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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 95: RYAN MALONE – THE REMOTE WORKFORCE

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, over the past few years, organizations have wrestled with the concept of remote employment. Having employees who work from home. Much has been written about the effectiveness of the remote worker and how to lead a remote or virtual team. A recent Gallup study revealed that more Americans are working remotely. Yet not all industries and organizations have embraced the concept, as many companies struggle to find the sweet spot. One organization has gone all in with a 100 percent remote workforce, and it's been a big success. SmartBug Media is an award-winning full-service inbound marketing agency with clients in several industries. Its CEO founded SmartBug to provide clients with outstanding results while offering employees a fulfilling life outside the office. SmartBug Media CEO Ryan Malone joins us on the podcast today to discuss how a fully remote workforce can produce winning results.

Ken White

Well, Ryan, thank you for taking the time to be with us today. It's great to have you on the podcast.

Ryan Malone

Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Ken White

So SmartBug Media, you know, I think a lot of people would see and say, oh, it's an agency or maybe a digital agency. How do you explain and describe it to people what you do? What your organization does?

Ryan Malone

So we are a we do what's called intelligent inbound marketing for revenue growth, and that's kind of way where we have positioned ourself. And what that means is that we

combine several different strategies to help companies increase their lead flow, their sales pipeline, and how they interact and create goodwill with customers that have been closed. So we use things like inbound marketing, which is a combination of Search Engine Optimization and blogging, and content marketing. We use things like public relations and web development, and sales enablement to create. Effectively a marketing system for companies that starts from the time that they've defined a product and they're going to market. All the way to the time where they need to provide a reasonably qualified lead to a sales team. I think what's unique about us is that we've got about 36 full-time people in 15 states. We're 100 percent remote, and that model has been very good for us for a number of different reasons, which I can get into later if you'd like.

Ken White

Yeah. I mean that that is absolutely phenomenal. I mean, anyone with agency experience knows what that world is like and to be successful in 100 percent remote. Where did you even come up with that idea?

Ryan Malone

There was really two things when I used to run marketing for technology companies, and I was working at an early-stage network security company, and a good friend of mine who I worked with earlier in my career was at the tail end of his career and was working for me at the time, and we won an award for a client, and our CEO insisted that he go visit the client to tell them about this reward award and it was a Friday, and it was literally like a 10-minute phone call that could have been a telephone high five and call it a day, and he ended up missing his nephew's birthday party. And at that time, I real I had just gotten married, and I realized that I had decided that I wanted to start a company. And I realized that our unique thing was that it's about life memories. And the analogy that I like to use is that it's more than likely that you and I won't remember this conversation when we're retired, but you're going to remember the things that you do with your family this weekend. And as an employer, if I can create a challenging work environment for people but give them the flexibility and the mind space to create life memories, whether that's volunteering in your kid's school or spending time with a sick grandparent, or training for a triathlon or we've had people one of our lead developers is a rock climber. So he wanted to go rock climb in Portugal for a while. So he picked up his computer and went to Portugal and did a great job. If we can do that, then it addresses a whole bunch of issues from tenure to talent to culture to employee happiness and all kinds of things, and so we decided to do a remote model because we felt like if we did a partial remote model or a headquarters with a few satellite people that those satellite people would never really be in the know as much as if we were to do 100 percent remote model and remove all of those barriers.

Ken White

That's fascinating. I can't imagine. Yeah. People are so extremely happy with life. They're gonna bring their A-game to work every day then.

Ryan Malone

Exactly.

Ken White

How do you create a culture when no one you don't see each other, you're not in the same facility in the same building? How did you go about that?

Ryan Malone

Well, the first thing is it all starts with hiring. So you know, there are kind of the litmus test we use, and we hire people as we'll ask a question around like what's the first thing that you like to do socially when you come into the office on a Monday. And what we're trying and what we found out is that the people who like their social life really depends on coming in, going cube to cube, and talking about the weekend, and that's really what drives their entire kind of identity. They don't work really well remote. The people that work really well remote are the people who really want to do quality work. They don't want as many distractions. Yeah, they have friends at work, but they also have a lot of friends outside, and they have an identity outside of work, and they're very driven and accountable. And so if you start with that, it's kind of like, you know, a basketball analogy they always say you can't coach height. It's just something that you have, and it's the same with this. You have to have a certain kind of DNA and disposition from a personality perspective to handle remote, I think. But once you have figured out how to identify and find those people, you do have to do some things that force culture a bit. For example, since we're all remote, we use video a lot. And we kind of have a video mandatory policy, and there's, you know, there's bad hair days and stuff like that, and that's fine. But in general, we have a video-only policy with ourselves and with our clients since we work in different teams as we're an agency. We try to have projects that are outside of client work, and we mix people up so they have a chance to work with each other outside of their normal teams. We have biweekly meetings, which are essentially an all-hands meeting, and they can be really silly. They could be like a baby photo contest. Where you have a chance to share something about your life that you otherwise wouldn't do, and the winner gets a prize, and it's a great way for people to get to know each other. In fact, when you start working here, your first two weeks, all you really do as have these half-hour video phone calls with the team, and the only rule is that you can't talk about work, and then finally, what we do is once a year because you still haven't seen each other at this point and you know spouse or life partner or whatever that works with on the other side of the screen from your colleague all they know is what gets interacted through the screen. So we usually fly everybody out and their families to somewhere some resort on the West

