

Dave Thomas

By: Michael H. Seid, founder and managing director, Michael H. Seid & Associates - MSA

Dave Thomas died yesterday morning. He and I co-authored a book together – Franchising for Dummies – and because of that many of my friends called to make certain I had heard the news and to chat about his passing.

I imagine that most people will think of Dave as the folksy pitchman for Wendy's and I guess that's fair after 800 commercials. But in real life he wasn't the folksy – ah shucks character that appeared on the TV screen. He was just so much grander.

When Dave started Wendy's he challenged a market that most people considered already saturated. In its first decade Wendy's grew faster than McDonald's did in its first ten years and did it at a time when everyone said that there simply was no room for another burger chain. He did it by focusing in on the simple things – a great product, best in class service, a passion for detail, innovation, a genuine love for his people and never cutting corners.

What makes Wendy's great is that you never heard Dave or anyone at Wendy's headquarters blame lower unit sales on the failure of a movie or promotional tie in. Other chains do it all the time but not Dave. His focus and that of Wendy's was on things such as shorter wait times at the drive up windows, better products, cleaner restaurants and his people. You didn't see Dave touting movie tie-ins or children's meal promotions in his commercials because he did not have to. His message was simple – Wendy's sells great tasting food. People believed him because Wendy's delivered on his promise.

Dave wasn't flashy, he wasn't overpowering, he looked you in the eye when you talked and he genuinely listened. He respected people with experience and did not suffer fools easily. An orphan, three step mothers by the time he is 12, on his own before he was 15, living in squalor as a child, working his way up to be a restaurant manager and creating his initial nest egg as a franchisee of Kentucky Fried Chicken. He even wore the white suit like Colonel Sanders. Dave was one of the founders of Arthur Treacher's before he began Wendy's. He had a lifetime of achievements before he was 35. He defined the word entrepreneur.

Dave didn't graduate from a leading college or get any advanced degrees. In fact it was only a few years ago in 1993 that he got his GED and graduated high school. He went to the prom at Coconut Creek High School in Ft. Lauderdale, he and his wife Lorraine were made king and queen of the senior prom and Dave was voted most likely to succeed. The prom picture is in his home office prominently displayed near pictures he took with Presidents of the United States. Next to his family, getting his high school diploma was one of his greatest accomplishments.

He was the most naturally gifted businessperson I have ever known. While other large companies suffer greatly from the loss of a senior executive, Wendy's in the past few years lost two major figures and never missed a beat. His brilliance is that he respected people, held them responsible but let them do their jobs without interference. The culture he created at Wendy's – and that culture is clearly a product of Dave Thomas' personality - is what makes Wendy's such a wonderful brand and such a well-operated business. While Dave will be missed, I can't imagine how the Wendy's organization will miss a beat. That is a part of his legacy – an organization that functions flawlessly after the reins have been transferred from the founder.

Dave was never satisfied with the status quo and innovations that were introduced at Wendy's have changed the way the Quick Service Restaurant industry functions today. If you like pulling up to a drive through at your local restaurant and getting your product in under a minute, thank Dave. If you think that the line you are on is always the slowest line but at Wendy's it just seems your service is a bit faster, thank Dave again. The single line at Wendy's is called a snake, he invented it and other restaurant chains copied it.

Some people have commented that the brand will be hurt because Dave was the spokesman for so long and people will view the company differently in the future. Nonsense! Even though he was the brand's number one spokesman, people didn't view the company as Dave. They always knew that Dave was talking about Wendy's because in his television messages he always focused the audience on the product, the service and the Wendy's brand. Sure the commercials will change but the underlying message won't need to. Dave focused the brand on what was important to the consumer – the quality of the product and the quality of the Wendy's experience. He never allowed himself to get larger than the brand itself.

Dave's passion has long been on other more important matters than Wendy's. He was dedicated to children and to creating programs and raising money for adoption services. Through his hard work the US Postal Service issued a series of postage stamps dedicated to the cause of adoption last year. All of the proceeds from his books including the one I co-authored with him were donated to his Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. Dave was a man of many different levels. Donations in his memory can be sent to the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, P.O. Box 7164, Dublin Ohio, 43017.

Dave leaves behind a large family, his wife of 47 years Lorraine, five children (yes one is nicknamed Wendy) sixteen grand children and a lot of people who will miss him. I am very glad I got the chance to know him.