

Put Down the Doughnut. Take a Piece of Fruit

Looking for something healthier than what's in the snack machine? Call The FruitGuys. Chris Mittelstaedt's San Francisco-based business provides more than 1,000 clients with fresh fruit as an alternative to the usual break-room fare. With revenue of \$7.7 million, the 12-year-old company claimed position 2,001 on the 2009 Inc. 5000. —Darren Dahl

I had lots of friends who were working long hours at dot-coms and surviving on chocolate-covered espresso beans and Jolt Cola. I thought it would be a good idea to sell them fresh fruit. My goal was simply to get people to put down the doughnut and pick up a peach instead.

With a company name like The FruitGuys, people thought we were a joke. So I started dressing up in a banana suit. It actually got people to take us seriously.

The dot-com crash was a turning point. I was \$100,000 in debt and was forced to reset my expectations and do everything I could to save the business, including laying many people off. I was sick to my stomach for weeks.

We want the company to grow and make profits, but we also consider ourselves social entrepreneurs. We're big advocates for farmers and local agriculture. We have buyers knocking on doors off country roads looking for new and unique fruits and vegetables.

I am an omnivore, but I haven't had fast food or soda in 12 years. I am definitely trying to live the goals and values I have for the business.

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