Coast, you know, like a Pelican Hill or another kind of five-star resort. We have a three-day what we call SmartBug a-palooza. It's one day of work, three days of fun, and it's a chance for these people to get to meet each other, get to know each other, get to know their families, and it's really interesting that people go from you know I've worked with you for six months but never met you do I shake your hand do I high five you uncomfortable kind of thing, and then 10 minutes later they're hugging each other and then three days later everybody's crying because they have to leave and they've never been in a place that is able to provide that. So we work really hard at it. But if you work really hard at it, it creates a really strong bond with people.

Ken White

You know, there's a lot of parallels as I listened to it talk about this in my field of education with online education, and you know the successful providers in online did not try to recreate the face-to-face experience online. They created something brand new, and it seems like that's what you've done. Forget the old rules. Let's create something new that will work with this type of individual in this type of environment. It seems to really be working.

Ryan Malone

So far, so good. Yeah.

Ken White

So how do clients react when they or do they react when they learn that this is the way the organization is organized?

Ryan Malone

It's funny. When we started, I had a mentor who said you know, this is really crazy, like, you know, you might be able to get five people, and then you're really going to have to get an office, and five people came, and he's like well you know when you get to 10 or 15 that's really kind of, and it just kept happening. And now he's a believer and recommends people do this. But clients say the client thing was interesting because, at first, you know, when you're just a couple people, it's not that big of a deal. Clients actually react in a couple different ways. Probably the ones that are most connected to the face-to-face thing will ask us if we can come out for a quarterly business review or something like that. And that's great because we love to get to see clients and, you know, check out the facilities and stuff like that. But the vast majority of the clients either say are fascinated with the fact that we're remote and depending on the consultant that they're working with and kind of where that person is located, it's kind of like they're following them in the sense that we had a gal who was a consultant of ours and she was lived kind of a nomadic life. So she had a really nice camper, and she would drive to Yosemite and live there for a month, and then she will drive to Santa Barbara and live there for a month, and they always wanted to

know where she was at. And it was kind of like this source of excitement for them. And then the third reason is that I think a lot of times clients, you know, people are so busy, and they want to get what they need to get done and have a good relationship with their agency, but they don't always want to go to lunch or have a four-hour meeting or things like that they just want to get it done. And I think that we're able to provide that with enough personality, and our culture has us becoming friends with our clients that it doesn't really matter.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Ryan Malone Founder and CEO of SmartBug Media, in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education helps companies and organizations from all over the world by creating and delivering customized business and leadership development programs. If your organization is looking to get to the next level, contact the Center for Corporate Education to discuss how we can create and deliver a program that specifically fits your needs and gets results. For more information, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Ryan Malone, CEO of SmartBug Media.

Ken White

We talk about the culture you know you have your five values that you created. Could you share that with us? Walk us through that.

Ryan Malone

Yeah, sure. Every company has values, and I think they're really really important, and we execute them. We do our annual reviews and quarterly reviews on them, and we hire based on them. The most important one, which is actually the one that wraps everything together, though, is what we call rocket for the customer. It's fundamentally the idea that you need to have empathy with the customer and the challenges that they're going through and the goals that they're trying to achieve, and the fact that they may or may not have a good day or a bad day. And you need to be in a position to be a hero if you can. So that's a really important trait for us because, at the end of the day, people hire agencies because they want peace of mind and they want to know that somebody has got their back. And that's really important. Get it done for us is about accountability which is probably the most important value you can have as a remote company because you can't really walk down the hallway and ask somebody how it's doing. So we've spent a lot of time and money to create systems and handoffs and checks and balances to make sure that things are getting done properly with the right level of quality and that there's enough space for creativity. But at the end of the day, you've got to get stuff done because your clients depend on it, your teammates depend on it. And so people that are accountable are people that we really look for. At the same time, right as a, you know, as a

digital company, you have to stay curious, and so we look for people that continuously want to learn. They're not people who always ask like hey, how do I do this. But they try to figure it out themselves first, whether it's in their personal life or their professional life. And they know that there's always something to learn, which means that they have to be open-minded to innovation in the sense that there's always a better way, your way not always may not always be the better way, and you should always listen to see if somebody else has a slightly better idea. And if they do, jump on it and incorporate it into what you do. And then the last one is just have fun because, you know, at the end of the day, like I mentioned, it's about memories, and we want you know when you hang up your, you know, your computer for the day we want people to realize that they hung out with some people that they have a lot of intellectual respect for, that they have a lot of fun with, and that they had a great time doing work for their clients. So it's really important for us, and we actually dedicate a good chunk of our interview process just to figure out how well they align with our values.

