music they heard swirling in the air. His bravery and willingness to do what no one else dared

called people to action in that one moment. As I spoke with Michael Lastoria, CEO and co-founder of &pizza, I could not get this video out of my mind. While listening to him speak about the dynamic brand and pizzeria he established, what flashed before my very eyes was the word FEARLESS!

The Washington, D.C., metro region is honored to have its streets stamped with &pizza locations. The pizzeria has taught the locals a new way to experience pizza delivery. When we order pizza, we expect to type in a website, choose from a list of crusts, and pick our toppings and sauce from an array of possibilities. But what if we could truly have real involvement in the process of making our pizza? What if we were given front row — or better yet, backstage — passes to this experience? Now imagine that the people behind the counter making your pizza are doing all they can to ensure you feel right at home. Washingtonians are getting just that when they encounter &pizza.

This dynamic pizzeria came to life when Lastoria's passion for brand grew into a desire for creating his own branded product. After discussions and exploration with his co-founder, Lastoria decided on pizza. Within the industry, innovation was already taking place through technology, allowing for faster service and unique delivery methods. However, Lastoria found a stone unturned: the product itself. There

wasn't a player out there innovating with the experience of creating pizza. Now, an idea had formed.

Lastoria wanted &pizza to be about more than just bringing food to guests. He reminded us that pizza isn't a new thing. It has been around for centuries. It was, however, time to bring pizza into the 21st century by bridging communities with the brand and the product behind the brand. "It was really about trying to create a cultural movement around something that we already love," he said.

Lastoria knew that the guest experience would be key (&pizza serves guests, not customers), so he thought about how &pizza would be different. People are used to a focus on the pizza itself and promotions like a new flavor or deal of the month, but Lastoria wanted to focus on a highly visible and personalized experience that would help form bonds. Even though customization has always been part of the pizza experience, never before have individuals been able to see the ingredients they ordered and take part in that customization. In addition, personalization at &pizza would go beyond making pizza "my way" and include a one-size-fits-all approach. There's no need to order a medium or large pizza; in an environment where sharing is the norm, Lastoria created a new concept of pizza that encourages individual style.

Lastoria deliberately chose to break other rules, too. As a matter of fact, the first rule of &pizza is that there are no rules. From the very beginning, Lastoria made the strategic decision “not to apply any rules on what this had to be.”

With his vision fixed in his mind, Lastoria journeyed to find the right location with the right people who would embrace his vision. Washington, D.C. was love at first sight. “It was reflective of the &pizza brand and what we set out to create was already in D.C.,” proclaims Lastoria. Despite the naysayers, H Street, Northeast became home to the first &pizza. Lastoria details how connected he felt to the neighborhood and how the diversity, vibes, and people drew him in: “It was a lot of interesting people, doing a lot of interesting things.”

Taking a risk on his concept and brand, Lastoria opened the doors to &pizza and has since enjoyed steady growth into other D.C. neighborhoods and in Maryland, Virginia, and Philadelphia. In each of its new locations, &pizza finds a fan base — a following that includes guests, other community members, and those who work for the brand. Lastoria attributes this gravitational pull to the highly personalized experience and the transparency the brand offers. He then schools us on how he believes connections are formed: “We connect with people when they allow us to see the world through their eyes. When they let us in enough to share a piece of us with them. Brands that let their customers truly see who they are and why they exist are the brands that create fans.” Traditionally, businesses have been told to be conservative and to never mix business with pleasure, but today’s marketplace allows for greater access to information, and consumers want to dig in and discover the intricate details of companies before deciding to become their customer.

The difference at &pizza is they eliminate the guessing game and bare themselves to guests. Walking away from a traditional business model served as a kind of initiation into the communities that &pizza serves. Lastoria built this transparency and community

It is near and dear to Lastoria’s heart that &pizza’s employees feel they are a part of a tribe, which he defines as “a group of people

“We connect with people when they allow us to see the world through their eyes. When they let us in enough to share a piece of us with them. **Brands that let their customers truly see who they are and why they exist are the brands that create fans.**”



tie by embracing the look and feel of the neighborhood and applying it to the design of each &pizza location. Additionally, he took time to understand the passion and needs of the specific neighborhoods and supported their causes. Most importantly, he looked to the employees of &pizza, known as Tribe members, to unite the pizza

shop with its guests. It is near and dear to Lastoria's heart &pizza's employees feel they are a part of a tribe, which he defines as "a group of people that are connected to each other, connected to a leader, and ultimately connected to a purpose." The significance of this concept is that it's much easier to get people to rally around a purpose than a company. The &pizza Tribe members are represented by the ampersand in the company name. Lastoria sought a symbol that was both flexible and reflected unity. The ampersand not only allows him to create extensions from the &pizza brand, it also represents a connection, just as it is used to join words and connect sentences. It was a natural fit for Tribe members to be represented by an ampersand. As Tribe members bond with the brand, they work and advance the vision behind it. More than 50 have bonded so much so they have gotten tattoos of the brand's iconic ampersand—a company benefit offered to any Tribe member.

Because of their impact on the community, Lastoria ensures that Tribe members know how important they are to the overall Tribe. The company invests in their futures, develops and charts career paths, pays well above minimum wage, and gives full-time hours to Tribe members to express in concrete terms how vital they are to the

brand. Tribe members recognize that working at &pizza "is not just a job, it's a career," notes Chloe Rosenthal, Director of Human Resources. That is why the pizza shop has implemented a No Ceiling Policy. Interested Tribe members can advance from hourly worker to shop leader, which entails "being a mini CEO of your own shop," adds Rosenthal.

Lastoria explains that at &pizza "we hire for style and personality. We teach the other parts of it." He admits that this is not always easy to do, but it's important to Lastoria that Tribe members provide a human touch in each pizza shop. As a result, guests come to know Tribe members by name, creating deep interactions. Hiring for uniqueness and allowing Tribe members to be completely self-expressive at work has allowed this goal to be met at every &pizza location.

Because he fearlessly orchestrates all the pieces and continually makes his own rules as he goes along, Lastoria has created today's &pizza business model and relishes its success. Lastoria had conviction in his vision and understood that it may not attract the masses, but it would mesmerize the few. He is convinced that &pizza fans appreciate that the company is doing things differently and redefining the norm. With their every move, Lastoria and his co-founder decided to "make big bets on what we believed in and not what others think."

Just like my friend in the video who danced when everyone else was passively looking on, Lastoria stood out from the crowd and marched to the beat of his own drum. "The weirder you are, the more different that you are, the more unique that you are; I think you have a better chance carving out a niche and a path for yourself," concludes Lastoria. ■

Nona Phinn is the Director of Marketing at the Council of Better Business Bureaus where she focuses on growth of the brand and consumer engagement. She has a diverse background in marketing providing her the skills necessary to develop and drive integrated marketing programs and strategy.

"The weirder you are, the more different that you are, the more unique that you are; I think you have **a better chance carving out a niche and a path for yourself.**"

- Michael Lastoria, CEO and co-founder of &pizza