The Business Builder





Serial entrepreneur Robert Leary, '77, is making his mark across businesses and industries — tackling Broadway, information technology, and a sports-drink alternative.

By Natalie Missakian

DURING THE DOZENS OF SEASONS ROBERT LEARY, '77, SPENT COACHING YOUTH SPORTS TEAMS, he noticed too many of his young athletes were gulping down sugary sports drinks to quench their thirst after practices and games. Worried about the health effects of chugging so many empty calories, the father of four brainstormed with two other sports dads to develop a healthy — yet still tasty and refreshing — alternative. One that would not only hydrate, but curb hunger and boost energy, too.

They started a company and came up with Trimino, a protein-infused water with 7 grams of protein; the full recommended daily allowance of major B vitamins; zero sugar, fat, or caffeine; and only 28 calories per 16 oz. bottle. "It's a still [noncarbonated] beverage, which is good in the athletic context because you can chug it," Leary says. "But the product is great for everybody. Our biggest segment of the market is women on the go."

Leary and co-founders Casey Hoban and Peter Dacey, all from Guilford, Conn., worked with a flavor chemist in New Jersey to create the drink, and fine-tune the flavors and mix of ingredients. They started selling it around six years ago to local mom-and-pop delicatessens. "We were doing self-delivery, just knocking on doors. It was insane," says Leary.

But when the company landed a distribution deal in 2016 with Polar Beverages, the product took off. Today, the sports-drink alternative, which first hit grocery shelves in 2014, can be found in 90 percent of supermarkets in New England, including large regional chains like Big Y, Stop & Shop and ShopRite, according to Leary. The drink, which retails for about $2 a bottle and comes in seven fruit flavors, has also broken into markets in

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Texas, Florida, and Southern California and is sold online in 49 states via the company website and Walmart.com.

Leary's foray into the beverage business is the latest chapter in a long and fruitful entrepreneurial career. A retired health care software executive, he also owns Vineyard Point Associates, a boutique investment firm specializing in health care and technology startups and "other off-the-wall projects," according to his LinkedIn profile. He also produces film and theater productions and, yes, is even a Tony Award winner (and two-time nominee).

Barefoot and wearing khaki shorts and a tropical-print shirt that belie the chilly temperature outside, Leary sits on a couch in the living room of his waterfront home one morning last November, looking relaxed as he chats about his eclectic career and his time at Southern. To his right, an expanse of windows offers a view of Long Island Sound stretching to the horizon. Behind him, three glass cabinets display an assortment of colorful crystals and other geological specimens. He traces his passion for collecting rocks and minerals to his years as an earth science major at Southern.

"You want to see something really cool?" he asks as he heads to his foyer, where a small black meteorite sits on a pedestal. He says he purchased it during a trip to Park City, Utah, for the Sundance Film Festival. "I saw it and fell in love with the piece. It was one of those I had to have," he says.

Leary grew up in East Haven, Conn., and got his first taste of the business world with a paper route when he was 12. He followed his older brother to Southern in 1972 because he wanted a school that was affordable and close enough to commute from home.

He paints a picture of his younger self as a bit of an academic slacker, cracking jokes about how he graduated on the "five-year-plan" with a "gentleman's B-minus," although it was clearly no obstacle to his future success. After initially enrolling as an economics major and hating it, he switched to earth science because he enjoyed the subject in high school.

"I was working at least one job if not two, so those were crazy times for me," he says. He paid most of his own way through school with a job as a toll collector on Interstate 95 in West Haven (at a time when toll booths still dotted Connecticut's highways).

Challenging as those days were, he had the foresight to imagine a future in computers. While Southern didn't offer a computer science major at the time, he loaded his schedule with as many programming classes as he could. It would pay off handsomely.

His entrepreneurial journey actually began with a "temporary" software engineering job at Yale during his final year at Southern. "They promised me two days of consulting work, and it turned into a 30-year career," he says. Leary worked for a health services research program that was developing new methods for measuring and managing health care — an experience that would later provide the framework for his first startup.

After doing similar work for a few years in the private sector, in 1980, he struck out with his wife Renee, also a Southern grad (Class of 1975), launching HSS, a company that developed software for hospital payment. He eventually sold the company, bought it back, then ran it independently for 11 years before it caught the eye of health insurance behemoth United Healthcare, which acquired it in 2005.

Leary retired two years later, but not for long. "All I wanted to do was coach lacrosse and read books," he remembers. "And that lasted for about two years until my daughter graduated from NYU and wanted to go into the movie business."

That's when Leary got involved in the entertainment industry. So far, he has financed around 15 movies, some produced by his daughter, along with a handful of off-Broadway and Broadway productions. Among his film credits are *Stanford Prison Experiment*, *All These Small Moments*, *7 Days to Vegas* and — one of his favorites — *Super Troopers 2*, a sequel to the 2001 screwball comedy turned cult classic about the antics of five Vermont State Police troopers. In 2014, a Broadway production he backed, *The Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, won the Tony Award for Best Musical.

Meanwhile, Leary continues to build up and market Trimino, which just debuted a flavor called Orchard. "It's like an apple-pear flavor. It's very compelling," he says.

His advice to aspiring entrepreneurs? "You don't need that ultimate unique idea, but what you do need is superior execution.

"My software business was developed around software that was in the public domain, so we didn't invent anything," he says. "But we made it more accessible, and we developed an expert team that our customers could rely on." ■

Previous page: A long-time youth sports coach, Robert Leary, '77, [photographed at his Connecticut home] turned his business acumen to the beverage industry and co-founded Trimino.