

Episode #64 - Transcript

Josh Steimle on 10X-ing in a year by finding the right partners

ANDY BALDACCI

Josh, thanks so much for coming on this show.

JOSH STEIMLE

Thank you so much, Andy, for having me here.

ANDY BALDACCI

Yeah, I'm really excited about this. My friend Matt was talking about you. Like I said before the call, he's been talking you up. There's a lot of pressure on this. So I'm expecting some big things.

JOSH STEIMLE

Well, I've had a good night's rest so I'm good to go.

ANDY BALDACCI

All right. Perfect. So you launched MWI back in 1999. You had a period in there where it was a real struggle, including almost having to shut the doors, but now you're growing fast and have built a multimillion dollar agency. Can you share the backstory of how this all came about?

JOSH STEIMLE

Like you said, I started in 1999. I was a college student at the time, and I ran it as a college student for about two years until I graduated and then just kept on doing it. This has been the only real job I've ever had. There were two iterations of MWI. The first was actually called Mind Wire Interactive, and that's where the MWI name came from. That's what I started while I was in college. I sold that in 2003 because I had a partner. We didn't really get along. A buyer came along, and it seemed like a good opportunity to part ways amicably. So we sold the company in January of 2003, and then I started over again under the name MWI. I thought that my partner was holding me back and that if I was just free of my partner, I could do whatever I wanted and everything would just be amazing.

Selling the company turned out to be a bad deal, by the way. I mean, everybody thinks, oh you sold the company, you made some money. Well no, actually I lost 40 thousand dollars on that deal, so it was a terrible deal, and it really hurt a lot for years. But I sold that company, and I was on my own, and I just thought, "It doesn't matter. Even though this was a bad deal I'm on my own and now I can do whatever I want, and everything's going to be awesome." Then from 2003 to 2007 I made so many mistakes I could not pay myself a dime during those years. So I went four years with zero pay from the company, just working completely for free, and I was working 80, 100 hour weeks. I was sleeping on the office floor.

I was just killing myself. I didn't see my wife. I didn't go to any social functions. I missed all sorts of family events, and it was just a huge big mess.

After four years of that I decided, "Okay, I'm going to die here if I keep doing this. I'm losing money, I'm getting into massive debt, and something's got to change." Then I started looking at things I could do to fix the business. So, around 2007 things started turning around, and I started making slightly better decisions, but I still had all this business debt.

Then in 2007 I retreated from the world a bit. I said, "This isn't working." I let all my staff go, put everybody on contract, went back to working out of my house, which is how I started in 1999, and I said, "I'm going to retreat until I figure this out." Then in 2012, almost ten years after I had sold the company and ditched my partner and went on my own and thought I was going to rule the world that way, I realized I needed to have a partner again. So in 2013 I brought on a partner, and we started working together, and then everything started going fantastic from that point. Not everything, but things improved dramatically, and that's the short story on how we got to where we are today. There's a lot of detail I skipped over, but that's the brief overview.

ANDY BALDACCI

Before we do get into what actually changed you and what made things turn around, I have a couple questions about the leadup to that. So, honestly, after that point when you're sleeping in the office, when you move back out of the office, get rid of the employees, move into your basement as your office, what keeps you going?

JOSH STEIMLE

You know, it seemed like success was always around the corner. It was like there was somebody dangling this carrot in front of me, and I was like, "Oh, I almost got it. I almost got it. I almost got it." People ask me, "How did you do this for ten years? Why did you do this for ten years? I mean, you're not getting paid for four years. Why did you even go six months without getting paid?" The reason was every single month, I would look at the last month, and I'd say, "Wow, that was really tough, but this happened and this happened, and these great things changed, and this month there's huge deals on the table. If I just hold out for two more weeks, I'll get this big deal." Every single month was that way. Every single month I could look back and I could say, "Wow, that was tough, but I learned a lot. I've made progress. I've made these changes, and I've got this big opportunity right in front of me." It went that way for ten years where every month it was, like, "Oh, I've got to keep on going because if I quit now when this thing's on the table..."

And yet year after year, I would also look back and say, "Wait a second. Every month is this way. It sort of materializes, but then it doesn't." And it would go up and down too. I mean, I'd go from a 100 thousand year revenue with the business to 500 100 thousand and I'd think, "Okay, I'm growing. Everything's working out." Then something bad would happen, and I'd go back down a 100 thousand and be like, "Oh, that's terrible. Now I've got to work again." Then I'd start working, we'd close a bunch of deals, and we'd be like, "Okay, we're back on

track.” It’s amazing, when you're going through this kind of thing and you're working, the time just flies by. You're looking back and you're saying, “Man, ten years just went by, and I'm not any farther along than I was.”

ANDY BALDACCI

Along the way it's not as though you're knocking on doors and no one's answering, you're not getting anything coming in, and you just keep going blindly. You're getting a piece of success. You're getting some traction, you're learning a bit, and then sometimes things regres. But it's not as though you hit a plateau and you just stayed there constantly for ten years. There's ups and downs along the way.