Ken White

Yeah critically important. I'm guessing the vast majority of the team would be considered millennials.

Ryan Malone

A good chunk, yeah. I'd say probably at least half, maybe a little bit more. I don't really use that word because I think I actually wrote an article about this in CNBC. But I think the millennial label is a little bit misused.

Ken White

Sure.

Ryan Malone

Because it's actually interesting if you go through and they say, you know millennials are so entitled and this and that. But it's pretty funny if you go through I looked at some data from Gen X which is what I am about what our needs and wants were back you know 10 15 20 years ago when they were at that that we were at that stage of our career and that they were almost exactly the same. And with the baby boomers, wanted were exactly the same, and so I think it's more about a function of the period of your life that you're in rather than whether you're a millennial or a Gen Xers.

Ken White

Yeah. And then, being surrounded by millennials every day in higher education, I can tell you that the future is in incredibly good hands. This is a motivated group who really knows how to get things done. Your organization, especially the remoteness of it. Do you see it

working in other sectors? If someone from other industries were to come to you. Would you encourage them to consider this?

Ryan Malone

I do, yeah, I do. I think there's there's certain things obviously where you can't. Right. Obviously, industrial manufacturing and kind of stuff like that. But if you're a service or knowledge industry, there's really no reason why you shouldn't. And I think that companies do themselves a disservice by saying, you know, we really have to have an office, and people need to collaborate, and you can't collaborate with a remote company. Well, I have proof that you can. Because yesterday we found out we won 36 Marcom awards for our creative work, and if people tell you that you can't do creative remote, then I usually point them to that list, and 24 of those were for clients. So but people, I think, are very shortsighted because that's what they've done and what they realize is it's really hard to find talent 10 miles around your office. I can find talent anywhere in North America and which gives me the opportunity to choose the best of the best. And each of them gets to spend more time with their family and spend more time doing stuff that they want to do and have a higher kind of happier demeanor, and they come to work every day, and you know there's something to be said by you know for working in your Maryland basketball shorts every day to make you happy, and I think I'm able to offer that and the people that haven't kind of come around and thought that remote is a good idea are at a disadvantage and in a way I hope that they keep doing that.

Ken White

Any less. First of all, congratulations on the Marcom awards. That's a great award. That's no small victory there. That's great. Congratulations.

Ryan Malone

Thank you.

Ken White

Any lessons learned or any stumbling blocks? If someone were to say you know, I love what I'm hearing. I want to try this. Is there something they should watch out for or anything you learned along the way you'd share?

Ryan Malone

Yeah. So one of the things that you will get hung up on is, as a business owner, you're going to. And you come from more of a in-person environment is, the first thing you're gonna wonder is are people actually doing their work. And I will tell you that for the vast majority of businesses if you hire the right people, it doesn't matter. You'll never have that question. And the reality is that, you know, based on the way you've set up your company,

whether or not somebody is getting their work done really quickly anyway, it's just the nature of running a business. That's the first thing. The second thing is that sometimes service companies have a hard time with process. So I would air on the side of creating your processes early because as you start to add remote people, you start to then have to create process for a larger and larger group that are interconnected, and it becomes a bigger lift, so if you spend a little bit of time ahead of time and fix your processes. It doesn't mean they're going to be perfect or not modified down the road but try to figure out what your system is first, and then the third thing is I recommend that you. It's really easy to use phone calls and stuff like that. But I highly recommend you use video as much as possible because the one thing you do miss when you do remote is you don't get nonverbal communication, and it's so important. And if you can have somebody on a video camera, you can just you get all that, plus you get to meet their family and their kids and get a sense of who they are as a person. So those are three things I would probably start with.

Ken White

Great advice. So bottom line, talented people who are creative and get work done, are will succeed if you give them the opportunity in a remote work environment.

Ryan Malone

Absolutely.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Ryan Malone of SmartBug Media, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization meet and exceed your goals with business and leadership development programs that fit your needs and get results. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week Ryan Malone and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Till next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.