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ACCELERATING ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS PODCAST

EPISODE
202

Stephen Christopher

Show Notes at: <http://www.aesnation.com/202>



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Best of success,



John Bowen
Co-founder, AES Nation

John Bowen: Well I am really excited today. One of the things that we all want to do is make that dent in the universe. We want to get our message out. We want to attract the right clients, the right customers, serve them well, great value for them and by doing that in our own enlightened self-interest, create tremendous value for ourselves as well. And this what capitalism is all about. And I've got a fellow entrepreneur today who is just an amazing individual. You're going to love him because he's gone on a journey that many of us have done. He is one of those persistent entrepreneurs. He's out there making a difference and stuff happens.

We all talk about nobody gets out of life unscarred and certainly no entrepreneur whatsoever has ever done that. But what we have is a remarkable individual entrepreneur who with his persistency and really going through the market changes had identifies his unique strength, his unique skill where he's creating tremendous value in his market and each of these different markets. And he's going to share with us when being persistent but also knowing when to pivot. And learning how you can leverage some of the digital marketing tools to attract even more clients. This is a two for, so you don't want to miss this. Stay tuned we'll be right there.

Thank you for joining us here. It's just amazing opportunity. You and I have known each other through mastermind groups, we've done some car events together. We share some similar passions and vices along the way, but I want to share your message with our audience. First of all, thank you for joining us.

Stephen Christopher: John thanks so much for having on man. I really appreciate it and yes, we've certainly shared some fun and entertaining experiences together over the last couple years.

John: Well this is so important. I want to give Jason a shout out at mastermind talks is where we met. And just runs a phenomenal program. Not only entrepreneurs we want to help each other and really learn and one of the things I've gotten to know you Stephen, you are a resource to that group and to many others on really being a persistent entrepreneur who's pivoted and who's made a difference and really had that core strength to the digital marketing. What I want to do before we go too far is 'because I want to share the lessons that you've learned in your businesses and what's really worked for you and how many, you've helped so many clients do this as well. But how did you, give us a little bit of this backstory.

Stephen: If you really want to go back to the entrepreneur in me, when I was 14 years old I started a mobile car detailing business. Where I would say, "Hey I'll go to your house and detail your car." Well I was 14, I couldn't drive. So luckily back then I was a cute kid, so I convinced people to drive their car to my house and leave it.

John: That's an important part of mobile there. That branding.

Stephen: Unfortunately I kind of lost of the cute kid piece so I don't think I can pull that off any more. That was really what kind of got me started and I just knew it was so fun for me to be in control of my own income and my own time. I could work when I wanted to work and I could work as hard as I wanted to work and I saw direct correlation to that reward. I've been an entrepreneur for a long time but really my first I guess you would call my first real business where we had office space lease and employees and those types of things was a mortgage company that started around 2005 and ended abruptly in 2008 which I'm sure a lot of people listening and watching know it probably exactly why that was.

We, me and a partner built up a mortgage company where we dealt with higher net worth investors. People that wanted to buy rental properties which was a huge piece of the mortgage industry back then. The company itself actually went really well. We grew it really quick. That's where I learned digital marketing. I learned what SEO was, so I was gathering all these skills but in 2008 when the market crashed I also learned that business wasn't actually as easy as I thought it was because back then I was I like, oh what are people complaining about? This business stuff isn't hard. You just open a door and build a website. You get business. And people come to you. And you have money. I quickly realized that that wasn't truly the case long term. I learned a lot about foresight and paying attention to what's coming down in the future from that mortgage company.

Then I went on to start a digital marketing agency in 2009. I ran that until 2014 and I sold that because I had a 50/50 partnership that we had different ideas of what you do when you become successful. Mine was you work harder, and you reinvest in the company. His was, you don't do that. So, learned a lot of lessons about partnerships with that. How to get out of them. How to get into them the right way in the future. And so, sold that in 2014, walked away the next day and said, "All right, I have nothing. I have no company, I can't take any of our existing employees. I can't take any clients." So, in 2014 I started my current digital marketing agency Seequs Digital Marketing from just me with a phone and a computer again. And going out and getting clients and this'll be our third, this'll be this company's third year in business. We've grown 900 something percent over the last couple years. We'll close about 18 employees right now with some pretty big plans over the next couple years.