JOSH STEIMLE

Right. If I had plateaued, I would've quit, or I would've done something else. There was always growth, but then there'd be a huge setback, but then there'd be growth again. If you looked at the revenue of the company, it was this 45 or 30 degree angle of growth and revenue. Really good growth. It's going up, up, up, up, and then all of a sudden there'd be this cliff, and it would drop. Then it would go up, up, up, up, and then a cliff, and it would drop. Well, it was those up parts that kept me going. I would get over the cliffs really quick because I had learned some big lessons and changed things and fixed it. I was always making progress personally. I was always learning, and it was very engaging and very interesting work, but financially it was not that great, and personally it was really wearing on me and killing me.

Up until 2007. Things got better in 2007. It was still a hard slog, and there's been challenges since then, but those challenges really keep me going, and that's what makes business interesting. If it were consistent growth, that would be kind of boring because it is those challenges where you begin something. You think, “This is going to kill me. This is going to put me out of business.” Then you overcome that. That gets your adrenaline going, and you become a junkie. You're, like, “Wow, I don't want to create these challenges, but these are really exciting, and it's really fun to overcome those challenges and then look back and say, wow. Look at that. I got through that. I made it.”

It's kind of like if you're a rock climber and you're climbing a cliff face. You don't want to die, and you don't want to fall, but if you have a fall and recover from it, you overcome some error, you get to the top, your adrenaline's going, then you're like, “Wow, that was exciting.” That's the story you tell all your friends. You don't tell your friends, “Yeah, I climbed this rock face, and nothing happened. I just climbed, and I made it to the top.”

ANDY BALDACCI

Right. It's not exciting.

JOSH STEIMLE

“There was this time that I fell, and I thought I was going to die, and this happened.” Those are the stories you tell, and it's the same thing with business. It's the times that I fell and

recovered that are exciting and keep me going.

ANDY BALDACCI

Yeah, as someone who was a professional poker player for eight years, to make it last, to have longevity in that field, you can't let your emotions get the best of you, but at the same time I would be lying if I said that those ups and downs weren't what kept me going. You have to temper those emotions, but they're still there, and that adrenaline when it gets going is part of why I did that for as long as I did. I'm entirely relating with you on that feeling where it just keeps you in.

JOSH STEIMLE

There's one more that kept me going, and that was definitely pride and ego. I definitely had an ego wrapped up in this. I didn't want to be seen to fail. The longer it goes on, the more you're like, "Well, now I've been doing this for ten years. If I fail, man, this is really embarrassing." There was always this feeling, "I've got to make this work, I've got to make this work."

ANDY BALDACCI

Your identity is invested in it.

JOSH STEIMLE

Yeah. This is my whole identity. I've been doing this for 17 years now. This is my whole career. If I fail now it's like, "Well, why did you do that for almost 20 years, Josh, and then you fail?" Then you read those stories. A lot of books have told this one, about these guys who had the gold mine. This is a real story. These guys had a gold mine, and they worked on this gold mine for years and years and years, and then they finally said, "We're not going to find the gold here." They gave up. They sold the mine. Some guy bought it, and he dug three feet, and he found this huge gold deposit. You're just like, "Oh man, I don't want to be that guy who quit right when he was about to succeed." Things like that keep me going too.

Now it actually seems to be paying off. I spent 13, 14 years building it up, failing, not having things work. Now all of a sudden, we're into the multiple millions, we're going global, things are growing. Now it does seem like it paid off, and we're progressing towards the large global agency that I always wanted to build. Hopefully this story works out, and we're able to succeed at creating that large thing, so I can say, "Yeah, I failed for 14 years, and then it worked out."

ANDY BALDACCI

It's interesting because in that turning point year, you went from 10K a month to 120K a month in one year. Is that accurate?

JOSH STEIMLE

That's right.

ANDY BALDACCI

What happened? You said you brought a partner on, but what changed to make this possible?

JOSH STEIMLE

In 2007 which was one of my turnarounds, I went back into my basement, and I said I'm going to put everybody in contract. That's when I started getting profitable. Even though my revenues were down, I was making more money from a profit standpoint. I was paying off debt, and I was also trying to get healthy during that time. I had gotten really fat, out of shape. I couldn't walk up a single flight of stairs without wheezing for five minutes afterwards. I'd walk up ten stairs, and then I couldn't talk to somebody for five minutes because I couldn't breathe. I was really out of shape. So in 2007, I said, "My business is a mess. My life is a mess. I'm going to fix this." So I got into triathlons, and I ended up doing a couple of half Iron Man events and marathons and all this stuff that I swore I would never do. I hated running. But I did all this stuff and I got into shape.

Then I focused on myself and my body and focused on getting the business profitable, but not on growth. I wasn't trying to grow it. I did that for a few years. Then I spent all of 2012 trying to find a partner for my business. In the beginning of 2013, I thought I'd found the right guy, but at this point, the business fell off another one of those cliffs. I was selling and closing deals, and then I had this partner who would take care of all the fulfillment. But when I say a partner, I don't mean close business partner. I mean just a fulfillment partner that I would turn over the business to, and he'd get it done.

