

Transcript

Krystal Hobbs 0:04

Welcome to Beyond the Tools, the podcast that helps contractors attract more leads, grow their business, and finally get off the tools. In each episode, you'll discover marketing tactics that work. You'll get actionable insights from other successful contractors, and connect with experts to help you grow. I'm your host, Krystal Hobbs, owner of a social media agency that helps contractors attract and convert more leads. Get ready to take your business to the next level so you can finally enjoy the fruits of your hard labor. Ready, let's go!

Hey, contractors, welcome back to Beyond the Tools. In this week's episode, I speak with Megan Bedford, who is the founder and chairwoman of Desk Free Nation. Megan has a really interesting background because she started working with Home Services way back when she was doing advertising sales for the Yellow Pages. But then she start her own agency focused exclusively on home services companies and franchises. She grew that company, merged it with another digital agency, and in 2017, she sold it to Scorpion. In 2018, she founded Desk Free Nation which essentially is all about helping with the labor shortage and being able to show young people the benefits of working with the trades, and what a fantastic fulfilling career it can be.

So in today's interview, we have a great chat about what she's seen as she's transitioned, essentially, from being an agency world to working inside her clients' businesses when it comes to their marketing and the bigger picture items that come along with that and setting yourself up for success. We also talk about how you can work with your marketing team a little bit better, whether they are in an agency, in-house or consulting firm. And then we dive into how you really need people, of course, to be able to fuel that growth. So we talk about how to make your company more attractive to new untapped markets when it comes to labor. And also how you can get involved so that more young people are considering the trades and instead of being reactive, you're being proactive about a solution to this huge problem that we've talked about a lot on this show. So without further ado, let's go right over to Megan.

Megan, I am so thrilled to have you here on the Beyond the Tools Podcast.

Megan Bedford 2:56

I'm excited to be here.

Krystal Hobbs 2:58

So I know you moved from running an agency that worked with home service and contracting businesses and now a lot of the work that you do is alongside or even inside a client's business. What would you say has been like the biggest shift or the biggest difference for you in that work and what you're able to do now versus then?

Megan Bedford 3:21

So much. On the agency side, when I was talking to a client, I was really analyzing numbers. So ROI, KPIs, what's working and what's not, but when you're in internally, in a business, you get such a different view, because what you don't focus so much on the agency side is what happens to that lead when it comes in after. And so what I'm able to see is, okay, well, how are we performing with booking these calls now and what does that look like? And I'm not just focusing on digital marketing so much. It's really like this big picture of what the company wants to accomplish and I'm able to kind of work with other agencies to fit in all the pieces. Before, I used to be the one held accountable, and now I get to help everybody else. That's fun.

Krystal Hobbs 4:17

That's awesome. Definitely a shift there, I'm sure. And I guess, I'm sure a lot of our listeners are working with agencies or consultants, how can they set up that marketing team for success?

Megan Bedford 4:33

So I think one of the biggest challenges that I've seen in the industry is that a lot of home service companies are great at running their business. But when it comes to SEO, pay per click and LSAs, and all of these marketing terms becomes very complicated in a lot of ways. And so, for them, if an agency tells you something's working, you kind of say, "Okay, I believe you." But do you really know? And I used to witness kind of home service companies go from one agency to another. And every time you have to make that switch, it kind of takes you back 10 steps. So how can you avoid that? How can you partner up with a company that you can rely on and know that's really going to do their job? And then do you have someone in place to kind of hold them accountable as well. So the first kind of advice that I offer any home service company is to know your numbers first. Because you can't. You will have no clue what's working and what's not for your business. If you don't have tracking lines in place and you don't have a clear picture of what is giving you a return on investment and what's not, it's really hard to make decisions without data. So, when you're partnering with an agency, I'm very skeptical of partnering with agencies that don't have experience in-

