

# LOUISVILLE BUSINESS FIRST

## COO Nettles took Papa John's from MapQuest tech to high-tech — here's what's next

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As recently as this summer, Papa John's International Inc. was running its app deals using mapping data from MapQuest.

Yes, print-off-the-directions-because-it's-2002 MapQuest.

That's why Mike Nettles was brought on at Papa John's (Nasdaq: PZZA) in 2017 – to update and drive the company's technology forward. He spent 2017 learning the Louisville-based pizza giant and making a plan.

“We entered 2018 with a multiyear roadmap with some pretty bold agenda items to accomplish in [the] first year,” Nettles said. “A lot of that year one has to do with enabling technology.”

He said he wanted to do innovative things but found that a barrier was the old technology strewn across the company.

“So how do I implement new technologies on top of those that were built 14 years ago?” Nettles said. “One of the ways you do that is you pick what you want to modernize.”

The mapping software and data were top on his list – a feat Nettles officially tackled this summer when he updated the back-end mapping.

“Now you can drop a pin to tell me where you are if your address is not something that comes up naturally,” he said.

He said the company already had a good ordering system in place, but he increased its power by adding Alexa voice ordering and Facebook instant ordering capabilities.

“We really want to meet the customers where they are and do that as efficiently as possible. I don't really want to do gadget-y and gizmo-y things as a marketing ploy,” he said. “I want to find a way to embed innovation in places where my customers already are spending time – such as on Facebook at dinnertime.”

Nettles is taking his bold ideas to the top, helping to rebuild Papa John's battered reputation.

As part of a leadership shakeup at the company driven by internal changes after this summer's scandals, Nettles recently was promoted to be the company's executive vice president and chief operating and growth officer, with four directors reporting to him. He oversees the company's four major customer touch points: digital technology; marketing, communications and branding; product innovation and development; and operations.



**Mike Nettles, executive vice president, chief operating and growth officer of Papa John's International Inc.**

Nettles said that despite the problems persisting between the company directors and its ousted founder, John Schnatter, the feeling within Papa John's is positive overall.

“We've really spent the last few months ... taking a deep look at ourselves and what we want to be moving forward,” he said. “I think in general, team members here are excited about the direction we're taking the company.”

He said there's a renewed focus on improving the customer experience and making Papa John's a good place for employees to work, which he thinks will drive good results in 2019.

“I think now everyone knows who we serve – and that's the customer and the communities our customers live in,” Nettles said. “At the heart, it's all about service, servicing the needs of the customer. I also think that [employees] recognize that if we do that, and do it well, it really gives us a renewed focus on what we're going to do in 2019.”

Speaking of which, more tech and marketing advances are coming in the new year, he said, along with an increased focus on rebuilding

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employees' and customers' trust in the brand.

Nettles, 51, answered a few other questions for Louisville Business First about himself, what happened this year and what's coming in 2019 for Papa John's:

## Why do you have the career you have?

From an early age, I was always fascinated with technology. I grew up a child of the '70s and '80s, when home computing and technology were just fads and for hobbyists. But early on, I discovered that the language of computing was a creative outlet, which allowed someone who could "speak" the language of processors and routines to accomplish wholly new creations. This sparked a lifelong passion of tech-enabled creativity for me.

Ironically, I didn't get my first full-time tech job until I had landed a job as an auditor, where I found ways to make the technology system better. I made a compelling case for how to improve the system and here I am, almost 30 years later, still finding ways to better technology innovation.

As tech has grown to become the enabling force behind so many other business disciplines, I've discovered that being a good technologist requires a diverse set of skills. It is important to understand finance, marketing, operations, supply chain/logistics, product development, real estate construction and a whole host of other business disciplines.

I have had to become a generalist to become a specialist in designing and delivering business-changing technology innovations.

## How do you motivate your employees?

By letting them know they inspire me. I view my role as that of a stage-builder and a producer. It's my job to build the stage, fund the production and help ensure we have the right talent in place.

It is important that I serve the needs of my team so they are set up for success and can do their best work. I coach more than I instruct. I encourage my employees to take risks by making it safe for them to do so, and then I help them to recover quickly and learn from their experiences.

## What technology has had the biggest impact on your business?

Data science and analytics. The motto "know thy customer" has changed everything.

Instead of trying to create one-size-fits-all message, use data and market segmentation analytics to speak to each individual to meet their needs accordingly.

## How do you recharge yourself in the middle of the day?

I make the time to walk around the office and speak to people. I make a point of getting up from my desk, taking a moment to step out of the myriad of meetings to walk the floor and drop by someone's office.

Not only does it help me clear my head, but it enables me to build relationships with the people around me. By taking the time to connect with colleagues, I am constantly learning new things – their concerns, challenges, victories or accomplishments – that can make Papa John's a better place to work.

## What leadership traits have helped you along the way?

1. Resiliency. Personally and professionally, I've faced adversity, and it's taught me not to give up easily.
2. The importance of listening. Too many people say they have good listening skills but aren't fully focused on the conversation and are, instead, thinking about the answer to your next question.
3. Face-to-face communication without a physical barrier, like a table or desk. I find that it leads to more meaningful conversations and helps to build relationships.
4. Effective selling. We've all been told that at some point we need to know how to sell – from ideas to products or confidence. An effective sales technique is the single best thing I've learned and it's helped me so much in my career. It's an art based on psychology, and if your job involves selling multiyear visions to organizations that historically looked at single-quarter goals, you better learn how to sell.

## What's the best advice you've ever received?

Never waste a good crisis. A crisis situation presents an opportunity for unprecedented change.

Be bold and seize on the opportunity to be the voice of courage and conviction when everyone is looking for a safe haven from the storm. It's about taking a deep look at ourselves and turning that reflection into meaningful change.

## What's been your smartest business move?

Working at Papa John's here in Louisville. It's the first opportunity where I've been able to use my diverse skill set all at once, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

We have a remarkable opportunity to move the company in the right direction, and I'm excited for people to see a better Papa John's in 2019.

## What's the simplest thing you never learned to do?

Grocery shopping. I was a widower for several years, and as a single parent, I handled all duties, which included grocery shopping. I sucked at it and would overcomplicate everything. I would plan a month of meals in advance and try to buy everything I needed for the month all at once in a single trip.

I'd end up with three-cart excursions and still forget half of what I needed, while coming home with many items I didn't. When I remarried, my wife laughed at seeing how badly I planned grocery shopping. Now I just cook, and she does the shopping.

## What's the biggest mistake you've learned from?

A "good job" is more than just a paycheck and title. While it's easy for this to be the focus when you're first starting out, your career is so much more than that.

It's important to invest in yourself early on to explore your interests and passions so you're following a career path where you see opportunities for growth. A "good job" should be measured through relationships, new learnings and meaningful connections that make up a lifelong return on your own investment of time.

I wish I had told my early 20-year-old self that when I was first starting out.