

# Fast Casual

## Ideas & Trends For The Fast Casual Restaurant

### Q & A with Saladworks CEO

John Scardapane opened the first Saladworks location 21 years ago in a Cherry Hills, N. J., mall. Although he had little entrepreneurial experience and was told the concept would not work, Scardapane forged ahead and quickly grew the chain to 12 food court locations. He then decided to franchise with a solid executive team.

From those initial 12 locations, Saladworks has grown to 82 locations throughout the East Coast. Fast Casual had the opportunity to ask Scardapane about the chain's journey and the company's focus on healthy franchise / franchisee relationship.

**When you first launched Saladworks in the Cherry Hill Mall food court in 1986, you initially were told it wouldn't work. Now that you have 82 open locations, what do you think when you look back to that time?**

Most business ideas run through the gamut of people telling you it won't work, but, successful entrepreneurs can use that as fuel for their fire to succeed. With Saladworks, I did just that. I didn't just rely on myself to make the concept work—I relied on my team. It was about us rather than me.

When I look back to 1986, it absolutely astonishes me how many people have been touched by Saladworks in a positive way. From customers to franchisees to partners—we have successfully touched many lives by always revisiting our core values and culture as the backbone for our success.

**I saw on a city ranking that Philadelphia is the 16th most physically fit city. Does that translate well for Saladworks in that market?**

The health craze really has caught on, so the ranking ultimately can speak for why Saladworks does well not only in Philadelphia, but in the entire country. When you have a concept that benefits people's lives by offering healthy alternatives in the fast-casual segment, you are offering something that everyone can enjoy, not just a limited customer base.

Our customer base always has been "healthy" in Philadelphia and at all of our locations, but now with everyone paying even closer attention to way they eat, our base has grown exponentially.

**When you talk about the historical growth of Saladworks, you mentioned its strong culture and core values. How important are having those two things in the restaurant industry, especially when you're dealing with concepts that franchise?**

A company's core values and culture are absolutely, 100-percent imperative to the success of your concept and franchise. When I get an inquiry from another franchisor who ask how we have successfully developed such a healthy environment and values, I tell them it is as simple as executing the core values you outline in your strategic plan by following the culture your system builds. Culture is not something that I can build; it is something that is developed by the people your system contains.

**Saladworks added the dinner daypart in 2006 based on key initiatives agreed upon by its Franchise Advisory Council. Has that launch been a successful initiative for the council?**

Our success in the day part-segment has been solid; however, we always are relying on our system and FAC to help develop new initiatives that can be implemented to increase our success.

**While some concepts are trying to stop or limit franchise groups from forming, how has the advisory council benefited Saladworks and its growth?**

Our FAC is very important to our success, especially as we continue our growth. We cannot be out there, in real time, at the store level, so we rely on our franchisees to provide us with store-level insight.

When a system declines to utilize their franchisees, I think it ultimately is because they don't trust their franchisees. That goes back to our culture and core values of recruiting the best people for our system, who ultimately we will look to for advice.

**You also recently traveled to New York with four other concepts for a "Road Tour." What was the idea behind the trip, and would you call it successful?**

The Road Show has been an excellent opportunity for us to network with in the industry. It has given us a chance to take our core values and culture outside of our individual franchise system and into the franchise industry by networking, utilizing and sharing resources.

In Long Island, we had many entrepreneurs reach out to learn more about the industry and our individual brands—so if we educated just one entrepreneur on the potential success of a franchise system, then we certainly succeeded.

**If you were to give any restaurant-industry advice to those just starting out, what would it be?**

I would tell them to utilize the tradeshow circuit in order to find a concept and executive whom they admire so that they can use them as a mentor. When I first started Saladworks, I so wish I could have had someone to help me learn the ropes of the industry. I definitely looked, but no one seemed to want to help me grow and learn. Had I had a mentor, I could have been light-years ahead by relying on their insight for assisting in my experience level. Be a sponge, get out there, find the right person and truly utilize them as your mentor.