

TOBACCO BUSINESS

A man with short, graying hair, wearing red-rimmed glasses, a blue checkered blazer, a white shirt, and a pink patterned tie. He is holding a cigar in his right hand and looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred indoor setting with warm lighting.

GOING BIG WITH BOUTIQUE

Tabacalera USA's Rafael Nodal on why all cigars are boutique

MARKET DISRUPTORS
The boutique cigar brands you need to watch

TPE22
Three things to do to prepare for next year's show

Minding Her Business

By Antoine D. Reid



Desiree Sylver is bringing her own flavor and business sense to the cigar industry with the launch of Drunk Chicken Cigars, a fowl-inspired brand that's boutique in size but every bit premium.

Desiree Sylver is a busy woman. As she's answering the many questions for this interview, she's also completing many of the day's tasks that are necessary to keep her business, Drunk Chicken Cigars, moving forward. The sound of packing tape being pulled from the spool and applied to boxes containing recent orders serves as some sort of industrial musical background noise. She's also busy making plans for an upcoming event she plans on attending. Multitasking is all part of the game for Sylver, who became one of the latest entrepreneurs to enter into the premium cigar industry with a brand that's getting a considerable amount of attention and conversation because of its unique name.

Sylver was born in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. She recalls her childhood as being fun. "I feel like we had the best generation ever," she says. "We were a little bit freer. We didn't have COVID or things of that nature."

Long before she launched her cigar brand, Sylver worked in the federal government as a civil servant. With a Ph.D. in organizational leadership, she served as a professor at Strayer University and was an instructor within several different companies. Teaching and being a professor was all part of Sylver's retirement plan. That is, until cigars came into her life.

Sylver's ex-husband smoked cigars, and she'd regularly find herself in a cigar lounge for what became their date nights. He'd go into the humidor and would come back with a cigar for both himself and for her. While she didn't know much about what she was smoking, she enjoyed cigars, so much so that when they divorced, lounges continued to be where she spent some of her leisure time and also learning more about the products she was smoking.

"I was totally shocked when I saw inside a humidor for the first time. I had no idea there were so many different cigars in there," she explains. "The humidor manager was like, 'What do you like to smoke?' I was like, 'I don't know, whatever my ex-husband handed me!' The guy in the humidor explained the wrapper, binder and fillers to me, and explained the different notes and stuff. So I became very interested in trying to learn as much as I could about the cigars and trying to figure out what I liked to smoke.

"When I came home, I had probably about 10 or so cigars. I started to research them and look up the wrapper, binder, filler, and that's when I realized [they] all were so different. I wanted to find out what I liked, so I did a spreadsheet and started to put the wrapper, binder and filler in it and took notes on what I liked."

Photography by Kristen Gonzalez

Sylver's self-exploration of cigars began nearly seven years ago and has since developed into much more than a hobby—it's become her business. Sylver shares how her curiosity about cigars helped build a brand that, while small, has every intention of making a big splash in today's cigar scene.

The Good and the Bad

Sylver had no intention of ever starting her own cigar brand. When she reentered the dating scene, her now-fiancé, Rico Reed, also smoked cigars. In addition to traveling together, the two smoked cigars together as well. There was a running joke between them that one of them was going to have to quit smoking because of how many cigars they each smoked each day and how expensive the hobby was becoming. During one of their trips, they came across some cigar rollers who informed them of some current tobacco they had to work with. Sylver and her fiancé explained what they liked and asked the rollers to create a couple of blends for them. Having cigars made specifically for their palates and preferences helped them indulge in something they enjoyed in a more budget-friendly way.

These cigars were inexpensive to make, but the tobaccos used in the blends were very much premium. Now, Sylver and her fiancé had their own cigars to smoke in addition to those that they would buy in the lounges they spent time in. In the lounge, friends would approach the couple and ask them what they were smoking. After telling them it was a cigar they made, they'd offer some sticks as samples. The friends smoked these special blends and would express how good they were and made the recommendation that they try to sell those cigars on their own. Suddenly, a business was born.

