

# Multi-Unit Franchisee

ISSUE 1, 2024

 MULTI-UNIT  
FRANCHISING  
CONFERENCE

March 19 – 22, 2024  
Las Vegas, US

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Explore the Mega 99 rankings

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Case Studies: When it's time to sell

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A portrait of Ryan Debin, a man with short grey hair, smiling and wearing a white button-down shirt. He is standing in front of a blurred background of green foliage and yellow lights.

CHIEF EXCITEMENT OFFICER

**RYAN  
DEBIN**

Encourages “smile-watt hours”

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As chief excitement officer at Momentum Enterprises, Ryan Debin focuses on family and fun and encourages his team to create as many "smile-watt hours" as possible.



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“Creating atmospheres of optimism. That’s what we do with every business that we run.”

# Chief Excitement Officer

Operator aims to create “smile-watt hours”

Written by HELEN BOND



## RYAN DEBIN Chief Excitement Officer

Company: **Momentum Enterprises/  
Launch Entertainment**

No. of units: **11 My Gym Children’s Fitness Center, 4 (1 in development) Launch Entertainment Park, 1 Retro Fitness under development, 3 Abbott’s Frozen Custard**

Age: **45**

Family: **Wife; 4 kids**

Years in franchising: **13**

Years in current position: **6**

**R**yan Debin is the “chief excitement officer” and driving force of the aptly named Momentum Enterprises Inc., a Boston-based asset management company backed by Arena Capital Partners. It’s all about community-centered concepts focused on family and fun.

The nation’s largest multi-unit franchisee of My Gym Children’s Fitness Center and Launch Entertainment Park, Debin says he likes to “do things differently than most people.”

For instance, Debin projects his multi-brand family entertainment portfolio revenue to hit \$24,242,424.24 in 2024. To a numbers guy like Debin, a financial target that lines up with the operating year makes good sense.

“If you were to ask any one of our managers of all our businesses, ‘What’s our goal?,’ they all know,” Debin says. “I just do things like that because it’s easy to remember.”

Along with 11 My Gym centers and four Launch Entertainment Park locations open and one in development, Momentum’s franchise holdings include Abbott’s Frozen Custard and Retro Fitness. Momentum also owns independent businesses, Wimbledon Tennis & Pickleball Club and Club Elevate as well as The Newport Venture, an investment firm that acquires and manages commercial mixed-use real estate throughout Newport, Rhode Island. In all, the 45-year-old entrepreneur oversees 22 businesses across New England and New York.

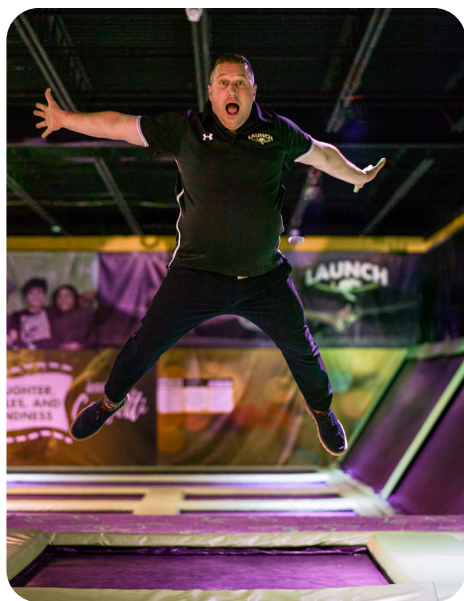
Debin’s operational approach takes a page from Life is Good, the inspirational retail brand founded to spread the power of optimism. He says Momentum has an informal—“soon to be formal”—partnership with the Life is Good Kids Foundation, which was founded by Debin’s close friend Steve Gross.

“I just love their message. So at Momentum, we have a mission stolen from Life is Good, called ‘creating atmospheres of optimism,’” Debin says. “That’s what we do with every business that we run. We create those atmospheres for people to reach their full potential.”

The approach is fueled by Debin’s obsession with “smile-watt hours.” Think kilowatts of good-vibes energy bottled up as smiles. There’s even a running meter, which at last count was ticking toward 500,000 on the path to hitting 1 million smile-watt hours by the end of 2024.

“Every single day, every time someone comes in for a birthday party at Launch, a birthday party at My Gym, or any interaction we have in the businesses that we operate, there is a chance for another smile-watt hour,” Debin explains. “It’s there as a reminder to my 500 staff that we have the opportunity to get hundreds if not thousands of those smile-watt hours every day.”