John: It is interesting cause when you talk with friends who are entrepreneurs we can relate really quickly that I do as a financial guy, I do remember 2008, 2009. It was fairly significant in the financial market, real estate and financial were probably the two hardest hits. The only upturn was in the bankruptcy type side. The bankruptcy attorney friends that I had did well. This is Stephen one of the things I want to go into because this is none of us get out of life unscarred. We get hit repeatedly with I always call it the two by four effect. Stuff happens. You're going along. You're really building a great business. We're passionate about doing what we're doing. Each of the businesses you had, you were passionate, you were making a

difference and then stuff happens. And particularly when you have something like 2008, 2009, our revenue went down 45%.

Had I not been a fairly affluent individual with easy access to capital, it might have been different. We rode it through and the whole thing. But there was certainly no shortage of businesses that went in a different direction. In our case it got us into the digital marketing because prior to that it was exclusive just corporate business where the big brokerage firms, the private banks were hiring us for consulting. We said, "No, let's work direct with advisors." We needed to communicate it.

Let's go to a life lesson that you and I have both had. You shared it here on yours is persistency. How in the face when you're getting hit by two by fours, whether it's a 2008 downturn, whether it's a partner that you're not aligned, all of us here, fellow entrepreneurs are either have gone through this or they're going to go through this. There will be another downturn. As we're doing the recording the stock market's up 250% since 2009. 16% almost annualized rate of return the Standard and Poor 500 dividend reinvested. Nothing goes straight up. How do you deal with that when you do stuff happens?

Stephen: It's taken me a decade to figure out how to deal with this. Especially as I get older there's more fear around that unknown a lot of times because I have less time to recover from it. So, over the last really decade since my mortgage company, once I made the decision that I am absolutely an entrepreneur, I knew that I could never work for anybody else. I knew that this was my calling in life. I knew that I had something inside of me to help people. Once I made that decision it really helped me get through those harder times by just saying, "Okay, well this happened. What can I look back and learn from it? What could I have done differently if anything in that?" And I'm learning these little lessons that I can take and move forward into the future. Since I'm already certain about my decision to be an entrepreneur then I don't waiver at all.

And that's really helped me with my first business when the mortgage company went under, I started having all these things of like, maybe I should just get a job. That was really hard. Job seems easier. My family's telling me that. But once I really figured that out and made that decision it was like well, okay, I'm an entrepreneur. I've got to figure this out. Just figure out what skills I learned that I can take into my next business. That was really helpful and just my own personal driving why to help people achieve things that they never thought possible. Having that as my driving why has always pulled me through every sort of situation like that because I'm like, all right well, what can I do now to help people achieve things that they never thought possible? And as soon as I start thinking down that path, it's allowed me to just pull through and not focus on the negative and all the crappy things that may have happened at that time.

John: It's really words of wisdom Stephen. Because what happens, I know in my own experience that I've had the two by fours, mine have been two by sixes sometimes. Once you get that realization that you an entrepreneur and this as you sell businesses, particularly if you have an earn out, you're staying, I remember I thought I had done a merger and it ended up I wasn't clear who was in charge and if you're not clear then it's an acquisition. So I stayed for two years and one day. First year was great. After that meh. But it was very clear that I had 400 employees there, I was part of a very senior team. We were going public all that. And quite honestly hated my life. Make a lot of money but hated my life. Even in good times and bad times we want to be clear on who we are, what we want and be persistent to that just as you have.

