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Executive Voice: Former Smashburger CEO applies restaurant lessons to spa industry

Former Smashburger CEO applies lessons to spa industry

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David Prokupek may have left Smashburger six years ago and headed east to run companies outside the food industry, but in many ways, he's never left Colorado. And he imparts the lessons he learned as a fast-casual restaurant CEO into his very different successor positions.

The 58-year-old Prokupek, who lives in New York and runs Tampa Bay, Florida-headquartered medical-spa company Ideal Image, still returns to Colorado every couple of weeks. Sometimes he scopes out new retail locations for his growing company. Sometimes he visits friends. Sometimes he meets with the chapter of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) he has been involved with for 19 years, discussing everything from business lessons to how to balance a family life while running a national corporation.

Prokupek first came to live in the Centennial State 20 years ago, when he moved the headquarters of investment banking company Cleary Gull to the Mile High City



KATHLEEN LAVINE, DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

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temporarily before it was purchased by a private-equity firm that itself was then purchased by the Royal Bank of Canada.

Having followed the restaurant industry closely as an investment banker, Prokupek landed at Smashburger at a time when it had just two stores open, transitioned into becoming the chain's CEO and stayed for six years until it had grown to 250 stores.

After an acrimonious parting of the ways that involved a lawsuit surrounding the value of his equity in the company as it was in the process of being sold, Prokupek made a break from the restaurant world and became CEO of New Jersey-based Jackson Hewitt, working to reposition the tax-preparation service as a more everyday-consumer-focused company before its sale in 2018.

After taking some time off, private-equity firm L Catterton approached him about taking the reins at Ideal Image, a now-135-location business specializing in noninvasive treatments like Botox that occupies the No. 1 position in its sector.

The road may have been winding, but his time in Colorado has been the most satisfying professionally and personally, Prokupek said. Never has he guided such a small company to become something so large and international as at Smashburger, and never has he felt so at home as he has among the people and places that mark this state — which is why he keeps flying across the country to come back, even as his family has settled now on the East Coast.

“It’s really where my strongest roots are here,” he said while enjoying lunch at Elway’s in Cherry Creek. “We figured out a way to be in Denver a good long time, and we’re back growing this business here. I’m very open to Denver again.”

Cheeseburgers and medical spas may not seem to have a lot in common, but Prokupek said he’s taken a page out of the Smashburger playbook to grow Ideal Image.

He’s pushed to make Ideal Image more consumer-facing — extending its hours to accommodate visitors, lowering the cost of Botox treatments by one-third and advertising on the radio to emphasize that consumers can get same-day services. The chain is ready to relaunch franchising, a Smashburger staple for growth, after

an eight-year hiatus. Since he took its helm in spring 2018, revenues are growing an average of 100% per month, he noted.

Ideal Image has just two stores in Colorado right now — including one that debuted recently at Colorado Boulevard and Mississippi Avenue — but Prokupek envisions opening four to five more locations in the state over the next 18 months as he plots growth of between 250 and 300 units nationally over the next five years. In some ways, he sees this time as similar to Smashburger’s growth boom.

“It’s pretty exciting to think of being in the second inning [as a company] with 135 stores,” he said.

Ideal Image likely isn’t his final act, he predicted without guessing what’s next. He wanted to be a sports agent when he was growing up in Wisconsin. He likes the idea of working in industries, like restaurants and medical spas, that require people to come in person to enjoy the product, thereby making them “Amazon-proof.”

Whatever his next move is, though, it’s not likely to take him away from Colorado for too long. He’s got too much to do here. And to come back again to all the lessons he learned while working here.

“People regularly ask ‘Can I keep a job?’ But it’s not that unusual to pivot across industries like I have,” he said, smiling. “And I’m pretty proud to have done it and done it well. ... It shows there are ways to go out there and reposition yourself.”

David Prokupek

Title: CEO

Company: Ideal Image

Residence: New York City

Continued tie to Denver: He is part of the Young Presidents’ Organization here that meets monthly and connects older CEOs to younger executives to discuss business, family and transitions, and give each other a support group.

Fun Fact: A huge tennis fan, he attends the U.S. Open annually in New York.

Staying power: Despite an less-than-amicable split with Smashburger six years ago, he still eats the chain's food, especially in airports.

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