

Over-Communication with Cory Tomczyk
The Shred Coach Podcast Transcript

TOM

Cory Tomczyk, welcome to The Shred Coach Podcast. I'm glad you're here. How are you today?

CORY

I'm honored to be part of this. Thank you for the invite.

TOM

Yeah, no, I'm really glad that you're with us today. So, let's set the context. Tell me a little bit about IROW, you're shredding company and recycling company, but give me a picture of your business right now. Tell me about it.

CORY

Well, IROW is celebrating its 32nd year in business.

TOM

Wow.

CORY

Yeah, who knew? You know, I started this company way back when as a purely a recycling operation. We were doing bulk cardboard and print shop wastes and office paper too (this was pre anyone being aware of identity theft), servicing customers in North-Central Wisconsin.

We evolved as the industry evolved. We started doing document destruction, I started out with a very simple Hammermill shredder, and I got involved in NAID, I think in the second year of NAID's existence. I've continued my involvement and activity with i-SIGMA. It's been extremely helpful to my business. For a while, I guess for 15 years we had a actual garbage hauling business. Yeah. And we sold that almost five years ago now to a waste management. And it was a very happy day around here. Cause I went from 48 employees down to 22 overnight.

TOM

Wow.

CORY

I say Cory won that night.

TOM

That's really cool. So, when did you sell that part of the business?

CORY

It's going to be almost five years ago now.

TOM

Okay. So, in terms of, you're now a shredding and recycling company primarily. Tell me a little bit about your operation. Are you plant-based, mobile? What the makeup of your shredding business?

CORY

We are plant-based. I always jokingly tell people we have too many trees and cows per square mile in Northern Wisconsin than we have people. So, I can never make a mobile shred truck, monetarily justified.

TOM

Got it. Okay. Okay. So, part of the decision to be purely plant comes from your history, but also just the economics of putting a \$300,000 truck on the road every day.

CORY

Yeah. We just don't have population density, which we like, I mean, don't get me wrong. We like our rural world. But it doesn't pay for a truck.

TOM

Got it. Okay. So, are you doing more than paper shredding? What else do you do?

CORY

Let's see... a year and a half ago we did start, at the behest of one of my customers, some record storage. We're very, very small. I mean, we're under 3000 boxes, but-

TOM

Okay, so just, just a small ancillary revenue stream there. Are you doing things like hard drive, shredding, product destruction, all that kind of stuff?

CORY

We have a degaussing machine for hard drive; we degauss and crush. We do product destruction on a variety of things. When we got into that, I didn't realize how much a call there was for that. We do everything from handling food waste, decasing stuff, to medical supplies. Every once in a while, we'll do a little pharmaceuticals, but that gets dicey. There's some pretty heavy regs you got to match up for that. But I will charge for it. I'm happy to do that.

TOM

And so, you mentioned earlier 22 employees after the sale of the garbage business. Are you still at 22 full-time equivalent employees? Is that roughly your size still?

CORY

Thankfully we are. We are a fully staffed

TOM

Good for you. That's great. and because you're obviously collection, your drivers are collection, do you have mostly, is that team mostly drivers of the 22 or a lot of plant driver combination? What's the relative makeup of that structure?

CORY

So, I've six people that are just drivers, just doing trucks. Everything else is between the plant and the office staff. You know, our facility is 40,000 square feet. We have a big tipping floor where waste management, GFL, advanced disposal, a couple of local haulers bring loads of just straight cardboard from their customers and dump it on the floor. We also pick up those of cardboard and the receiver boxes and dump it on the floor and bale it up.

TOM

Okay. So that's the recycling part of the business that is more than just putting paper together. You're also doing cardboard for other waste collection companies. Okay.

CORY

We have a couple that haul us office paper mixtures. The problem with that is I can't provide them a certificate of destruction because I haven't had it under command and control from point A to point B, but it still comes to us. So...

TOM

Got it. Okay. So, that gives us a really good sense of your business. And you've been at this 32 years. You've been at it a long time. You've been involved in the industry. You're a known entity in the industry and have contributed a lot to the industry, but...

CORY

I'm an old character in the industry.