He brought on a new account manager. That account manager just didn't manage our clients well, and all of a sudden I was losing all of my clients rapidly, so we crashed. We got down to three clients left. We were bringing in about ten thousand a month, and all of that was going to contractors. So, I'm back down to making zero money all of a sudden, and it was at this point that I brought in my partner. He was really strong in business development and sales, which was a weakness of mine. I said, "Hey, we need to sell stuff here." I was going to put him on the phones and send him to networking events and have him close deals, but then this really lucky break came along, this blessing. I got the opportunity to write for Forbes Magazine, and I started writing about digital marketing and what I know and what I do. That started generating leads for the agency.

It's not that I was writing about my agency. I was writing about digital marketing. Then people would read the article, they liked the article, and they would do their investigation to figure out who I was. Then they would contact me and say, "Hey, I read your article and I loved what you said and we want to hire your agency." So that combined with bringing on the partner brought this rapid growth. We'd get calls in from people saying, "Hey, I read your Forbes article, and then I figured hey, why don't I just hire this guy, and so I want to talk to

you.” Then I'd hand them over to my new partner. He was just really good at talking to people, figuring out what their needs were, selling the value of what we could do. We just started closing deals right and left and growing rapidly. That's how we went from almost going out of business to over the next 12 months getting 120 thousand in revenue, which blew past what we had ever done before. I had never done over 500 thousand in a year, and then we're doing 120 thousand a month.

ANDY BALDACCI

So, to back up a little bit, why were you so focused on finding a partner?

JOSH STEIMLE

I had been trying it without a partner for 10 years, and it wasn't working out. I wasn't growing, and I knew in the back of my mind that I needed somebody to hold me accountable. I was working, but I knew that if I had somebody looking over my shoulder ... I didn't want somebody to micromanage me, but I just knew if I had somebody to report to, I would work differently. I would work better. It would keep me on my toes. I also knew that I needed somebody to handle that sales sides of things because everything starts with sales. If you don't have business coming in, then there's nothing else to do.

ANDY BALDACCI

When you were with that other partner though, weren't you the one doing sales?

JOSH STEIMLE

I was doing sales before I had the partner, but I wasn't great at it. I would get a lead, and I wouldn't even contact that lead for three or four days. Anybody who's done sales knows that speed is the name of the game because people contact you when they're ready to buy. I would wait for three days, and then I'd email them back and be like, “Hey, sorry for the delay.” I was totally lazy about it, and I was busy. So the only clients I was signing up were people who were relaxed about their own businesses and who were willing to put up with almost anything. In a way, it was great, because once I got them signed up as clients, they were super chill to work with. But at the same time they weren't the hustlers who had fast growing businesses, and that's why they hired me, because I was lazy on that sales call.

I decided I need a sales guy who answers the phone immediately, who responds to email immediately. Also it's just better. I wasn't super good at sales. I didn't have any sales training. This guy that I brought in, Cory Blake, had the training, had the background, had the mentality for it. Not that he was a slick sales guy, but he was good at talking to people, figuring out their needs, and then speaking to those needs.

Also part of what triggered this was I had a great friend. He had worked with me, and he had given me a lot of advice over the years that had helped me on a personal level and with the business. His name is Mark Browning. So Mark and I had gone on a trip to Brazil together, and we were out in the middle of nowhere in the state of Rondônia driving a car. I remember

clearly where we were. He turned to me and he was, like, “Josh, I know you don't want to hear this. I know you don't want to have a partner, but you need to bring on a partner.” At that moment it just rung true to me. I'd been doing this for ten years, and it wasn't working out. That was the very moment that I thought, “Yeah, this is time. I've got to change something.” As soon as I got home from Brazil, I started looking for that partner.

ANDY BALDACCI

Then where did you ultimately find Cory?

JOSH STEIMLE

Cory is my brother-in-law. I swore I would never hire family because I don't want to get into that whole mess. If you hire family and then they don't work out, you have to fire them, and then it makes family reunions awkward. There are just so many messes that can come from hiring family. So I swore I'll never even hire family part-time to do something. I'm not hiring them as interns. Nothing. I am not going to touch that. The same goes for friends. If I hire somebody and they become a friend, that's fine, but I'm not going to hire somebody who's already my friend because then they might end up not being my friend.

So what happened was Cory and I were together Christmas of 2012. I started telling him about the challenges I had with the business, and he started giving me sales advice. Then I went back and I applied it, and it worked. I came back to him, and I was like, “Hey, talk to me some more about this.” And he'd give me some more tips, and I'd go apply those tips, and they'd work. So then I came back to him, and I was like, “Can you do sales consulting for me part time? I'll pay you 500 bucks a month or something. I don't want to be bugging you unless I'm paying you.” So we worked that way. He was just giving me advice, and it was working out really well. Then I went back and I said, “Hey, how about if you do part-time? 10 hours a week.”

So he started helping me out part-time, and it grew organically from one step to the other. We took it slow. It really took most of 2013. It wasn't until September-ish of 2013 that I said, “Cory, you've got to come on full-time. I need you. We've been working together. It's working out.” We sat down, and we talked about the family thing. If this goes really bad, can we still be friends? Can we still show up at reunions and not be mad at each other? We both agreed that we were reasonable people, and that we could deal with this like adults. We were both willing to take this risk, so he jumped in at the end of 2013. Then by maybe January of 2014, I went back to him and said, “Hey, I want you to be a full partner with me in this business.” So that's how the family element snuck in.

