



KAYUM DHANANI

MANAGING DIRECTOR

Barbeque Nation Hospitality Limited

HOSPITALITY_FOOD_SERVICE_TOURISM



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Growing a group of 21 restaurants into one of India's largest casual dining restaurant chains and a global food and beverage giant in a short span of 5 years may seem like the stuff of fairytales; unless the visionary behind the growth is Mr. Kayum Dhanani, serial entrepreneur, owner of varied businesses and Managing Director of Barbeque Nation Hospitality Ltd.

Barbeque Nation – which pioneered the concept of live on the table grills in India – was the brain child of his brother Sajid Dhanani. Kayum Dhanani took over the business in 2012, after Sajid passed away. Along with the restaurants, Kayum inherited the various challenges. The biggest challenge for Kayum was the shift from previously managing B2B businesses to a B2C business, in an industry (hospitality) that was entirely unfamiliar to him. There were no national sit-down restaurant chains; the casual dining industry though large, was unorganised, and there were no set benchmarks or defined processes, which meant that there were no precedents to refer to.

Unfazed, Mr. Dhanani started at the basics, interacting with employees at all levels and channelling their feedback to understand the challenges and opportunities for the brand. Over the first crucial year, Kayum took his time to learn everything about the business. Taking a hands-on approach, he personally developed novel solutions to challenges to the business model and management, such as supply chain issues, the lack of qualified manpower to lead regional teams, turnover of senior management and staff training modules. The end goal was to create a dining experience that would satisfy the thousands of customers who walked into his restaurants every day. He created yearly goals for Barbeque Nation and ensured that the company surpassed them, year after year. By 2014, a mere two years after Kayum took over, Barbeque Nation had decreased costs from 38% to 33%, expanded margins and surpassed existing sit down restaurant chains in terms of sales and other parameters. By 2015, the brand opened its 50th milestone outlet, and by 2016, it had opened its 75th outlet.

After gaining expertise and in-depth assessment of the business and the target consumer, Kayum developed his vision for the brand. Today, his goal is to expand Barbeque Nation into a global brand. He believes in the potential of the brand and its business model. Currently, Barbeque Nation is one of the leading restaurant chains in India, with over 5000 employees and 82 operational outlets across India. Barbeque Nation opened its first international outlet in Dubai in 2016. Interestingly, the buzzing city of Dubai happens to be a place where Kayum completed his schooling. The Dubai outlet has met with encouraging response, prompting plans to open other outlets across the UAE. In the short term, the company has expansion plans in various Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and Singapore.

Mr. Dhanani attributes this philosophy to his brother Sajid, for whom 'it was never about making money but about happiness.'



In India, Kayum is optimistic about the huge demand for the brand. "In metros, even after opening five outlets, there is a demand for more," he says. However, it's not just the big cities which hold promise. "The response from smaller cities has been great as well, he says.

Mr. Dhanani's business mantra was simple – invest in people, not businesses. Money will follow happiness. Barbeque Nation invests heavily in staff training, to ensure that customers are given a warm, personalised dining experience, similar to dining at a close friend's house. The brand continually strives to offer more experiences to the customer at existing price points, to keep him engaged and to keep up with his changing tastes. This is not an easy objective, considering the finicky Indian customer's varied tastes and expectations. Yet, Barbeque Nation manages to achieve some of the highest Guest Satisfaction Indices in the hospitality industry, and employees truly take customer service to the next level. Kayum recalls an incident where one member of a family of 6 wanted to eat Chinese (not on offer at Barbeque Nation, at that time), so the staff went to a nearby store to buy Chinese. A great idea, according to Mr. Dhanani, is only as good as its execution.

Ensuring customer satisfaction would be an end in itself for many businessmen, but not for Mr. Dhanani. He believes that success of any brand is driven by happy, involved employees. "Sustainability and profitability in business are an outcome of happy people, be it customers or employees. That is the real measure of success." Creating a strong brand is not merely about the numbers, but a reflection of employee's feelings towards the company.

The most rewarding part of his job, according to Mr. Dhanani is being surrounded by involved employees and working in an atmosphere where 'employees push you to grow'. Kayum believes that while expansion plans and innovative ideas are essential for business, it is the employee's efforts and ownership across all levels that make a business flourish. Barbeque Nation follows an inverted communication flow, where customer facing team members communicate their learnings to management teams that implement strategic decisions based on their inputs. This bottom-up approach ensures that employees feel included and their feedback contributes to the business effectively. Little wonder then, that Barbeque Nation is one of the best employers in India, and one of the award winners of the Economic Times Great Places to Work Award, for the 2nd consecutive year.

Mr. Dhanani attributes this philosophy to his brother Sajid, for whom 'it was never about making money but about happiness'. In his first crucial year of taking over, Kayum found fresh respect for his late brother, when he realized that Sajid had laid the foundations of a company that focussed on the business of happiness, which continues to be the guiding principle and ethos of Barbeque Nation. Today, he describes his brother as his greatest inspiration. This is no small acknowledgment, considering that Mr. Dhanani comes from a family of entrepreneurs.

During his early childhood, Kayum lived in Baroda before moving to Dubai to finish his schooling. At 18, he returned to India and joined his family business. In 2000, he moved to Chennai, away from his Gujarat based family. The move was significant in more ways than one. The entrepreneur in him wanted to see if he could survive on his own, in an unfamiliar business vertical. Not only did he survive, but his business venture Sara Suole Pvt. Ltd., flourished and he went on to explore different industries. Today, he manages 8 different business verticals, many of them first edition businesses that he has created.

Apart from his businesses, the serial entrepreneur is passionate about different cultures. In his free time ("What free time?" he jokes), he travels extensively – both in India and abroad. For him, travel is a collection of memories, interactions with new cultures and experiences that leave him the richer. He believes in capturing memories through his camera, rather than through curious. He is also a deltiologist or a collector of postcards, which he keeps from all his travels. An outdoor person, he engages in activities like off road-ing, biking, snorkelling on his travels and is an avid golfer when he is not travelling.

> Fastest Growing Footwear Exporter Award.

> Becoming the largest Casual Dining Restaurant Chain in the country.

> Taking over Cat Walk brand (India's leading Ladies Footwear Brand).

> The start of Barbeque Nation globalisation.

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