

EXECUTIVEPROFILE

NOT JUST CATERING

Michael Lessing is part of
a sixth-generation family business

Michael Lessing is the chief operating officer of Lessing's, a Great River based hospitality company that got its start in 1890. Today, the company serves more than 40,000 people a day across the northeast at more than 100 corporate, educational, country club, high-end wedding venues, restaurants and, most recently, a pizza franchise. The company's restaurants now include Mirabelle at Three Village Inn in Stony Brook, Sandbar in Cold Spring Harbor and more. And among the wedding venues is Bourne Mansion, where a Vanderbilt once married. There are 15 family members working at the firm, which is now in its sixth generation. Lessing spoke with LIBN about navigating food trends, business and family.

Who started the company? It was started in 1890 by my great-great grandfather, Maxwell Lessing.

Did you grow up thinking you would work in the family business? I actually didn't. I worked in the business as all our family did throughout the summers, but went to school for finance. I started at Bethpage State Park in 1984 as a steward and never left.

Is that where Carlyle on The Green is now? Yes. The state park renewed every five years. We knew the U.S. Open was coming, and we chose not to bid on it. We were running Salisbury on the Green at the same time in Eisenhower Park. It was the right decision at the time. The capital investment was more than we were comfortable with. It wasn't the right time to go into that level of bid. It wasn't in our wheelhouse.

So your financial background paid off? It definitely did.

Do you come from a large family? I have six siblings and my father is one of six. From the fourth generation, it grew quickly. I have 32 first cousins. At Thanksgiving, we had over 100 people. We used the Bourne Mansion – why not?

How has the firm grown from the previous generation? My father Larry and Uncle Jack ran the business until 2010. In 2002 we formed an executive committee, [with four areas]: catering, restaurant group, food service management and finance, so each one of the four of us had a specialty. Now I run the whole company, as well as the catering division. Schmidy Lessing is in charge of business development. Mark Lessing oversees the restaurant and franchise group. Kevin Lessing runs the food service division. Lawrence Lessing runs Blaze Pizza. Scott McKelvey is CFO.

Is Scott McKelvey family too? He is not. That's why we put him in charge of the money.

Most family businesses can't make it to the third generation. What's the secret to making it to six? We worked really hard over the last 10 years to separate the family and the business. We treat the business like a corporation, with policies in place. In the sixth generation, my son Michael is first one in. Anyone in the family that wants to go in has to work two to three years outside the company. My son Michael worked in the Union Square Hospitality Group – that's Danny Meyer's company – at the Blue Smoke and Jazz Standard. His cousin Lawrence worked at the Shake Shack in the theater district.

What other initiatives are you taking? Four years ago we added the Lessing's Franchise Group to the mix. Lawrence Lessing joined us and took on Blaze Fast

Fire'd pizza. It's L.A.-based. We have area development rights for New York and Connecticut.

How do you keep up with the latest food trends? We have a great staff and a great chef and nutritionist on staff. [They] work with us on our trends ... and menu development ... They do a lot of work on menus to stay on top of trends, with lighter, less calorie meals, [with] ingredients that are rich, and pull that into our menus so people can still enjoy popular cuisine. [We used] innovating ways to use vegetables to create classic comfort food. And if you want a great hamburger, we can do that as well.

What's the protocol for family members who want to join the business? They should work outside the company and choose a career in the industry, not just take the easy job but something they want to do. We've worked to keep the family on one side and business on the other. We have an HR director, and there has to be a position open. We won't make one for someone. They have to earn their stripes. Every one of us in the fifth generation started at the bottom. My son came in as an assistant manager. If there's an opening in the business they can apply through our channel as any other manager or assistant manager can.

Do you have other children involved in the firm? My daughter Maggie is working in digital marketing in the city and is very happy with what she is doing.

What advice do you have for leaders of companies that have multi generations? The biggest thing is to have a structure and policies in place as you're growing the business so that it's the same for everyone who comes through. When exceptions are made, that's when issues arise. Our HR director is not a family member, and that's been very helpful. Absolutely get jobs outside the company; that way you get fresh ideas and enthusiasm and passion for the business when they come.

What's next for the firm? We're continuing to look to grow all of our divisions. Our business development team is looking for opportunities for us. We have four operating divisions, and look to grow each of them by 15 to 20 percent a year. You have to have goals.

Is this a good time to be in food services? This is a great time to be in food services. It's always changing. It's always exciting and everybody has to eat – in good times and bad.

What do you recommend to people who want to get into the industry? Do your homework and make sure the math works. It's not a hobby.

— ADINA GENN



Photo by Judy Walker