ANDY BALDACCI

This is going ahead a little bit, but what changed to make you decide to make him a partner?

JOSH STEIMLE

It just seemed that if I gave up a chunk of the business to him, he would be committed to it. I

knew that if I brought him in, he was going to close deals, and he was going to make stuff work. But I also knew that he was more than just a sales guy. He had entrepreneurial tendencies. I was looking towards the day I would leave MWI and turn it over to somebody. I was thinking, "Here I am. We've got two people in the company, and I'm already thinking about succession plans, but someday if I grow this, I need somebody I can turn this over to that I can trust and that I know is going to do a good job." I saw that potential in Cory, and he was a young guy and I was getting older.

So, I thought, "Okay, he's 20 years behind me, but if I bring this guy on and train him and he's the right guy, then this is great. He's starting out young. He'll get a bunch of experience in the business. He can be there the whole time it's building up. Then he can take over someday, and I can move on or retire." I saw this opportunity coming together, and it just seemed like a perfect fit. We just went from one step to the other. That plan is working out now. Cory has been taking over more and more of the business, not just doing sales but running every aspect of the business. Every time I look at the details of what he's doing, I think, "He's doing exactly what I would do, and he's doing a better job at it, so this is perfect."

ANDY BALDACCI

What advice would you give to other agency owners to identify whether or not they need a partner?

JOSH STEIMLE

The situation I found myself in was that I had run the business for a long time by myself, and it wasn't working out. It was failing. So if any business owner finds themselves in those circumstances, that might be a big red flag that you should look at bringing on a partner. Maybe that would be a big change in your business to fix things, to get things working right. Now, the issue is it's so easy to bring on a partner that puts you out of business or is a bad fit. I got lucky. I found somebody that was just the perfect fit. If he hadn't been, then this would be a very different story today, but he happened to be the right guy for the job at the right time. In terms of identifying whether you need a partner or not, if you're running the business by yourself and it's going great, could bringing on a partner make that better? Maybe, but it could also ruin things. I wouldn't necessarily say that bringing on a partner is always the right thing to do. But if you're failing, then maybe it wouldn't hurt to try, or maybe it'd be a great thing to try.

For me, the other factor was that I worked better when I had somebody to be accountable to. It's not that we have a system for accountability, per se. It's more that I know anything I do is going to come out, and Cory's going to know about it. If I don't do any work for two weeks, then I know Cory's going to notice. It keeps me on my toes. It keeps me working. It keeps me from getting lazy. I have a persona to maintain with him, you know? He's the young guy, I'm the old experienced guy. I gotta maintain that, right? I gotta keep looking good. So I gotta keep hustling and doing the work, and that type of stuff keeps me motivated

and keeps me going. It's the little tickler in the background that says, "Hey, you gotta work hard because you don't want to look like the lazy business owner who brings in somebody else and leeches off them." I gotta make sure that I'm contributing value. There's a friendly competition. We both have to show each other that we're adding value to this business and that motivates us and that keeps us going in a good way.

ANDY BALDACCI

How do you identify if a partner is a good fit, and how do you recommend finding one?

JOSH STEIMLE

In terms of finding a partner, I went out to my network. This is how I spent all of 2012. I talked to everybody that I thought was a potential partner for the business. I sat down with a lot of people, and I talked with them openly. "Hey, I'm looking for a partner. I think you might be a fit. Can we talk about this?" Either people weren't interested, or they just weren't quite the right fit. It wasn't the right time for them, or it just didn't seem like it would work out. Nothing clicked. Then I ran out of people that I knew. At that point I thought, "I do not want to go find somebody I don't know to come in and own half this company. That would be such a huge risk." I had kind of given up at this point, but I still had it in my mind that I needed a partner. I just had no idea who it could be. I'd exhausted my entire network, and I wasn't looking for family, of course, so I had never even thought of going to my brother-in-law. It was just serendipity that he came along.

If I were in this position again of finding a partner, I'd go out to my network. I'd be talking to my network. Also, if I could go back in time, I would've done a lot more networking to build that up years ago. I'm not going to bring somebody in as a partner if I haven't known that person well for three, four years. Well, the day you need a partner, it's too late. So if you don't need a partner today, but maybe you're going to four or five years down the road, today is the time to start networking. In retrospect I could've been much more social. I could've been reaching out to people. I could've been developing more relationships. Then I might've had ten other people I could have considered as business partners instead of six or seven.

People say, "I network all the time. I don't really get anything out of it." Well, you never know what's going to happen with those relationships. I don't believe in networking just to use people, but networking is fun. I love talking to people. I love getting to know people, regardless of any business or financial benefit I get. At the same time it's easy to say, "Well, I'm just going to focus on my business. I'm going to be heads down, working all the time. I'm not going to events. It's just a waste of time." It's easy to say that, but those things can have long term dividends. When the day comes that you need to reach out to somebody, it can be huge.