One of the things though as we're persistent we tend to stuff happens. We have to reinvent ourselves. We're in Silicon Valley, the operative word here is pivot type. Tell us about how you reach that conclusion of the 2008 was actually I think they just dropped the house on me. It wasn't a two by four. With the partner you can so many people fellow entrepreneurs are thinking they can muscle through it. When you're not in alignment or the markets not aligned. How do you make that decision not to just be persistent, keep going, muscle through it and actually pivot?

Stephen: I learned a lot from the 2008 when as you say, the house got dropped on me which is pretty true. I learned that I didn't pay close enough attention to what was coming the future. So, I took that lesson into the partnership with my first digital marketing agency and so as soon as I started to see that not really working with and figuring out okay, this is where I want to go. This is where he wants to go. I was like all right, I should make a decision. In hindsight I still waited too long in that. But way shorter amount of time until I made the decision there. Really, I just asked myself the questions, what do I want out of this? Where am I going? Where's the business going? And as soon as I recognized that there was a misalignment I started having those really difficult challenging conversations and I learned a lot about how to have those. I learned a lot about how to not have those as well. But now I'm more well prepared to make the next pivot whatever that might possibly be.

For me, as most entrepreneurs we work really, really hard. And that's this badge of honor thing. How hard we work. How much we work. How forceful and persistent we are. What I've started to realize as I've aged a little more in the entrepreneurial world is that it should be actually pretty easy. If we're in alignment with where we want to go and we're in alignment with our strengths, this business stuff should be relatively easy and so as soon as it starts to become hard or something that I really hate. Like you were talking about with that acquisition.

As soon as it becomes something that you just really don't like, you're draining all of your energy and you're not using your strengths, therefore you're not adding the most value. Therefore, obviously you're not going to do a fantastic job. As soon as something becomes

hard for me or something that I just really don't like, as long as it's not, maybe a week or two that's acceptable but if it starts going into months, something's gotta change. And that's generally when I'll look at it and say, "Okay cool. It's time to look around. Take a good hard look around and see what needs to change? What needs to pivot?" That's how I've done it.

John: This is one of the most difficult things Stephen is for all of us because you're supposed to be strong guys or gals as entrepreneurs and we can handle it. We're the leaders and so on. There's sometimes when we're leading and the direction's wrong. And the market's telling us, and I've had to reinvent myself and pivot and start different businesses over the years. I got to tell you the one thing I've always done is waited a little too long. I've shortened it as we go but still and this is something that as fellow entrepreneurs we all have to work on because and Stephen you really said it well because we can be in the moment and if it's really hard we want to double check and particularly we want to make sure we're aligned with our why. Why we're doing this but also what the future's bringing. Because you really do want to ride trends.

I'm not a very good surfer I've tried it but you got to go with the wave. Going against the wave is a bad thing. Skiing love. Skiing you go downhill you don't ski uphill type thing. It's a lot harder. This is where taking that time is just so important. But one of the things that you did that I was actually surprised, I didn't know this, I knew your strength as a digital marketer and I know in the conversations you've given me some great advice and the fellow entrepreneurs, and our mastermind group turn to you. But when I pulled up your website I saw, oh Stephen's really gotten focused on the niche side. This is something I'm particularly passionate about because it's just so tempting when we start thinking we're smart and we can tackle the world and do everything and none of us like that idea of focusing on niches. Share how you decided to do this. Everybody needs digital marketing why narrow yourself and then why you picked the particular group. And then what that means to you.

Stephen: How we picked a niche or how we decided to get niched within our industry was a very stressful decision because in my first digital agency were kind of, we would serve anybody. Anybody that needed SEO or social media or paid advertising online, we would serve them. And that company grew pretty quickly. Fortunately, we were in a good time for digital marketing in 2009/10 but I noticed with our second company that we would do really, really well with some clients and some clients we would just do average with. And so, took a step back and started talking to some of my mentors with a lot of the great groups that we're in, some of them even together. And I talked to a buddy of mine that owns about a \$25 million SEO agency in Ohio. He kept telling me for months, he was like, "Dude, pick a niche." He's like, "We're doing 25 million and we only really service three industries."