home services. When you compare a home service business to an attorney, let's say an attorney could get one job for the whole year. And that's it. We're a lead generation business. You need to have constant leads come in, especially if you're a bigger company. And that supply chain of leads is so important that an agency really can make or break you especially if you haven't been in that marketplace for a long time and you're really relying on a lot of new people to come in new customers. So the first piece of advice is to partner with somebody that has experience in home services. Partner with somebody that has a track record, that you can talk to other clients and see. Talk to them and see how their performances. You might not want to partner with the same agency for pay per click, LSAs, SEO and social. A lot of companies that I come across have specialties and one of them may be SEO, and you don't have to be with the same agency for all of them. And I think to expect that from an agency is expecting you to be the best at everything, too. We all have things that we specialize in. So those are some like high-level things that I will look at an agency. When it comes to an in-house marketing person, that can be harder, right? Because finding somebody that understands home services and all the different ways to bring in leads can be challenging. And I know that's difficult. A lot of the owners handle it themselves. So we can expand on that. But definitely, somebody that understands Home Services is important.

Krystal Hobbs 7:41

That's logical. And I think I really like the idea of several different agencies specializing in different topics. We specialize in lead generation on social media since I get calls all the time. So I'll be getting calls about SEO, or can you fix my website and other such things. I'd love to be able to handle everything. However, I believe that working with an agency that is solely focused on one area is the greatest way to achieve the best results in that channel.

Megan Bedford 8:12

Yes, and I'm frequently asked about this issue, but many agencies will refuse to work with a company that already has a website designed by another firm. They'd always question, "Why won't they?" I suggested this because it's difficult to go in and solve other people's problems if you're doing SEO and the site, including the sitemap and navigation, isn't constructed appropriately. You can also fix content, but many businesses would rather start over and construct the proper navigation from the ground up. So that's something else. You can't expect someone to take your shoddy website

and turn it into something usable. Great. And that is a misunderstanding. And now that I've been on both sides, I can honestly say that I agree in many respects.

Krystal Hobbs 9:00

Absolutely. So now that you're working in the consulting side of things and looking at the bigger picture, I know you mentioned booking rates is that one of the biggest bottlenecks that you work on with a lot of your clients.

Megan Bedford 9:17

Booking right is a big thing. Thanks to the pandemic and home services. A lot of companies are up. We've had really strong years but I think the biggest issue will always be around recruiting and lack of technicians. I feel like it's always this ongoing thing. A lot of the time, I see where you have to shut down electrical or something because you don't have enough technicians. So, marketing and headcount go hand in hand. If you don't have the headcount, you can't really handle more leads. So it all goes into the same funnel. I think we all contend to be reactive in these situations like, "I'll react when the phones are ringing" or "I'll react when I lose the text." You should always be recruiting. And you should always be preparing for a downturn or recession. Meaning, look at yourself now, in the quiet times like this was a great time during the pandemic. If at first, like, take a step back and look at your business. If you were doing a search for a plumber in your area, would you pick up the phone and call yourself? Do you look appealing? Are your reviews good? If you are looking to go work for a new plumbing agency, go to your careers page, would you pick up the phone and apply there? So, I'm really trying to be, and one of the most important things I try to tell people is to not be reactionary. Always be working on your SEO, your presence, your reviews, and your recruiting on an ongoing basis. And yes, your internal functions are extremely important. But everything goes together, I don't think you can put one thing in as being more important than another.

Krystal Hobbs 11:11

You can't grow if you don't have the people there to be able to fulfill the work and the leads that you're driving. So, Megan, I know you have huge in-depth expertise in email marketing. And I always say email is like one of the most underrated tools, what have you seen in terms of missed opportunities when it comes to email marketing for your clients?