I mean, the reason I'm writing for Forbes is because I had a ten-year business relationship with the person who introduced me to Forbes. During those ten years, I got nothing out of

that relationship, financially, and that person got nothing from me. We just kept in touch, and we just saw each other at events and said, “Hey, how's it going?” Then all of a sudden she introduced me to an editor at Forbes. I got into Forbes and that changed my whole business. So that's the power of networking for the long term.

ANDY BALDACCI

Let's go with that. Getting into Forbes was combined with partnering up with Cory. That started to generate a lot of interest for you. Was it as simple as you got this first article published, and then the phone started ringing off the hook? What did it actually look like?

JOSH STEIMLE

No, there was something like a six-month lag in there. When I started writing for Forbes, I didn't want to get kicked off. This was an amazing opportunity. I thought, “I'm not going to do anything that seems the least bit self promotional. I'm not even going to write about digital marketing.” So at first I wrote about my entrepreneurial experiences, growing a business and startups. Things related to general business and entrepreneurship. I didn't touch digital marketing on purpose because I thought if I even mentioned SEO, then the editors might come in and say, “You're just promoting your business, and we're kicking you off.”

I wanted to steer clear of that, but after a few months, I noticed, “Hey, there are other contributors out there who run SEO firms, and all they talk about is SEO.” But they weren't promoting their companies. They were just talking about topics related to SEO because they're the experts. They were sharing advice and tips and telling people how to do stuff. So, I thought, “I can do that. What are some of the questions that I get asked frequently? What are the pain points I see with clients? What mistakes do I see clients making?”

So I took a topic related to my business, how to hire a SEO firm. I said, “Okay, this frustrated me as a SEO firm owner.” A lot of clients come to me, and I know that my agency is the fit for this client, but I can't convince them because they think I'm too expensive, or they think I don't have the right experience or background. But I know that I'm the right fit. I try to use testimonials. I try to use references. I try to tell them stories. But they're not looking at these things, they're just looking at the price tag and that's all. So I thought, “What can I write to get these people to see, this is the way you hire a SEO firm?”

Here is the right way to hire an SEO firm, because I run into too many clients that are going about this the wrong way. We would have lots of clients who'd say, “We really want to work with MWI, but you're too expensive, so we're going to go hire this other firm over here.” Then six months later, they'd come back to us and say, “Wow, that was a huge mistake. We just lost six months. We got nothing for the money we put in. Now we understand the value of MWI.” I'm sitting there saying, “I told you so, but I don't want to tell you I told you so.”

I thought, “Well, if I can write an article about this, then I can tell them so ahead of time. Then hopefully they come to us and they trust us because they read this article.” So that was one of the first articles I wrote, and that really blew things up for MWI because people found this article at the exact right point in their buying cycle. They want to hire an SEO firm, so they go to Google and they say, “How do I hire an SEO firm? What's the right way to do this? I'm confused.” Then my Forbes article pops up, and they read it, and they say, “Wow, this guy just told me the right way to hire an SEO firm. Who is this guy? Oh, he runs an SEO firm? I should just go hire him because I like this article.” We started getting a flood of leads coming in, the phone ringing off the hook, a ton of emails. We can track over two million dollars in revenue back to that one post alone.

ANDY BALDACCI

Two million?

JOSH STEIMLE

Yeah.

ANDY BALDACCI

Wow.

JOSH STEIMLE

Easily over two million. I could say over three million, but I'm not a 100 percent sure.

ANDY BALDACCI

Honestly, a lot of what you're talking about is straightforward, fundamental content marketing. Figure out what your target market has questions about, figure out what they're concerned about, figure out what they don't know, and then answer it for them. But you're taking it a step further by putting that content on an established platform like Forbes. Not only is it going to be easier for them to find it than on your personal blog, but you also get credibility from being associated with a big name like that. Did you find that to be the case?

JOSH STEIMLE

Right. I blogged on my personal blog for ten years, and nobody cared. I'd get 100, 200 readers a day or something. Really small traffic. Then I write for Forbes, and all of a sudden people care about what I'm writing because it's on Forbes. I didn't change what I was writing about, I just changed the channel I was writing for. Forbes's credibility made all the difference in the world because if somebody read “How to Hire an SEO Firm” on my SEO firm website, they'd be like, “Well of course this guy's writing it,” and they wouldn't really trust it. They'd just be like, “Who is this guy and what is this company? I don't know anything about him.” But they see it on Forbes and they're like, “Well, it's on Forbes. This guy must know what he's talking about.”

Then when they contact us, a lot of their questions are cut out because they've already answered a lot of questions in their mind just by it being on Forbes. They're not trying to figure out if we're a credible agency. They've already decided that we are. If somebody came to through my own website, they'd be maybe 15 percent converted to the idea of working with us, and then we'd have to work on the other 85 percent. But when they come to us through Forbes, they're already 85% convinced that they want to work with us, and we just have to get them over that last little bit to convert them to a customer. So that credibility was a huge factor in the success of my content because if you're putting up your content in a place without that natural credibility, it's just a lot more work.