I was like that's crazy talk. There's just not enough. As entrepreneurs we generally hear it all the time. Pick a niche, focus on it, that's where the money is. Look at everybody that we share

mastermind groups with. Joe Polish, Jason, all of these guys, they all picked a niche. And so finally I recognized going back to what we just talked about pivoting, I recognized that it was becoming too difficult and it was causing me too much stress to not do it so finally I just let go and said, "All right, we're going to niche." So we had a lot of people in the home services industry like large, five million to 50, \$60 million plumbing, heating, air conditioning, those types of local service businesses and so started talking to them and said, "Hey, you know, how can we add more value to you so that you would be willing to invest more in our relationship?" And we found a lot of opportunity left on the table became really good in that industry. Started solely marketing to that industry and a couple other local type businesses. And it just took off. Revenue was way up.

But probably the coolest thing was our ability to deliver really, really good results. Once we dialed our team in, we didn't have to worry about how to deliver results for a restaurant or how to deliver results for an eCommerce website. Once we dialed in that, now we started to become the expert and now we don't even market that much. People come to us because they know us as the expert.

John: As a matter of fact, I was thinking of someone I can refer to you. It would be good for your space. This is the fear that we all have is that we don't want to miss out on any opportunities but by the very nature if you tell somebody you're in digital marketing or whatever mass market that you're in, what happens is there's really nothing special. But once we start specializing on a particular niche, not only is it easier to share that story with someone else that they know where you fit and in addition as you said and this is so important, your competitive advantage you get by understanding that market and really the unique needs and solutions and you can really deliver value against anybody who's a generalist, it's not a fair competition at all. I want to encourage if your nicheless, get a niche. Put the flag in the ground. Test it. The market will tell you. Stephen did you consider multiple different niches along the way and this became clear? Or was this, this was the obvious one right away?

Stephen: We fell into this niche. I met a friend who runs a coaching program for that industry and so we became good friends and as he grew his business, we just naturally grew along with him and then we became bigger in that space. It goes back to just being open to the opportunity. I met this person actually he's in Joe's group. Met him and it was just open to the opportunity and didn't shut it out like I maybe would have four or five years ago. And it just led into this. Now what we've learned from it is we say, "Okay, what skills are we amazing at?"

What are the things that we're really good at to service this exact niche client? We have that list. And so, we're already looking down the path of so 2018 we'll be solely focused on home service for all of our marketing efforts but 2019 and 2020 we have those next industries already lined up. So later in 2018 we'll start testing the waters a little bit to how do we talk to

these industries? We'll go to couple events. Now we're already prepping for those next niches down the road.

John: It's really powerful. Let's go for all the entrepreneurs, one of the things most of us are, we're using, almost everybody's using some type of digital marketing, but we have the fear of missing out. We know, I know, and I got a whole team doing this, that we're not doing it as well as we could. There's two groups. Let's start with the organic which is my favorite. I love organic. How do we as entrepreneurs, how are you seeing digital marketing play out on the organic side?

Stephen: Organic is still really, really powerful. If you read anything about it you see all these articles on SEO is dead and Google's getting rid of organic traffic. It's just not true. Now maybe it's true by the end of 2018 or 2019 who knows but there's no reason not to be doing it right now because it does still work really well. The interesting thing, we just grouped up some of our clients and ran some test data just to figure out, get a pulse on okay, what is SEO or organic doing versus paid for our clients? And what we found is that, so we put dollar per lead on all of our stuff for our clients because these guys want phone calls and submission forms. An average paid lead for let's say an HVAC, a big heating, air conditioning company for paid is maybe about \$75 a lead. Some are higher, some are lower. California actually you're pushing into the like 100 marks for one single lead.

