Burned N Turned: Feeding the Fracking Boom

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"There's not a business you can start in North Dakota right now that wouldn't make it."[[1]](#footnote-2)That’s what Blair and his prospective business partners had been hearing. It was mid-summer2011 andfor three months the partners had been discussing and planning a business to exploit this “no-fail” environment. Blairwashome, reviewing their recent trip to Watford City, North Dakota, 500 miles away. They were anxious to get to work and start implementing their idea, a food truck that might expand to a restaurant. What additional analysis should they do before moving ahead?

**Watford City, North Dakota**

When five partners visited Watford City (WC), everything they observed encouraged them.WC was in the middle of the Bakken oil fields. Fracking technology had become effective and oil production had doubled between 2007 and mid-2010. As a result, the population increased by 18% from 2000 to 2010.By 2011, hundreds of mostly men had taken oil-field-related jobs. WC, a town of only 1,750 had no surplus housing. “Man camps,” temporary housing largely made up of trailers, had grown up around the area.The people were there to work, generallythey weren’t interested in becoming part of the community. Many had homes and families elsewhere that they visited when possible and where they planned to return. Traffic flow through the town was clogged with long lines of large trucks interspersed with many pick-up trucks and cars.

This influx of workers needed to eat and due to their long, hard hours and good pay, they ate out frequently. The few restaurants in WC had limited hours and some were closed Sundays, a practice from when it was a sleepier town.

**Burned N Turned**

The business idea began to evolve at an outside barbeque that Blair attended with his friend Sara and her family. Evan, her dad,who previously owned a construction business, had become excited about looking for opportunity in WC. He had heard stories from his stepsonwho was driving trucks through WC and watching the fracking boom at ground zero. Evan had two daughters, Sara and Renee,both with degrees in business and experience in services,who were excited about finding a business opportunity.

The family learned about Blair’s reputationas an excellent cook among his friends and family and his years of experience in catering. During winters, he worked for a company serving meals at Phoenix, Arizona area events including the world-renowned Barrett-Jackson auto auction. Summers found him feeding large numbers of wildland fire fighters acrossthe American West.

Blair’s primary contribution to the partners’ efforts washis catering experience. The business would start as a food truck and potentially expand to a restaurant. The concept they began to focus on was “good food fast” to serve those who worked in the local oil fields. Their goal was to have an attractive and variable menu of mainly Mexican food items, made to order, and in the customer’s hand within three minutes, at eleven dollars average cost. They plannedto be open from breakfast until 11 PM,longer than competitors, and open seven days a week – as the oil fields were operating at all hours every day.

Thename, Burned N Turned,was truckers’ slang: to get the delivery out quickly, pick up another load and turn around for home. It was meant to appeal to truckers and oil rig workers, the core target market.

When the partners visited WC, none of them thought that it would be a wonderful place to live since there was little community andthe famous North Dakota weather. But there was clearly opportunity. When they walked around town looking at restaurants, all seemed packed. One of the nicer restaurants had a 45-minute wait during supper. Six of the seven partners wouldmove to WC tostaff the food truck.They decided there would be no additional employees for at least six months. They would work in shifts so that each person would work two weeks and then have two weeks off. This would make WC tolerable.

They created a business plan for the food truck, written mostly by Evan’s daughter, Renee. Start-up funding was offered by Evan’s sister, Pam, to the tune of $75,000. Evan’s stepson connected them to the owner of a truck maintenance shop who agreed to lease them a roadside lot next door, an ideal location with quick and convenient access,especially for large trucks.

**Time to implement, or is it?**

As Blair said later, “When we went to see it, it was proof. The competition was at its limits, they couldn’t serve all the potential customers they could have had. They were doing the best they could, but it wasn’t enough. This town needed us. We had our proof, we could see it. Their business was not going to go down because of us, the demand was tremendous. We saw a ‘can’t lose’ situation. We could see by the traffic, it was a boom. We all knew it was going to work – there was never a doubt we were going to succeed.”

After returning home to Bozeman, Montana, the partners’ enthusiasm was even higher. They were wrapped up in what Blair called a “boom mentality.” Everything they observed on their visit, the news items they had been seeing for several years, and the data Renee included in the business plan pointed to a solid opportunity. Further, Evan and another of the partners, Matt, had just advised the partners that in Texas they had found the ideal food trailer for Burned N Turned. It was in very goodcondition and had all the tools and equipment they would need to serve their potential customers with high-quality food fast. This news only added to their boom mentality. They assured themselves that their endeavor would be a success – even if they ran into set-backs they would be able to overcome them. Blair’s enthusiasm continued to grow, and his excitement for the new business was bubbling over. Was there anything about the decision they had overlooked?

1. Nathan Pittman, quoted in *CNN Money U.S.* Oct. 20, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)