ANDY BALDACCI

Yeah, and people are going to view it with skepticism. They're always going to see another agenda. Obviously if you write a very sale-sy piece and you're just pitching your services, if it's transparently promotional, it doesn't matter where it's published. People are going to see through that. But when you're putting out genuinely helpful content for people in a publication that has credibility, you're going to see some great results.

So after you'd gotten some amazing results from this, what did you do next? Did you keep putting out more content on Forbes? Did you go do other sites? Did you do all of it? What was your strategy from there to take this to the next level?

JOSH STEIMLE

Well, one of my big concerns when I started writing for Forbes was, "What if I get kicked off of Forbes? What if they change this contributor model and stop doing it?" I just was worried that somehow this would end, and I wouldn't have anything else. I thought, "I've got to manage my risk here." So I leveraged Forbes. I went to Entrepreneur Magazine and said, "Hey, I write for Forbes. Can I write for you guys too?" They gave me a slot writing. Then I went to other publications, and I did the same pitch. "Hey, I'm writing for these other publications. Can I write for you?" That's how I expanded into writing for Mashable, TechCrunch, and 10 or 15 other publications. I started getting my content everywhere because I was worried that I might lose one or another and that I needed to have these other places that I could go publish.

That actually happened. Last year I did lose the position at Forbes. I had written 164 articles for Forbes, and then I had a misunderstanding with one of the editors, and I got kicked off. But I had all these other publications I could go to. I also developed relationships with other writers, so that even though I got kicked off of Forbes, I can still write an article and go to one of these other writers at Forbes and say, "Hey, I've got this article to pitch to you." Because they know me and know that I'm a writer, they trust me and they'll publish my articles. Maybe not verbatim. Maybe they'll rewrite it to be in their own voice. Maybe they'll

add some stuff, but I can pitch them. They'll listen to me and seriously consider my articles, where they might not consider it if it was somebody they didn't know. So I've still got Forbes, and I've got all these other channels I can write for. Now I focus my attention on Entrepreneur and Mashable but I leveraged that Forbes position to make sure I was safe and I'd be able to write and get my content out to a lot of other places if I needed to.

ANDY BALDACCI

For our listeners who have the same concern you do about losing one, if they get some of these opportunities and they're worried about losing it, obviously they can get more, and that's a good hedge against that. But can you speak to what that misunderstanding was? Did the content become too promotional? What happened so that, after contributing so much content, you had to step away?

JOSH STEIMLE

I still don't know what the real reason is. I tried to talk to the editor, and he stopped responding to emails. I'm still not sure if he had a bad day or if it was a case of mistaken identity where he got me mixed up with somebody else. What happened is I sent in a specific post about this organization Startup Grind and about their global event that was coming up. I just thought, "Hey, this is a great organization doing some interesting stuff," and I published it. Then my editor took it down. He came back and he was like, "This is over the top. This is crazy. This is so promotional. It's ridiculous. We've had this issue with you several times before, and you're out of here."

I was just like, "Whoa, whoa," and I went back and I read the article. I guess it is a little positive, but a lot of articles on Forbes are positive, and I didn't think it was over the top. I just disagreed with him. I could see where he was coming from, but I was like, "This is an overreaction." Then when he was saying, "We've had several issues with you before," I went back through every single communication I had with Forbes, and I could find exactly four times I had ever been spoken to by an editor at Forbes. You know, for 164 articles, to get feedback four times, that seems fairly reasonable. If I were working full-time in a newsroom, I would expect critical feedback from an editor four times a day, let alone four times over three years.

So I don't know. Maybe he thought I was somebody else. It was the last straw that broke the camel's back, but actually somebody else had built up all this tension with him, and then he took it out on my me because he thought I was that guy. I don't know, and when I tried to talk to him, he wouldn't talk to me. So I thought maybe it was just a misunderstanding, but then at the same time I thought, "I can get my content in Forbes through other ways. I don't have to be the guy who published it." Maybe this is better anyway, because if I can go pitch an article then I can put myself in that article, and I get more traction out of that. I took it as an opportunity to change up the way I was getting content out there and take more a traditional PR approach. Pitching articles rather than writing them all myself. It's worked out

fine. I have no complaints.

ANDY BALDACCI

All right. After expanding your reach by posting on all these different publications, there still is value in looking at other channels to develop your authority. So have you started looking beyond just written content on blogs?

JOSH STEIMLE

Yes. The one thing that I wish I had been doing earlier, and I knew I should have, was video. You've seen how hot video is with Gary Vaynerchuk and his Ask Gary V Show. Casey Neistat. All these other influencers are out there using video, and I knew I should be doing this, but video's tough. It's hard to put your face out there. You're like, "Oh, I don't look good today, and I'm uncomfortable. I don't look at the camera right. My smile looks funny." It's so easy to get caught up on all this superficial stuff.

Also, video's hard because you make a mistake and either you roll with it, or you edit it, or you go back and start over again. Whereas with writing, you make a mistake, you take five seconds, you fix it. No big deal. And with writing, even if I publish it, I can come back three months later and say, "I want to revise this" and change things. With video, you can't do that. So I stayed out of video for all the normal reasons, but I knew I needed to jump into it because I knew other people were not doing it, so there was an opportunity for me to make a little niche for myself.