"We heard that so much that we started investigating what that would look like," said Sylver. "We went to some lounges, and the lounge owners would tell us, 'Yeah, we would sell it.' From there,

we had to figure out what we needed to do. We talked to a lot of lounge owners, tried to figure out what works, what doesn't work. The constant thing was that we needed to change the bands on the

cigars, and so we did that and we've been selling ever since."

There was much work required to start a new cigar company. Sylver and Rico relied on retailers to help them figure out how to successfully launch their brand. They found that most cigar lounge owners were willing and more than happy to answer any questions they had to ask. As they made tweaks to their brands, Sylver and Rico would go straight to retailers to ask for feedback, seeking both good and bad comments and thoughts.

"I'd never want to hear just the good stuff because if I'm hearing just the good stuff, then I'm never going to be able to make corrections or updates or anything of that nature," Sylver explains. "I needed to hear everything so that I was aware. I'm an information junkie, and so I just asked a lot of questions, and people were willing to answer the questions."

Asking other manufacturers for their advice and input on production issues and price point was also part of the process. Early on in her business, Sylver understood how important it was to figure out the manufacturing issues. How much was it going to cost to get future cigars made? Were there any production limitations she needed to be aware of? What shipping time

frames should she expect? She knew that her company's customer service would be defined by how well she would be able to get product to her customers, so these were the crucial questions and problems she needed to solve early on in her business.

What it Means

Another issue that had to be tackled was what to name their new brand. While speaking with a manufacturer early on, Sylver was



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asked what she'd name her cigar brand. She told the manufacturer that she and her fiancé were considering calling it Mad Dog or something along those lines. When asked what that name meant to her, she responded it didn't mean anything; it was just a name.

"He said 'No, no, no. A name has to mean something! You have to have a story behind it.' So again, here was another lounge owner and manufacturer being very, very helpful in trying to help us navigate the waters of the cigar industry," says Sylver. "We sat there smoking the cigars that they made, and he said, 'Well, you need to come up with another name.' So we're sitting there talking, and we both said, 'Drunk Chicken.' He said, 'I don't know what that means, but that's the name of your cigars. Tell me the story behind it.' So we told him that our backyard's named the drunk chicken and kind of joked about it. He said, 'That's perfect. That's it. That's what you should go with.' He said it made sense to him, and it would make sense to others. And so we did."

Sylver's philosophy is that life is too short to sit around and cry over a lot of things, thus the name Drunk Chicken Cigars worked for this new business venture. Because the name is a bit kitschy, some have questioned the legitimacy of the brand and its products when they first hear it. People not taking the brand seriously because of the name is another issue that is just part of the business process. Sylver has been told that if she'd change the name of her company, she might do better. She agrees to some extent but also feels there's no certainty that a different name would necessarily make business any better. Drunk Chicken Cigars is here to stay.

The poultry theme carries over into the names of the different cigar lines as well: the DCO (Drunk Chicken Original) the Mother Clucker, the Fat Hen, Living the Dream and Sweet Dreams. These cigars are all based on Sylver and Rico's palates and what they enjoy eating and drinking. Rico prefers 6 x 60 cigars while Sylver likes Lanceros. Rico likes full-bodied cigars and Sylver prefers cigars that are more on the medium side. When creating the blends, Sylver wanted a cigar that was spicy and would pair with red wine—and something that was quick to smoke. Mother Clucker had the spice Sylver wanted, and Living the Dream is a smooth smoke that could be enjoyed in a short amount of time. Sweet Dreams was developed after receiving the request for something sweet. Discussions with lounge owners also led to the development of several other cigars, including the Egg-Treme and the event-only Homicidal Hen.

Five of the blends were launched right before the pandemic, and with in-person events unable to happen, Sylver relied on virtual herfs and Zoom meetings to get feedback on her products. This feedback helped to refine the company's marketing plans, giving them retail and consumer-generated tasting notes and descriptions of their



Strategic collaborations with companies such as spirits brand Uncle Nearest have helped Drunk Chicken Cigars scale its business.

cigars. Everything Sylver and her team does is a collaboration, and the feedback received from customers is how Drunk Chicken Cigars is quickly becoming a favorite among cigar enthusiasts looking for something different to smoke.

