

## Starting From Scratch: Emma Roberts, Capers Catering

by Carol Patton

**Culinary talent and an up-beat attitude have pushed Emma Roberts' Capers Catering to the top.**

About five years ago, while planning menus for her fledgling catering business, Emma Roberts was watching an old television movie about a bank heist. When the television robbers referred to the bank job as a caper, something struck her about the name. She knew instantly that "Capers" would be a perfect name for her company.

But unlike the characters in the movie, Roberts has been able to pull off her job—establishing a successful catering company in the heart of Boston. With eight full-time employees, the caterer generates approximately \$1 million in annual revenues from clients such as law and money management firms, advertising agencies and the local public radio station.

Somewhat humble about her accomplishments, Roberts adds that her success was simply a mixture of a healthy dose of hard work and a little bit of luck sprinkled with family tradition.

### Hungry and Eager

Roberts' story began in the late eighties, when she worked as an account executive for an advertising agency. At the time, the local economy was spiraling downward.

Many businesses were hit hard, especially her own employer, which was laying off dozens of workers nearly every week. Without any intention of sticking around for her notice, Roberts quit her job and turned to what she knew and loved best—food.

As a young girl growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, Roberts and her father would shop at rural farm stands and cheese and butcher shops every Saturday in search of fresh ingredients for the family's weekly gourmet dinner. In fact, several times a year, Roberts would travel with her family to Boston and New York City to dine at top-notch restaurants.

Even after graduating from Denison University in Ohio in 1988, Roberts continued to nurture her innate culinary talents by experimenting with new foods and creating original dishes. So when

she found herself out of a job at the age of 27, the decision to enter the food industry was about as natural for her as following a recipe. She enrolled at the Cambridge School for Culinary Arts in 1992 and graduated the following year with honors.

Her newly-learned skills in tow, Roberts began working for, and learning from, several local caterers. "I was unique because I could cook and



do office work," she recalls. "I was able to learn both sides of the business very quickly because I had so much business background that people wanted me to work in their office."

After nearly two years of helping caterers build their own businesses, she decided it was time to go solo. With some valuable experience tucked under her belt, along with \$15,000 from personal savings and loans from family members and friends, Roberts launched Capers in 1995.

Roberts began working out of her kitchen in her one bedroom apartment and, with husband Bill, struggled to live off his modest income. Each day, she cold-called between 50 and 75 companies. Typically, 10 organizations requested brochures and after some follow up, a few agreed to meet with her.

“I was so hungry and eager that I worked around the clock,” she says, adding that she didn’t draw a paycheck for nearly three years. “I really didn’t have time to be scared or intimidated.”

Roberts was also a regular at events and meetings sponsored by local civic and professional groups like the Chamber of Commerce and Small Business Association, where she handed out business cards and generated new leads. Little by little, clients began to accumulate. About five months later, Roberts hired her first chef so she could concentrate on selling events. By the time Capers celebrated its first birthday, the catering company could afford to purchase new commercial kitchen equipment and soon moved into a 1,200 square-foot commissary.

That’s when the pressure really began to escalate, remembers Roberts, explaining that she had to increase the company’s revenues by between 30 and 50 percent to pay for the leased space. But luckily, she admits, she was able to rely upon many friends and business acquaintances to help her win jobs.

As the company’s volume grew, so did its staff. Another chef was soon hired, and later an office manager. Roberts continued to focus on sales and began adopting creative sales techniques. An example of this creativity took place when a bride would request catering information, the company would respond by delivering the top tier of a wedding cake to her along with sales brochures.

“We also do a lot of tastings,” adds Roberts. “When we visit our clients, we always bring plenty of food that they want to see even though they never asked for it. We make sure to never show up empty-handed.”

### Planning for Success

At this point, Capers has become so successful that it can afford to turn business away. Since the catering company makes all of its products from scratch and only caters full-scale events, Roberts has had the luxury of declining requests for drop-off dinners and solicitations from clients with unrealistically low budgets. Likewise, Capers will only cater up to three events, totaling 1,000 guests, per evening because Roberts feels she would rather earn less than sacrifice customer service.

“A lot of caterers just take on business because they want to make the money that night and maybe each event doesn’t turn out perfectly,” she

says. “We’d rather have one event be perfect than five events be so-so.”

That level of service has helped the business flourish and distinguish itself from competitors, says Roberts. The company, for instance, doesn’t bat an eye when customers request numerous meetings for small events or fax old family recipes they want recreated for their party. Capers will even assign personal waiters for high maintenance clients during events and offer them assistance with invitations, flowers and entertainment.

“Because I was an account manager, I’m more in tune with customer service,” says Roberts, who keeps a detailed client list, even including their dog’s name. “So when I call and ask them how [their dog] Pooky is, they really appreciate it. They want to know that you know them.”

Clients also demand continuity in service—when they can get it. While the off-premise catering industry is known for its revolving staff door, Capers has had “absolutely no employee turnover” since it was created. To help promote its services, the company also distributes a bi-annual newsletter, featuring unique ideas for events and unusual or new venues, to more than 2,000 clients and potential customers.

For all of Roberts’ efforts, Capers has certainly been noticed, especially by *Boston* magazine, which was so impressed, it awarded the company as “Best of Boston” last year. The all-woman catering company is also well-known for its generous, philanthropic spirit because it caters numerous fund-raising events for worthwhile causes such as AIDS, public television and the local women’s hospital.

Looking back, Roberts says her only regret is that she didn’t obtain additional financing earlier. Launching her company with too little capital, she says, limited its ability and initially stunted its growth. Meanwhile, to accommodate its rapidly growing client base, the company is scouting new, larger spaces, up to 4,000 square-feet, for its commercial kitchen. Still, regardless of the company’s size, Roberts believes it will always remain true to its own spirit.

Says Roberts: “When I talk to people, they know I love this business and can trust me with the most important day of their life.” c|m

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