So just lately I've started doing video. I've got a YouTube channel set up, and now we're doing it for MWI. We're doing it for this Influencer Inc thing I'm launching, which is an initiative to help people become influencers. I've started doing more video. It's not like I've done it long enough to get huge traction, but I'm seeing great results from just the little bit that I've done. I'm getting leads from it. I'm getting positive feedback. I'm able to help people. Even if I put out a video and it just gets 100 views, hey, that's still a 100 people that I'm influencing. When one of those people comes back to me and says, "Hey, I watched your video, and I went and I did this thing that you recommended, and it worked and it's changing my business," that makes it worth it. I don't care if 100 people watch it versus 10 thousand. If I can influence one person that way and get one view on the video, that's worth it to me. So I'm really enjoying video right now.

ANDY BALDACCI

So many agency owners in particular, and business owners of all kinds, they overemphasize the exact numbers in terms of reach of video, of blogs, of whatever. But especially as an agency owner, influencing just a small handful of the right people can have a disproportionate impact on your business. Especially when clients are worth tens of thousands of dollars over the lifetime of an engagement with you. You don't need to have a massive audience to have a real impact on your bottom line at the end of the day.

JOSH STEIMLE

No. You get a few of the right connections, and that can make all the difference in the world.

ANDY BALDACCI

I'm curious. You can build a good sized agency on the back of authority is the way you've approached it so far. How much of your revenue, of your new clients today, do you attribute to this type of marketing effort?

JOSH STEIMLE

I'd say 80, 90 percent of our clients come through content marketing/PR. The rest would be SEO and word of mouth type stuff. I might be a little off on that, but definitely the clear majority has come through content marketing and PR and articles that I'm putting out there.

ANDY BALDACCI

Roughly how big is MWI today?

JOSH STEIMLE

In terms of revenue, we're approaching three million a year. In terms of staff, we've got just over 20 people full-time, and then we have a large number of contractors that we use regularly.

ANDY BALDACCI

This is a question I usually ask at the end, but for you I want to ask this first because I have a few other questions around it. What are the long-term goals for MWI?

JOSH STEIMLE

When I started this agency, it was in 1999, and I was researching large digital agencies that were just starting. I mean, this was a new thing. Companies like Razorfish, Sapient, agency.com, back when you had .com on your name. So these were some of the big agencies I was looking at at the time, and that's what I wanted to create, not just a regional boutique agency or a specialist agency. I wanted to create one of these huge consulting firm agencies, but I wanted to do it in a new, different way that wasn't the old paradigm of the way businesses are run. I wanted to build the place people love to work at, and I wanted to do it at scale. I wanted to make it big. That's what I started out with, and that's always been the dream.

That's what was killing me all these years. This is what I want to accomplish, and here I've been doing this for 10 years, and I can't even get past half a million. I'm not even getting a start. When things started going better in 2013, bringing on my partner and looking at this, we started developing systems and processes and scaling. Now we're saying, "How do we create new offices around the world? How do we set up the systems? How do we manage these people? What type of people can we recruit to manage each of these individual offices?"

Now it's getting exciting because finally, after 17 years of failure and lessons learned, we're making traction to the point where I can see that hey, 10 years down the line we might have two thousand, three thousand, six thousand employees working all around the world in multiple offices. That's what we want to create.

I had this amazing crazy opportunity about three weeks ago. I went to Necker Island in the Caribbean and met Richard Branson. It was this crazy thing. It came out of nowhere. Somebody invited me to this event, and it was all these marketing executives and ad agency people, and I'm sitting there like, I'm this tiny guy. I run a 25-person agency. I'm sitting next to this guy, and I'm like, "What do you do, Brian?" "Oh, I'm the head of Mediavest, and we own Publicis, the largest PR firm in the world with tens of thousand of employees." They have to spend 14 billion on behalf of their clients every year. And I'm just like, "I run a little agency. It's a little smaller than yours." I'm sitting next to Gary Vaynerchuk's partner who had helped him grow Vayner Media from 10 people to 600 people.

I'm sitting next to all these people, and I'm like, "This is what I want to do." These people aren't talking about tens of thousands of dollars. They're talking about hundreds of millions and billions. They're doing work for Nike and Under Armour and all these huge brands. I'm looking at this, and I'm like, "This is the level I want MWI to be on. This is my goal. I want to make it this big, but I don't want to do this at the cost of quality and culture."

For us, culture and the quality of the work come first. If we have to choose between size and quality and culture, we'll choose quality and culture every day, but if we can get the quality and the culture right and we can start scaling that and we can manage that... Well, then I feel like we have an obligation to grow this because I feel like we're doing something good in the world. We're making a difference, and if we can make a positive difference in the world, I don't want to keep that to just changing the lives of 50 employees. I want to spread that to hundreds of people. I want to change all sorts of things in the world and make a big impact. So our first focus is the quality and the culture, but if we can get that right, then we want to scale this, and we want to grow this, and we want to make the largest digital marketing agency in the world.