On the organic side of things, we're getting 15 to \$25 per lead and the organic leads are driving more actual revenue. So, the quality of the lead is better, the cost is lower but it takes all this time investment to grow organic. From an organic standpoint if you're not doing it you definitely should be. The things that you should be doing is it's the age-old stuff. Putting out really good content. Potentially depending on where your business is and how important the organic can be, hiring an SEO company or hiring somebody that can do the technical aspects of it. The things that we're seeing change in organic is it's not as important just to put out quantity of content, it's important to put out quality of content.

So, we've actually gone in and tested some of our old clients' sites where John you've probably know this or used to do it is, you put out a bunch of blogs and you put out a bunch of content. Well what we found is that when we went back and looked at old blogs, blogs that weren't getting any impressions, they weren't showing up in search and they really weren't getting any traffic on the website, those were actually starting to hurt rankings. We did some tests with some clients we chopped of 75%, hundreds of pages of really good quality content, we got rid of it. And compiled it into more of a static long-term resource and we started to see rankings go up. These technical aspects of organic are starting to become more important than just the quantity of content that you're putting out. But putting out just really solid, good content that people are searching for is still primarily the way to go for organic.

John: We do a lot of research on this Stephen and I approach it a little bit different 'cause I'm not the digital marketing expert but we're looking at success and we look for what do people want to work with? They want to work with experts. It's really the same thing. They want thought leaders no matter what industry you're in. Given the choice particularly if you have some level of affluence and everybody's chasing people who can actually pay for this stuff. They want to work with the best. At the higher and higher incomes, it becomes more discriminating and this is where that power of digital marketing, the thought leadership, leveraging the SEO organic is just amazing.

You can obviously distribute it through social media as well and what I found interesting 'because this has been our experience too, the lead cost goes down dramatically on the organic side but for a long time I just did organic and hanging out in the mastermind groups like we're together. You should pay for it too. Even though if you have capacity you should pay for it because that lead cost is still going to be lower. What's working in paid traffic? Cause you're doing both.

Stephen: Organic and paid are two parts of what should be an entire marketing strategy. You should be doing both because not everybody goes down to organic and not everybody clicks on paid, so you should have both of those. What's working in paid right now is Facebook is one of the more under-priced places of attention. If you listen to any Gary Vaynerchuk, he talks about his day trading attention. So, Facebook is definitely one of the great places to get paid traffic. But you have to think about it a little bit differently. It's not like Google AdWords where somebody goes to Google, searches for the exact thing they're looking for and then you show up at the top for that exact thing with a perfect match ad. Social media you're showing up in your ideal client's newsfeed but they might not actually be looking for what it is that you do even though they're your ideal client, they're not looking for what you do when they're on Facebook.

You have to be a little more cautious about how you're doing paid. I'll just give a real quick example of what we're seeing work. We're posting educational type videos for how, I'll give an example of plumbing. How to know if your hot water heater's about to break. It's an educational video from the owner of the company and he just talks about things that you should know. We put that ad in front of their ideal client. So, if we know their ideal client is a 45-year-old female in a household of over 150,000 with two children. Great, we can target that in that exact area. So now she sees this and then we follow it up with maybe another educational video and then we take that data from people that actually watched, let's call it 10 seconds or more of that video and then we start retargeting them with some form of an ad. Like hey \$250 off of a hot water heater.

When you do pay through social because it is very, it does work very well right now, you want to make sure that you think about it a little bit more long term and not just show, hey you know

\$250 off this product. You get all excited 'cause you're like oh man, I can target my exact ideal client, but they don't really care. They're not there to buy your product, they're there to see what their friends are up to.

John: One of the powerful things that I still haven't gotten good at this Stephen, I'm working on it, is the retargeting part because what's so valuable on Facebook ads is our ability to identify people who are not only are our ideal clients but have at least predisposition to what we're talking about and then continue to communicate with them.