Timing has also played a role in Drunk Chicken Cigars' gradual rise. With the company launching during 2020, Sylver and her company were sought out by those looking to support Black-owned and female-led businesses.

"At the time, while there was Tres Lindas [Cubanas Cigars], led by two Afro-Cuban sisters, I think I was maybe the only other one that was visible," she says. "Now I'm sure there were other ones, but at that time, it just felt like we were the only two companies out there that were female, Afro-owned. It kind of propelled us."

As a female brand owner, Sylver has also encountered her fair share of questions regarding her knowledge of cigars and about being a brand owner. While this aspect of the business has been frustrating, she chooses to focus on getting to yes rather than any nos she may receive. She also incorporates her own experiences into her brand, making sure her company and its cigars appeal to the masses rather than a segment of the industry.

"I do make a conscious effort to make sure that I'm inclusive, because one of the things that I love about the cigar industry is that I can go to just about any lounge, sit down, and the person across from me can be a different color, race, orientation, religion, whatever, and we can have a great conversation," she says. "That's what I try to focus on: making sure that we're inclusive because I do believe we're a cigar company first."

The Real Competition

Though Drunk Chicken Cigars is small in size, Sylver isn't concerned with competing with anyone other than herself. There may be bigger companies in the cigar category, but Sylver knows competing with them is a losing game. Trying to keep up with others in the industry will take her focus away from her own brand and business, and keeping up with so-called competitors will lead to her going bankrupt, she explains. She's focused on things that she can control: creating a quality cigar and customer service. As someone who's obsessed with data and analytics, Sylver is competing with others by asking what she feels are the right questions—questions that will ultimately lead to Drunk Chicken Cigars putting out products that appeal to a wide range of cigar enthusiasts and that will help expand her business.

Like any brand owner, she's watching what's happening with regulations and has a lawyer on hand to help navigate the legal waters of cigars, but she's more focused on the bigger picture: future growth. At this year's Premium Cigar Association (PCA) trade show, Drunk Chicken Cigars opened 27-30 new accounts. She also got to spend time with other brand owners who have offered her advice on what to do in order to achieve success.

"At PCA, Matt Booth [of Room 101] gave me great advice," says Sylver. "Basically, he reminded me that customer service was important and said he felt like when you have less customers, you can be a better company. Hiram & Solomon ... I love them. I feel like they've adopted me. They've been super, super nice in providing advice. I met them in Pennsylvania and had them smoke my cigar. They gave me feedback, saying they loved the cigar and that I was doing the right thing. Every time I see them, they both are very encouraging. Right before PCA, I actually told them that I felt like I couldn't do this. They said, 'No, you're doing the right thing. You will be OK. Keep up the good work.'"

Many don't see or understand the work required to own and run a cigar brand, Sylver explains. There's very little "fun" to be had for a brand owner, but she's OK with that—this is her business, and she's willing to put in the hours and effort necessary to make Drunk Chicken Cigars a success. It's why she's willing to be "on" at all times to promote her brand and why little things, such as people calling her company by the wrong name (it's Drunk Chicken, not Drunken Chicken) don't phase her that much. Her company may be small and boutique, but there's nothing small about her vision of the future. Drunk Chicken Cigars has a future in the industry, and despite being boutique, from its products to its customer service, it's a premium cigar company through and through. **TB**



Sylver named her brand Drunk Chicken Cigars after her backyard and its fowl occupants.

Defining Your Customers

Desiree Sylver, owner of Drunk Chicken Cigars, loves analytics and using data to give her business a competitive edge. Here are three things you should be tracking regularly in order to better understand and serve your customers.

- **Who's buying?** Who are your customers and why are they buying your products? Don't assume you know why they are buying from you. Identifying who your customer can help you better market and sell your product.
- **Buying frequency.** Are your customers buying your product just once or are they coming back for more? You need to understand your customers' buying habits. If they're only buying once, focus on finding out why they aren't making another purchase.
- **What's trending?** What's selling right now, what's hot, what's not? These are questions that should always be top of mind for you and your company. Understanding trends can help you fine-tune your product and service offerings and give your business more focus.