ANDY BALDACCI

Wow. Obviously a ton will change as you grow and continue to scale, but other than making sure the fit and the culture are there, what do you see as being the biggest challenge you'll have to face down the road?

JOSH STEIMLE

Hiring. I have this idea as an entrepreneur, and maybe it's my religious background, but I want to believe people can improve and can become better and can change and can become different people. So sometimes I hire people looking at the vision of what's possible,

and I don't pay enough attention to who they are today and their proven track record. Then they come inside the company, and they don't perform. They don't fit, and I'm just like, "Oh, you just need to change this and this and this. You can do this. You've got all this potential." And then two months go by and we have to fire that person, because we realize they're not changing. They're not doing things differently. They are who they were when we hired them. I feel there's this balance between mercy and justice, and I think I'm too much on the side of mercy and not enough on the side of justice, and it hurts the business sometimes.

So the main thing is we've got to hire the right people from the get-go. We look for three things in the people we hire. We look for competence, we look for culture, and we look for hustle. Competence means they can do the job. Whatever we're hiring them to do. If it's social media marketing, they know how to do social media marketing. Just basic competence at the job. That's number one. Number two is culture. When I say culture, we hire people who are nice, people who are easy to work with. Google did a study. They spent millions of dollars trying to figure out what the ideal employee is, and they figured out nice people. Those are the ideal employees. So we look at that and say, "Yeah, we need nice people that are easy to work with, that you can talk to, that are reasonable, that don't get bent out of shape when you give them constructive feedback." Things like that. Then we look for hustle. When I say hustle, I don't mean just working hard or being fast or looking busy all the time. When we say hustle, we mean ownership. We want people who look at something and take ownership of it. They say, "I'm going to handle this the way I would handle it if I owned this, if this were my business," when they're looking at a client. So those are the three things that feed into our overall culture, and those are type of people we bring in and that we've seen perform well within MWI.

ANDY BALDACCI

Wow. You gave us so much in that and then in all the information before this. I'm just trying to unpack it all in my brain, and I'm a little worried about going through the show notes will be like because there is so much to cover. I'm going to have tell Matt that he did a great job because you lived up to the hype, but before we say goodbye, I like to ask all of my guests a few rapid fire questions. I'll go through them quickly. Your answers don't need to be too short, though. First, what do you spend too much time doing now?

JOSH STEIMLE

I spend too much time on tasks that could be done by somebody that I can pay 10 dollars an hour to do. The reason I do that is because we need to hire 10 people, and I can't afford to hire a personal assistant right now, but man, I really need a personal assistant. I would advise entrepreneurs to seriously consider hiring a personal assistant early on in their careers because let's say that 60 percent of your time, two-thirds of your time, is taken up doing work that you could hire somebody to do for 10, 15 bucks an hour. That means that you're only doing 30 percent of what you could do, and if you could offload another third of what you're doing to somebody else, you would double what you are doing.

How much would you pay to have a clone of yourself and double yourself? Now look at how much a personal assistant costs. You know, if I wanted to duplicate myself, I'd have to go hire somebody for 150, 200 thousand dollars, but I can go hire a personal assistant for 30 or 40 thousand dollars. Then I can do twice as much work without spending twice as much time at the office. I've doubled myself for 30 thousand dollars instead of 150 thousand dollars. So I would get started on that earlier because man, there's so much stuff I need to offload right now, and it just kills me that I'm doing work that I know anybody out there could do.

ANDY BALDACCI

The second one is, if all of that low value work was wiped off of your plate, what would you then spend more time doing?

JOSH STEIMLE

I would spend a lot more time setting up the systems for expanding our offices and working on manual text. Creating a book on how we go into Singapore or the Philippines and open an office of MWI there. That's a big focus right now. I would like to map that all out and say, "Here's a checklist that we can run down, and we can scale at these offices quickly." Then I'd be focusing on going out there and finding the right people to bring in to head up those offices.

ANDY BALDACCI

What are you hoping to accomplish in the next quarter?

JOSH STEIMLE

I'm here in Shenzhen, China, and we're looking to get an office up and running here. It's kind of up and running, but I'm the one running it, so we're looking to bring in other people to run it and head up the office. I'm hoping within the next quarter that's all finalized, we've got that going. We're talking to somebody in Singapore about starting an office there. We're talking to another guy about opening an office in New York City. If we could get those three things done, that would be incredible, but I'd be happy if we just get one of those things done, and it's successful and up and running.

ANDY BALDACCI

Yeah. Usually, when I ask the goal about the next quarter, I don't hear about opening multiple offices, but I'm excited to see how that all works out. Honestly, seeing the drive that you have and how far you've come and the systems that you have in place, I'm sure the future is very bright for MWI. Before we say goodbye though, I just wanted to ask. If listeners want to follow your story, if they want to see what you are up to at MWI and you personally, where is the best place for them to go?

JOSH STEIMLE

Best place is my personal blog. It's joshsteimle.com.

ANDY BALDACCI

Awesome. I'll make sure to get that link up in the show notes. Josh, I just want to say thanks so much for coming on the show today. It was a lot of fun chatting.

JOSH STEIMLE

Thank you so much, Andy, for the opportunity.