Stephen: Yep. The other piece and I'll try to not get too technical with it but sticking with the Facebook ads stuff. You can upload custom audiences. So, if you have a database of let's say 5,000 people that you've talked to or 10,000 clients that you've worked with over the last 15 years, and you have some basic information on them. Phone number, first name, last name, email address. You can upload that into Facebook and it'll match those contacts with their Facebook profile. We match generally around 60% of a lot of our lists. So now you can show content to somebody that already has had some form of an interaction with you and continue to target that down even more specific. That's an amazing tool that you can use through Facebook and it's so cheap. Everybody should just be doing that no matter what.

John: In today's world we've got so much noise out there. The multiple modalities that we're using to really be at the right time when somebody needs our service or wants our service we're there. It's just so valuable. Talking about services, what I'd love to do Stephen is talk about as a resource, I want to pull up your website and actually also go to your free site as well. Why don't we talk about what you have at the website and then also what is on your assessment page, I'll pull that up too.

Stephen: Cool. We have some good resources on the website. Our blog is good resource of just what's going on. Every Friday we do something called Flip Chart Friday where five to seven minutes somebody from our teams give a little blurb about things that you can be doing to make sure that you're taking full advantage of your digital marketing. That's every Friday we do it live on Facebook and then we post some blogs in between there. That's one good resource. Then the free evaluator if you're just curious about where my website shows up for a couple of what you believe to be your top keywords that people search for and you want to know a little about the technical side. Like how fast your website loads, now plays into where you rank organically with Google more than it did five years ago, this evaluator will tell you some things like that.

It'll tell you if you have some toxic back links coming to your site. Maybe you hired an SEO company five, six years ago and they were doing some old school back linking techniques. It'll run an evaluation of a lot of these types of things. It's just as seeq.us.com/free. If you have questions about it, John we've been friends for a long time, if anybody in your group just has

questions or just wants to know a little bit more about SEO or how their site's doing, I'm happy to jump on a call, 10, 15, 20 minutes and give them some feedback and make sure they're doing things right or make sure that they've hired the right company 'cause we get that a lot too.

John: It's invaluable and I really appreciate that Stephen. We'll have all the show notes. I'm pointing, I've got aesnation.com again. Accelerating entrepreneurial success. As a matter of fact, we're just updating the website, so it should be all new there. What we're looking to do is to have the success you got to actually implement this stuff. So, let me go with my key takeaways from today 'because there were a whole bunch. Stephen and I talked about persistence. Persistence and pivot, this is one of the biggest challenge for all of us as entrepreneurs is when's the right time to reinvent yourself, refocus the company and we don't want to give up too early, but we want to really make sure we don't keep on running into the wall and become all bloody and everything else. We want to provide that leadership and Stephen gave some really good thoughts on it's not only listen to how the market's reacting today but looking at the trends going forward. What's happening.

Focus, focus, focus in a niche. Just so invaluable. This is something in every one of our studies that we do on business owners, we've studied over 10,000 of your fellow entrepreneurs, we see there is high correlation once you get focused on a specific niche, the ability not only to target them from a marketing standpoint but all the lessons learned and the solutions that Stephen was talking about.

And then this organic and paid balance. Really, it's very, very clear to the extent that you can be the expert, the best. Be perceived the best of the best in your marketplace it's great. So many entrepreneurs are what I call hidden talent. They've got this great talent, but nobody knows them in their community whether it's the local market or whether it's a vast market. That doesn't count. You want to be the expert talent. The expert talent so they know you. Ideally organic can be very cost effective but don't neglect, as Stephen said, the paid traffic.

Stephen this has been great. I really appreciate you sharing your insights and your success. I want to just encourage everyone to either go to the transcript, the show notes and go execute. Review this and really make sure that you're doing each of things that Stephen's counseled us on and make a difference. Wish you the best of success.

A Second Opinion on Your Finances

A Complimentary Service from Financial Advisor Select for the Members of AES Nation

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John Bowen
Founder and CEO
Financial Advisor Select