As a kid in Orange County, California, Debin grew up attending birthday parties at a Medieval-themed amusement park and dreamed of owning entertainment parks. His



childhood aspiration would get its start on the East Coast when he headed to Boston College to study finance. After graduation, he remained in Boston and built a high-flying career in banking until the economic fallout from the Great Recession prompted him to explore franchising. Initially, it was a “purposeful and meaningful side investment.” His first venture was the 2012 acquisition of the My Gym location where his son was a member.

“In 2017, the division I was a part of shut down, and it was scary for about one day,” Debin recalls. “I realized it was all going to be good because now I could do this hobby full-time. One of the first things I did was create Momentum Enterprises.”

With four My Gym centers already in the fold, Debin spent the next two years beefing up his central team and quickly making Momentum’s presence known in franchising. He added Launch and earned back-to-back nods as My Gym’s worldwide Franchisee of the Year out of more than 600 locations in 38 countries.

Momentum’s penchant for prime opportunities continues. With ambitions to be a \$100 million company in the next five years, Debin says he is open to other concepts as long as they fit “our bread and butter, which is family, fitness, and fun.”

“Realistically, where most of our growth would be is in the higher volume businesses,” Debin says. “We know it’s hard work to open up and run a business. And as we grow, we’re learning that if it’s hard work to open and operate a business, it might as well be financially

rewarding. It’s easier to have more of an impact on larger deals.”

## PERSONAL

**First job:** Working for my father in the HVAC business. My first job out of college was in commercial real estate brokerage.

**Formative influences/events:** My parents both owned small businesses. My father was an entrepreneur with an HVAC business, and my mother was a doctor with a private practice. Just watching how they operated influenced me, giving me a love for business and inspiring me to want to do influential things. My dad greatly influenced me on the personal development side—Stephen Covey, Dale Carnegie, Napoleon Hill, Tony Robbins, and *The E-Myth Revisited*. He was big into all of that. It was an influence that my parents had on me that shaped a lot of my thinking.

**Key accomplishments:** Early in my career, at age 30, I was the youngest person ever to be promoted to senior executive in banking at Anglo Irish Bank. I was also the youngest member of the board of directors of Horizons for Homeless Children, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the lives of young homeless children and their families. Horizons has been a big part of my life. No one on the board knew anything about real estate, so they tapped me on my shoulder and said, “We need to figure something out, and you’re our guy.” I created a partnership with a private company. We bought land and got it subdivided, permitted, and built a new 120,000-square-foot headquarters for Horizons as part of a public-private partnership. It opened in 2021 and was a pretty spectacular accomplishment. In business, my greatest accomplishment has been forming Momentum Enterprises, which was the driving force that allowed us to build, open, and operate these businesses.

**Biggest current challenge:** Attracting and retaining resources, including labor and capital.

**Next big goal:** Successful opening of Launch North Attleborough.

**First turning point in your career:** Going from brokerage to banking. I worked for a big commercial broker shop when I was 21 and didn’t know anything. I still didn’t know anything when I was 22 and joined Anglo Irish Bank, but it was brand new. They had just come here from Ireland, and I was the second American they hired. They knew nothing

about Boston, the culture, or the customs. So in a way, it was very good because I got to teach them the culture of how things are done in America. It also allowed me to see deals and be part of underwriting deals that I wouldn’t have otherwise seen. We were the most dynamic company in that space. It was like “The Wolf of Wall Street.” If bankers could be rock stars, we were rock stars.

**Best business decision:** Forming Momentum Enterprises.

**Hardest lesson learned:** Taking on too much too fast.

**Work week:** 80 to 100 hours a week.

**Exercise/workout:** Lifting weights.

**Best advice you ever got:** To read the *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don’t Work and What to Do About It* by Michael E. Gerber.

**What’s your passion in business?** Obsessive accumulation of smile-watt hours (units of measurement for good vibes).

**How do you balance life and work?** My kids and family are involved with my business, so it doesn’t feel like work.

**Guilty pleasure:** Fast cars. I like the adrenaline. It’s a passion. It’s fun. Our newest Launch location, which we’re building in North Attleborough, Massachusetts, will be the first location to have the F1 simulators that professional drivers use.

