

BUILT-FOR-LIFE BOOTSTRAPPER BILL FLAGG ZINGS ON ZINGTRAIN

If you met Bill Flagg, you wouldn't be surprised that an interview with Bill Flagg doesn't quite go like a traditional interview might. Bill will ask as many questions as he answers. His are usually the thought provoking kind that are meant to teach you something. Bill will answer questions you didn't ask, not directly anyway. And Bill will extemporize on the topic he thinks you should be talking to him about rather than the one you'd decided on, but it's such interesting stuff that you feel fine with letting go of your agenda and just running with it.

Bill is a wiry, compact man with a lot of happy energy. He isn't buzzing with it, but you wouldn't be able to be dour around him. He told me something from his wild, single days that made me laugh out loud and also characterized him perfectly. Bill would walk up to women and ask them "What do you have going for you besides your good looks?" I think he does the same thing now—but with CEOs, not women!

Bill Flagg's company is called The Felix Fun! It used to be The Felix Fund until he attended The Zingerman's Experience seminar and dropped the D. That's Bill for you.

What made Bill look beyond the food at Zingerman's:

Bill describes an experience on the Zingerman's Deli floor. The staff member offered him a taste of a 100 year old, \$500 a bottle balsamic vinegar. Bill demurred. "There is no way I'm going to buy that," he said.

The staff member insisted. With an energy and enthusiasm that Bill noted with some amazement, the staff member said, "Just taste it. I want you to have this experience. That's all."

What Bill realized then was that this guy truly "got" Zingerman's mission. That impressed him and, Bill being Bill, he decided to find out more.

On Bill's first ZingTrain experience :

"I couldn't believe it when I first came to The Zingerman's Experience seminar.

"I had come as a curious skeptic. There are a lot of similarities between the Felix Fun and Zingerman's: unique and diverse businesses, organic growth, en-

trepreneurial, boot-strapped and planning on sticking around, not built to flip. But you all were much bigger and had stuck around for 30 years. Plus your practices have a good bit of credibility in the business world. I was impressed. I was also a little skeptical—were these people really going to share their 'secret sauce' with me?

"But you guys just roll it all out there. You're not worried about competitors. You're not putting on a public face. There was such a feeling of open-ness about everything—the

seminar material, the tours of the businesses, the staff panel. As a seminar attendee, I did not feel like an audience-member, I felt like a participant. And you guys let me poke around anywhere! There are not too many companies out there that are this naturally open. For me, The Zingerman's Experience seminar was like a gateway drug!

"What I particularly loved is that The Zingerman's Experience seminar is not for people who are looking for recipes and techniques for problem solving. It is a framework for building a great business."

On why Bill and the Felix Fun CEOs are so drawn to ZingTrain:

Bill, and by extension the partners he chooses to work with, have similar values in some ways: they want their businesses to grow organically, they don't want to eventually flip the businesses for money, they think about their businesses in terms of organizational culture and long-term value. And they are huge fans of continuous learning and personal growth.

Bill quotes John Mackey, co-founder of Whole Foods, who credits the growth of Whole Foods to his personal growth, because the organization follows.

"Some people are built for learning," Bill says. "We're like that. In fact, we are your target customer."

"We're excited about ZingTrain because you provide us with a framework on which to improve our businesses. All businesses face motivation and drama issues. What Zingerman's is doing is providing a framework that takes the drama away because the employees feel empowered and complain less because the responsibility to act is shared across all levels of the organization in an Open Book business."

"ZingTrain is totally comprehensive. It lays out the entire framework for building a great business."

"ZingTrain's true value is to entrepreneurs who want to deliver an experience, not just maximize profits, but don't want it to all be on their shoulders. You show us how to do it."

Bill was the co-owner of RegOnline, which he sold to The Active Network in 2007. He hopes to never sell another great company. In 2008, Bill started The Felix Fun to be an angel partner in helping other entrepreneurs grow great companies and thrive through organic growth. His four Felix Fun companies collectively have approximately 100 co-workers, \$15 million in revenue, 25% profitability and are growing 20% per year. When he describes the kind of companies he wants to invest in, Bill uses the tag line – 'Built for Life'. I want to change it to 'Bill-ed for Life!'

Bill Flagg now lives in Boulder, Colorado, but he first encountered Zingerman's as a student at the University of Michigan. Bill is a huge fan of Zingerman's in the most intellectual way. The food isn't irrelevant; he does have a weakness for Landjaegers, amongst other things. It's just that he really, really gets off on good ideas.

Which is all to say that interviewing Bill Flagg turned out to be more of a conversation than a question and answer session. I'll report it to the best of my ability but do excuse the variety of reporting voices and styles – it was the only way I could really capture the conversation.

"ZingTrain is more comprehensive than any books, workshops or seminars I've encountered. A lot of people do a great job in one particular dimension of the business world—Danny Meyer on Hospitality, The Great Game of Business on Open Book Management—but ZingTrain is totally comprehensive. It lays out the entire framework for building a great business—Visioning, Open Book Management, Service. When we sit in your seminars, we're just bouncing off the ceiling with the ideas that you are inspiring. This is the biggest value I have ever seen!"

And here, Bill began to extemporize about ZingTrain:

"If you ask me—ZingTrain is best for smaller to mid-size businesses with 1-2 million dollars in revenue. Or to put it another way, ZingTrain is best for businesses that have leaders who can implement change quickly."

"ZingTrain's true value is to entrepreneurs who want to deliver an experience, not just maximize profits, but don't want it to all be on their shoulders. You show us how to do it."

"In fact, now that I think about it—there should be an application process for your seminars! You should ask people who want to attend to write a vision about what they want to get out of the seminar and how they'll use it and then you can pick and choose who attends!"

We're not about to create an application process for ZingTrain seminars, but thanks for yet another great conversation, Bill!



**Gauri Thergaonkar,
ZingTrain Community Builder**



Visit our website at www.zingtrain.com for a listing of the public seminars we offer.

Interested in setting up a Private Seminar for your business?

Call 734.930.1919 or email zingtrain@zingermans.com

BOOK NOW FOR THE ZINGERMAN'S EXPERIENCE SEMINAR

Chock full of behind the scenes tours of our businesses, panel discussions with our staff who live what we teach and what co-founding partner Ari Weinzweig calls the 12 Natural Laws of Business or in other words, the "secrets" behind what makes Zingerman's a unique and successful organization, this is the seminar where we let it all hang out. Beware! Insiders call this our "gateway" seminar.

\$1500 (includes dinner on Monday night at Zingerman's Roadhouse with co-founder Paul Saginaw)

ONLY TWO SESSIONS LEFT THIS SEASON!

February 3-4, 2014
May 12-13, 2014

Register at www.zingtrain.com