Megan Bedford 11:37

It's funny because when I own my agency, we didn't focus on email marketing at all. And

it was more like an internal thing for a shot to do. And I have definitely made that a priority since ServiceTitan launched Marketing Pro, it makes it super easy, because the database is already in there. So for my clients, email marketing is an absolute. It's a great way to follow up with your existing customer especially if you're a multi-faceted business and you offer electrical, plumbing, HVAC, many of those customers may be only used you for one of those services. So one is an auto drip campaign. So, I call it as my salesperson that's able to follow up with a customer without having a whole sales team calling, because many of you guys don't have a sales team. So, if you have an estimate that you've given out for each return and haven't heard back from the customer, you can set up a drip campaign that says, "Hey, thanks for utilizing us and allowing us to give you an estimate." And then, maybe five days later, you say, "Hey, just to remind you, we offer 0% financing. Our clients say amazing things about us. You should pick up the phone and call us." And let's assume you still haven't closed that estimate or booked that project, after another seven days you might give them an irresistible offer to say, "Hey, last time and a follow-up with you, I'll give you a 10% discount on your installation or something." So drip campaigns are something you set up once it's going out to those open unsold estimations automatically. And you'll be surprised at how much business it brings in as well as the ability to contact them on a monthly basis about whatever's going on, whether it's a reminder for a tune-up, a special holiday, or something educational that's just for them. And it's not *salesy*. I can't stress how vital it is to state that email marketing will have a cost per lead as low as \$8. And it's that ongoing reminder to your existing consumer base, I'm still here, and I'm not going anywhere. These are the services we provide so that when they have a need for your company, they'll be able to say, "I got an email from them. I'm going to pick up the phone and dial her number." So, I'm a huge fan of email marketing and can't say enough good things about it.

Krystal Hobbs 14:05

Yes, that is extremely crucial. As business owners, we're frequently focused on the new and shiny, just trying to get people in the door, but we forget that we have a customer base that will likely utilize us again and again, or at the very least suggest us to others. So, with Desk Free Nation, I'm curious as to what you're doing to help with the major issue of not having enough text and a labor supply, so to speak.

Megan Bedford 14:39

Desk Free Nation started when I was still on the agency side. And I remember talking to a business owner and they said, "Megan, I do more marketing with your company. We

just don't have the technicians." And I just thought to myself that day, well, who's doing anything about this? Who's really solving the issue? Because I was just watching all these companies recruit from other companies, and that's just putting a band-aid over. It's not solving the issue which is young people aren't entering the skilled trades. So, I'm a little tenacious at times, so we started Desk Free Nation. And we really didn't know where we were going to go. We started on a national level. And the idea was to use storytelling to get kids interested in the skilled trades. Fast forward pandemic happens, we have to regroup, really not a great time to go fundraise for something. Then a grant dropped into my lap to develop these skilled trades career simulation games. And I thought it was fantastic to be able to bring the skilled trades back into local schools, from elementary to high school, and introduce young children to the possibility of being a plumber, electrician, HVAC specialist, or welder. And so these are the work. So that's kind of our first initiative. First, we have to get kids interested, right? We have to show them that the trades even exist because if you talk to a lot of kids that have never been exposed to the trades, they wouldn't even really know anything about them. So that's first. And then, let's be real. There's a big stigma that surrounds the skilled trades with parents and kids. And, I would say school counselors are less now, they're very interested in the skilled trades, but definitely the influence or being a parent. So, how do we show the success and awesome careers these are to young people and parents? We got to show them stories of people that are actually experiencing these jobs. They're educated, and they're having great success, and they don't have any debt. So those are some of the things we're working on right now and I'm really excited about where it goes this year. But I think without that younger funnel, with the number of baby boomers that are going to be retiring, the skilled trades, as we all know, are in trouble. We've seen it for years, and it's getting worse. So we're not going to fix the problem anymore by taking tests from one company to another. We have to really go inward and fix this problem by getting new blood into the trades.

Krystal Hobbs 17:27

Absolutely. And I know one of our past guests, Aaron Gaynor talked about it in exchange for labor, right? You're not creating anything new, you're just kind of taking from your competitors. So I love the idea of trying to build up that supplying that interest early. So with your simulators, is this literally I put on a headset, now I'm a plumber, I'm going to house some fixing a dream kind of thing?