**Favorite book:** Many favorites: *The E-Myth Revisited* by Michael E. Gerber; *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill; Robert Kiyosaki’s *Rich Dad Poor Dad*; *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey; and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

**Favorite movie:** “Braveheart.”

**What do most people not know about you?** I ran the Boston Marathon 20 years in a row. My last year was 2019. It wasn’t held in 2020 because of the pandemic, and that’s when I stopped. Twenty years was a nice round number.

**Pet peeve:** People parking in my parking spot. Making the same mistake twice.

**What did you want to be when you grew up?** Own entertainment parks. As kids, we would go to this King Arthur-themed park called Camelot in Anaheim, California, not far from Disneyland, where everybody wanted to go on their birthday. It had an arcade, mini



golf, and a water park. I just loved it. And then I ended up doing this for my livelihood.

**Last vacation:** Europe.

**Person you'd most like to have lunch with:** Jessie Itzler.

## MANAGEMENT

**Business philosophy:** To have high-quality people producing high-quality products in a high-quality environment.

**Management method or style:** Perfect blend of a resource and a coach to push people but not micromanage.

**Greatest challenge:** Consistently getting the most out of everyone.

**How do others describe you?** Passionate.

**Have you ever been in a mentor-mentee relationship? What did you learn?** Yes. My mother and father would be my top two and probably had the strongest impact on me. I learned everything from demeanor and attitude to thought process and organization. If you ever met my mother and father, you'd know I'm the perfect blend. Also, Steve Gross, founder of the Life is Good Kids Foundation; Kate Barrand, president and CEO of Horizons for Homeless Children; and Jeff Feingold, the former head of the Fidelity Magellan Fund. I'm on the board of Hope and Comfort, a non-profit Feingold founded that supplies essential toiletries to those in need. These are some of the other people who have impacted my life.

**One thing you're looking to do better:** A tighter focus on the details.

**How you give your team room to innovate and experiment:** Don't micromanage, and empower people to do what they know is right.

**How close are you to operations?** Very close.

**What are the two most important things you rely on from your franchisor?** Leadership team and instincts.

**What you need from vendors:** Flexible financing terms.

**Have you changed your marketing strategy in response to the economy? How?** Not in response to the economy, but my strategy has changed over time because each year's spend goes to different things.

**How is social media affecting your business?** Huge effect because it's the audience I'm targeting that's watching.

**How do you hire and fire?** We don't fire. We only unhire those who don't fit in our core values.

**How do you train and retain?** Through training and development and rewarding for positive performance.

**How do you deal with problem employees?** Work with them to come around.

**Fastest way into your doghouse:** Don't do what's expected of you.

## BOTTOM LINE

**Annual revenue:** More than \$18 million.

**2024 goals:** \$24,242,424.24.

**Growth meter: How do you measure your growth?** Measure on three-month, six-month, and 12-month revenue and same-store sales year over year.

**Vision meter: Where do you want to be in five years? 10 years?** In five years, I expect to be a \$100 million revenue company and have broadened our reach beyond New England. In 10 years, the sky's the limit.

**Do you have brands in different segments? Why/why not?** Yes, My Gym Children's Fitness, Club Elevate, Retro Fitness, Wimbledon Tennis & Pickleball Club, Newport Venture (Airbnb/hospitality), and Launch Entertainment.

**How is the economy in your region(s) affecting you, your employees, your customers?** The economy hasn't had a significant impact on business. We've seen some slower volume but not a dramatic change.

**Are you experiencing economic growth in your market?** Yes.

**How do changes in the economy affect the way you do business?** There is more of a focus on value versus price.

**How do you forecast for your business?** Historical factors and the percentage of growth we've attained.

**What are the best sources for capital expansion?** Alternative financing and private lending.

**Experience with private equity, local banks, national banks, other institutions? Why/why not?** Local banks have been good over the years, and we've had a good experience with private lenders.

**What are you doing to take care of your employees?** Compensate with raises and introduce Nectar, an employee rewards platform that provides incentives for a job well done. Points can be redeemed for gifts.

**How are you handling rising employee costs (payroll, minimum wage, health-care, etc.)?** The best we can. Pass more on to the consumer to maintain profitability.

**What laws and regulations are affecting your business, and how are you dealing with them?** Minimum wage laws and employment laws affect us, but we deal with them as they come.

**How do you reward/recognize top-performing employees?** Incentive programs.

**What kind of exit strategy do you have in place?** Working to create a business that runs itself and looking for others to partner with in the next three to five years as we continue to grow. ■