

THE POPCORN GUY



"To me, popcorn is a blank canvas," says Brian Taylor, hanging out at the office with Kernel Season, the company's mascot.

Coming to a theater near you

BRIAN TAYLOR, 28
President, Kernel Season's, Elk Grove Village

What can't you live without? My wife, Katie.

Who is your biggest mentor? My grandpa, Armand Dann, who's shown me how to live a good life.

What's your dream job? Astronaut.

What's your favorite way to relax? Hiking or tennis.

What's your biggest vice? Twizzlers.

At first I was just seasoning my microwave popcorn for personal enjoyment. To me, popcorn is a blank canvas. I went spicy—some jalapeño powder, paprika, garlic, even wet seasonings like soy sauce.

I was living in an apartment by myself while studying philosophy at the University of Michigan. I would have popcorn tastings where I would invite my friends and neighbors over to try new flavors. My friends would ask me to make batches for them.

I loved barbecue-flavored potato chips, and I wanted that flavor for popcorn. But I couldn't find it on the Internet, except in bulk, and that's how I got my business idea.

In 1999, I hired professional flavor technologists to create the recipes. Some of them worked for the big spice companies, others were freelancers. It cost me \$7,000 to start the business—money I had earned teaching tennis and selling Cutco knives.

I was ready to launch the company in 1999, before my senior year in college. We had the logo, the packaging and the flavors. But I waited,

graduated in 2000, then moved home with my parents in Highland Park.

I started with movie theaters. The first theater was Landmark's Renaissance Place Cinema in Highland Park. I gave samples to the manager to pass out. Weeks later, I got a call from the manager of a Landmark theater in downtown Chicago who wanted them. By then,

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our products were blended and packed in professional facilities; I wasn't blending them in my kitchen anymore.

In 2001, we had \$30,000 in revenue, but more than that in expenses. By 2003, it was \$2 million in revenue. We don't disclose our revenues anymore, but we've been growing by 50% the last couple of years. We have 10 employees. And in February, we moved into a new, 31,000-

square-foot building in Elk Grove Village because we outgrew our space on Western Avenue.

Now we're in 15,000 grocery stores, including Wal-Mart, Kroger, Safeway and Food Lion. And we're carried in every Blockbuster nationwide and at 12,000 theater screens. Theaters that buy the product see a 2% to 4% boost in popcorn sales. Some

of them sell the seasonings in individual containers as well. We just added those packages last year.

We have 14 flavors—barbecue is our least-popular flavor by far. It's a good barbecue flavor, but there's a disconnect in people's minds between barbecue and popcorn. We do better with flavors like white cheddar and nacho.

As told to Steve Hendershot