Megan Bedford 17:54

Yes, you will be able to download these games onto an Oculus headset. And you put on

the headset, and you're instantly transported to a home. As a result, our surroundings serve as a home. Perhaps your first step will be to repair a leaking faucet. After that, you can go ahead and install a ceiling fan or a USB outlet. Then there's the possibility of having to tune up a furnace. So you're handing them a reel and picking up the tools, physically picking up the tools that you'd use for that job and doing it. So a young person can feel proud and accomplished and wonder, "Did you even like that? Was there something that piqued your interest?" Then, if you have this level of interest, it's a matter of funneling these young people to areas where they can either go to technical school and learn a skill or go directly to a company and work as an apprentice. So it's about building those linkages, which is great, but I believe the stigma and curiosity should come first, followed by working on the system flow with stores and local technical schools.

Krystal Hobbs 19:10

Yeah, I think that brings up an important question, and we've had some guests on the podcast, like Chad Peterman, who founded a trade school at his company. And clearly, if you're a large company with a large crew, that's one way to go about it. But what about your own personal experience? Some of the smaller businesses, or even those that don't want to go down that road, how can they build that connection with young people, or even, as you mentioned, restaurant workers or women, or any of these untapped labor markets, how can they make those connections?

Megan Bedford 19:54

I think it's fantastic timing right now because there was a point, perhaps during the crisis, when a lot of people paused to consider their professions and asked themselves, "Do I really want to do this?" I've heard of folks in the restaurant industry making a successful transition into the skilled trades. And a lot of that is why, when telling a tale about the trades, you should tell it to people who have transitioned into other careers, not simply young people who are succeeding. Many women are having, if you just go on Instagram and look at some of these young women who are in the skilled professions, they're having a blast and there's nothing they can't accomplish. And it's just so encouraging to me. I just chatted with a woman who spent ten years as an English teacher and came from a family of educators. And then she was finished. She was exhausted and burnt out. She started thinking about vocations, saying things like, "I like working with my hands and I believe I'd really want to study a skilled craft." And she looked into plumbing and its possibilities. Then she began calling businesses and interviewing them to see if they would provide an apprenticeship. She found one and it

was a perfect match. She's been in her apprenticeship for about two years. Her ambition is to become a master plumber and possibly open her own business. Also, that's a really cool story. Those are the things I want to tell people because, as a parent, you're going to think, "Oh, my god, that sounds exactly like my kid. That's something I could picture my child doing now."

Krystal Hobbs 21:32

If you can see it, you can be it. It's definitely part of that, absolutely. So, I guess looking at that then and the work you're doing with Desk Free Nation, how do companies get involved? How do they take advantage of these interests that you're creating?

Megan Bedford 21:55

So, I believe our games will be ready to debut in the next month or so this year. So companies will have options to collaborate and sponsor headsets to get into schools to put sponsorship in the game at a local level if they want to. But you can also raise your hand and say, "Look, I can do a ride and decide in my shop" or "I have a terrific apprenticeship in my shop" because the purpose is to construct across the country. When young people show an interest, there are resources available to them, whether it's a school or a local shop. And school counselors are frantic for information on where to send students who would be a good fit for the skilled trades right now. So, if you feel like you have that capacity and capability right now, I would say, go into a school and ask if you can talk to kids and build that connection today, even if you don't have someone like us. Because you never know what it might become. Also, I heard this guy's tale, and this is how he recruits the majority of the time. He goes to gas stations and just talks to folks about, hey, and I'm not sure why he goes to gas stations, but I suppose that's how he meets a lot of technicians. But, for me, it's about whether you can participate in a community career fair, talk to people, and let them know that you're in the community and that you provide fantastic possibilities for individuals to develop a life skill. I believe that we often do not and that we simply go about our business. And I know we're all busy and especially when you own a home service business, you're so busy. But if you don't take that step back, and work on that, as the fundamental recruiting aspect, and make some inroads, it's going to be a lot more challenging growing that business down the line.