TOM

Right. So, I mean, the essence of this show is really talking about specific strategies or tactics or things that were implemented or resources you've implemented that have a verifiable impact on your business. And so, what are you doing? What's a specific thing you've done that's created a leverage for your business, that's created a verifiable result? What's going on?

CORY

First and foremost, I always give credit to NAID and i-SIGMA. I think staying involved in the industry, my time servicing on the complaint resolution council, my time serving on the board, just going to shred school, I still go to shred school. Just being at the expos, that kind of stuff

helps me to speak more intelligently about my industry, helps me to listen to what other people are doing. I certainly don't have all the answers. And the real answer for me is probably a combination of what other people are doing applied to my part of the world. My little slice of heaven, as it were, is just different enough from other parts of the world that you got to mix and match and mash it up a little bit to make it work.

TOM

Right.

CORY

That's a huge part. So, the other thing is knowing that little slice of the world. People in Northern Wisconsin, you like to know who they're dealing with. When they pick up the phone, they like to know you're experiencing the same weather that they are, and they like to be able to communicate. And so, say we get, a foot of snow. We're going to go down that truck route and call every customer say, "Hey, we may be late. We may not get to you today. You know, we got to talk to the drivers", and everybody appreciates that and understands. As long as we're communicating with them, they really don't care for a day late or something like that. So, I think customer communication, customer interaction is, key.

TOM

So, was there a deliberate decision you made about being over, I guess over-communicative versus traditionally, what a lot of businesses do is just, "Well there's weather today. They must assume it." Has there been a process that you've engaged that's taken you from being "whatever happens, happens", to being obsessive about this? And maybe that's not the right word, but it sounds to me like you're really focused on it in a great way.

CORY

I want them to know that we think about them, that we value them as a customer and that we're going to take the time to make that simple phone call. And it may be just seconds, but it might be here that they, "Oh, hey, when you come, could you also do this?"

TOM

Mm.

CORY

It just adds that personal touch and lets them know that we're humans running a business and we're serving their business.

TOM

Right. So, you've, you've talked about that in light of the emergency or the last-minute change that often comes with weather but how have you leveraged that local awareness of your unique marketplace that doesn't look like a big city that doesn't act like a big city in terms of that

relationship to communication? What else are you doing that specifically leveraging that unique hometown connection?

CORY

Well, I don't know that I can put my finger on anything more than just being able to talk to people. We're small enough that I, you know, I want to see- I could see a couple of my largest customers out for a Friday night fish fry in a local restaurant. Or certainly going to run into them at community events. So, when you're talking to him- or what what's really fun is when I'm out wearing my logo-wear of some kind, and someone says, "You worked for IROW?" and I said, "Yeah, I do work for IROW." I say. "Oh, you know, I talked to your dispatcher, Michelle, she's so nice. She lets us know everything that's going on." I said, "I'll let her know that." And then they ask what I do. I tell them, I work for Michelle.

TOM

So, how do you train your staff to do that? Because it's easy to talk about. And a lot of times what I see when I talked to owners is there's a- they kind of naturally bruise out of you because it's your business. But when you've got staff that you're bringing in, how do you get them to know, don't just hang up the phone? I want you to hang out, I want you to be overt and expressive about what's going on. How do you get the staff to get the same belief that you have?

CORY

It starts when you hire them. When I hire someone, I can teach anybody the mechanics of any of these jobs. Nothing we do is that technical. So, I've got to find the person that's going to fit; fit in my organization, has the personality I'm looking for and just trying to match them up. My interviews are very unstructured. They're more of a conversation like this so I get to know who that person is, get to know little bits about them. And in the back of my mind, I'm always trying to figure out how that's going to apply, how their life experiences are going to apply in working here.

TOM

Got it. So, it's really a hiring process that gets the right people that are aligned with the way you think the values, the predisposition that you've talked about, which is to be overly communicative because that's what fits your local culture, not just a business culture.

