

From Suits to Tattoos: The Entrepreneur Behind Moncton's Ego Studios

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Mike Coleman Image: Submitted

MONCTON – Mike Coleman may be known as the owner of one of Moncton's newest tattoo and piercing studios, but for the first 20 years of his career, he was a suit.

After completing a kinesiology degree at the University of New Brunswick and a masters in sports management at the University of Ottawa, he went to work in marketing for a little company called Gillette, which was acquired about 10 years in by Proctor & Gamble.

“You don’t get a whole lot more corporate than Proctor & Gamble. It’s a company that’s a couple hundred years old,” Coleman says. “It’s kind of traditional I suppose.”

Yet it was an environment where Coleman thrived.

“What I enjoyed about it was having the support of a big company behind you, representing quality and really strong brands. One of the things about both companies is they are both very strong brand builders,” he says. “It’s exciting to work with brands that are internationally recognized and have a strong reputation that proceeds you in everything that you do.”

Coleman’s job was to create a national retail sales organization. They were the people who met with retailers directly in stores to represent their brand and products. They worked to ensure the company’s brands were positioned properly to retail and that any promotional events were executed effectively. Coleman first built this team at Gillette, but when he moved to Proctor & Gamble, he was tasked with creating a new one. He successfully built a team of around 100 employees, but after five years, he says the company was looking to take another direction.

“They decided to go in a different direction with retail execution and they wanted to look at more third party involvement,” Coleman says. “Very few companies now have their own retail sales forces on the road, because it can be more cost-effective to go to a third party that’s representing multiple brands and create more efficiency in the marketplace and save more money that way.”

This meant Coleman and his team were no longer needed. The transition happened in phases, but Coleman knew what was coming.

“My experience with Proctor & Gamble during the last five years was after building the organization, it was my responsibility to start eliminating the organization,” he says.

At one point during the transition at Proctor & Gamble, he was given the opportunity to do the job remotely, so he decided to move back to New Brunswick to be with family. He says it was around this time that he started to feel the corporate world wasn’t for him.

“That was a signal to me that I needed to do something a little bit different. I enjoy building a team. My personality is one where it’s about building a team, building trust, creating an organization that’s built on a real sense of personal touch,” Coleman says. “Once you start eliminating those things, it’s a new and unique experience I haven’t been through before and when I got to the end of it, I was exhausted. It had taken a toll on me and I decided that I needed something different as a result of that.”

After chatting with his brother-in-law who was making a go of it in the franchise business, Coleman took control of a few Booster Juice franchises in the province.

“That was sort of dipping my toe into the entrepreneurial world,” he says. “Then it was ‘ok if we’re going to go down this road, is there something we can create that is uniquely ours, something that could be repeatable once you create one?’”

Coleman started looking at the market and businesses that were currently doing well as franchises but perhaps weren’t franchised in the past. He uses the massage and frozen yogurt markets as examples.

“Those are two industries that have been around for a long time but have seen some growth because they started to do things differently,” he says. “So that got me thinking about what other opportunities are there out there that exist today that maybe existed in a similar way … that need to be refreshed or changed.”

That’s what got him looking at the tattoo industry. It’s more popular than ever before yet the model hasn’t changed much.

“The people getting tattooed today are very different from the people that got tattooed 20, 30 years ago,” Coleman says. “It’s become very mainstream but the retailer had not evolved with the consumer. The consumer is now a mom. It’s much more female than it used to be, and tattoos now are less about self-expression and more about important, personal things that are happening in someone’s life.”

“As a result of that, I thought there was an opportunity to create a space and an environment in a location that serviced that client more than that client was being serviced today.”



Inside Ego Studios. Image: Submitted

That's how Coleman came up with [Ego Studios](#), which opened in June 2016. Located on Mountain Road in Moncton, the studio offers tattoo, piercing and hair services. He says the shop's commercial location and traditional salon services help make tattoos and piercing, which used to be alternative forms of self-expression, more approachable.

"It brings the average everyday consumer in and gives them a little bit of exposure to the other services," Coleman says.

There is also a business benefit to the model.

"I don't depend on one service to drive the business," Coleman says. "Having four separate streams of revenue allows me to balance services and balance financials in a way that a regular tattoo studio wouldn't."

The tattoo industry is one that's rich with history and culture and Coleman is well aware that his model isn't for everyone, nor will every artist want to work for him. He says those who do are often older with family, a hefty portfolio and regular clientele.

"The tattoo industry has existed the same way for a long time and that's generally how the artists like it. They like the culture they created. They're very comfortable because for them it's about the art, it's less about business. It's about art and they have a bit of celebrity associated with what they do too," he says.

"For me to open up a studio the way I have, it's very different from what exists and it doesn't appeal to every artist. They see it as a little bit too mainstream and they it a little too much as a business. It's not a slam-dunk for any artist to come in and work for me."

Though going from corporate suits to tattoos and piercings was a huge leap, there's one thing from his Proctor & Gamble days that still remains with Ego: the love of branding and building a team.

"Brand building and marketing is something that's very important to a young business and ensuring that we're building the brand properly," Coleman says. "Like any business, it's always about the

people. The human resources component, the building of a team, motivating a group of people, those things are common through a big company or a small company.”

The long-term plan is to open more Ego Studios throughout Atlantic Canada.

“My long-term vision is to always have more than one, to grow the business so that it has multiple locations across Atlantic Canada,” Coleman says. “What I’m enjoying the most about this is that building something is both scary and it’s also a lot of fun … I think we do have something here that actually sustainable.”