Krystal Hobbs 23:58

Definitely. So, in light of future talent, new generations, and a variety of other factors, how does a contracting firm make their workplace more appealing? Because I believe that a lot of the time, they think about their operations and how to develop the business,

but they don't think about the culture or how to make their workplaces more appealing to new employees.

Megan Bedford 24:31

Yes, I believe that many business owners still have the idea that "people must adapt to my way of doing things." It's as if they're saying, "No, not this generation; we'll have to adjust to them." So, after interviewing a number of younger individuals, I discovered that what they really desire is a little flexibility. I'm seeing a lot of younger individuals who want to work four days a week and take three days off, and the proper firm will let you do that. So flexibility is really essential to this younger generation, as is the concept that they have a clear road to their future, a clear path to success. For example, what will this look like in five years? Are they in a classroom setting where they are learning something? I believe one of the things they enjoy about what they do is how much they learn every day. Then I ask a lot of the females I've interviewed about working in an environment where they're largely surrounded by men. And the vast majority of them have found themselves in great settings where they feel safe and at ease, with no problems. That, I believe, is fantastic. That is what I would expect from you wherever you work. And I believe you will see more women in this sector, where you will no longer be the lone lady in the shop, but rather one of many. As a result, I've discovered that adaptability is crucial; a sense of belonging, the ability to learn, and then a route to follow. What that entails for them are all critical considerations. And, of course, there's the matter of the environment.

Krystal Hobbs 26:08

Yeah, I think those are really practical things. Anybody listening could do.

Megan Bedford 26:14

Absolutely. And, for example, the chefs I've spoken with who have transitioned, individuals who have worked in the restaurant industry, what's really amazing is that they went from working evenings for their entire lives and not being able to see their children, and now we have the ability to work as if it were a regular job while yet being able to spend time with our family at night. That is greatly appreciated by them. So it's like these tiny things that people were just fed up with and being able to shift to a different career that matches their family's needs feels great.

Krystal Hobbs 26:53

I love that. One of my account managers, Kelsey, she's awesome. And she came from

food and beverage, and like, evenings and weekends off, like, what you do with all this time? My shift ends when you say it ends, really?

Megan Bedford 27:09

And just not having to bring your job home with you. Once you're off that job site, and you finished your job for the day, you're not really bringing it home with you. And for some that feels wonderful, too.

Krystal Hobbs 27:23

Yes, I think it's amusing that you mentioned the environment because I'm a member of a handful of HVAC Facebook groups. And I know there's one female tech in there who said, "How do you guys use the restroom throughout the workday?" Like, "Do you ask your customers whether you can go in?" And I believe that something as simple as visiting the restroom is something that their employer may not be considering as part of their daily routine.

Megan Bedford 27:55

That's a good point. I don't even think about that.

Krystal Hobbs 28:00

Awesome. So, Megan, I know that anybody listening is definitely going to want to hear more about what you're up to both on the consulting side as well as with Desk Free Nation. So where's the best place for them to learn more about you?

Megan Bedford 28:19

All my contact information is on Desk Free Nation. I don't have a website for my consulting company. Megan Bedford under LinkedIn has my contact information as well. But literally, all my information is right on deskfreenation.org.

Krystal Hobbs 28:33

Excellent. Well, thank you so much, Megan. I really appreciate you being on the show.

Megan Bedford 28:39

It's been great. Thank you for having me.

Krystal Hobbs 28:45

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Beyond the Tools. If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review wherever you get your podcast. I'd love it if you could also share this episode with a fellow contractor who is ready to get off the tools and grow their business. And if you want more leads, sign up for our email list at reflectivemarketing.com where we share weekly marketing insights that you can't get

anywhere else. I'm Krystal Hobbs and I hope you'll join me on the next episode of Beyond the Tools. See you next time!