CORY

And it's a trap too, Tom. When we get a new person in, one of the first mistakes that they make is they want to give someone an answer, but they may not have all the information they give the right answer. So, you just got to grin and bear that and help people get on their feet. But because we have a communication focus, you know, I'll call people back, "Hey, you know, so-and-so told you this, but they really didn't understand that X, Y, and Z has to happen first. And we're not going to be there until Tuesday." "Oh, well, thanks for the follow up." So, if you're uber communicative, when you do have that crisis or you do have that problem, it's not a big deal.

TOM

Right, Got it. So, what else are you doing that really leverages business success, business results?

CORY

I've got a great sales lady and a lot of people know Cindy does our sales work. She's out and about in the community way more than I am. She's probably the first face and I'm the second face on IROW. And I also tell people I work for Cindy because she gets stuff done. You know, I've facilitated for those ladies. That's my job, you know? So, we're out in the community. We're active in the chamber of commerce. Any kind of event that we can help. We've done all kinds of nutty things. We staffed the kids player at a local event, had nothing to do with our, you know, reaching out to our customers. You know, said another one, "I'd rather we all had logo wear on", but people recognized it, you know? So, and they knew we were there to support.

TOM

Yeah, it sounds like though with 32 years of history, the brand becomes somewhat ubiquitous in the community. And then it's...

CORY

We hope it is.

TOM

Yeah, but a brand is often when you think about our brand is often a promise, right? A lot of times a brand is a promise. But you can't keep screwing the brand up. If the promise is we're communicative, we're engaged, we're involved and you break that promise, then that has detrimental effects in your business, obviously. So, from that perspective, what other things do you do with your team? Because you've got a pretty big team, you know, 22 employees isn't a small operation. Turnover can be high, but you've got drivers out in the world. You've talked about the two ladies that are really important cogs in your wheel that you work for. But what about your team? Like how do you make sure that they're top of their game?

CORY

The guys working the balers out in the plant, they know that I'll get right in and help them if there's a problem, if there's a breakdown. I'll go a couple of days without seeing everybody on the plant floor, but I'll never go a week without talking to somebody on the plant floor. They've all seen me driving forklifts. They've all seen me working the conveyors. They've all seen me working with the trucks. Just making sure that I'm not the guy that's sitting in the office every day or going to a lunch or something like that. I'm involved and I hear them, and I talk with them as much as I possibly can, because without them I'm nothing. I'm too old to be the guy hauling the bales every day after that day, like when I started but...

TOM

Right. So, where are you hitting walls with your approach to over-communicating, making sure you're connected in your community. Where do you hit obstacles to that? You talked about sometimes your staff might not know all the steps and they try and over-communicate, but where also you feeling like you hit walls with that?

CORY

I don't think I am. No, I think it's served us very, very, very well. We've had guys screw up and miss customers are not read the paperwork right, didn't do everything they were supposed to do. But if they know that they can talk to me or they know they can get to Cindy or they know if they get the office staff that I'll call back it doesn't turn out to be the end of the world.

TOM

Right. So you you've created, it sounds like a lot of good will in the community as well, because screwups everybody can handle, but daily screwups is different.

CORY

If there are daily screw ups, then Cory's not happy, and everybody around here is not happy.

TOM

Right. So, is there anything else you are leveraging or adding to your business now that feels like it's creating better results for you then say you were doing three years ago. Are there new activities or engagements that you're doing or strategic implementations or tactics? What else may you be doing that's creating better results for you, right?

CORY

Well right now, the better results, you know, on the bottom line or just the fact that scrap paper is worth a lot more money than it has been in a long time.

TOM

Right. It sounds like you're putting a lot through the machinery, so that's a good thing.

CORY

Yeah, we're a thousand plus tons a month minimally. So...

TOM

Wow.

CORY

We're okay. I'm pretty proud of that being in the rural area that we are.

TOM

That's amazing. Yeah. That's really cool.

I dug into your history a little bit on LinkedIn and while you've been at IROW for a long, long time, obviously, you know, 32 years, what's really interesting to me about your history is it's punctuated with board engagement. So, I think, you know, not only i-SIGMA and NAID before that, other associations like ISRI, right? Which is the...

CORY

Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, yes.

TOM

Yeah. So, you've got that and then you've got the chamber and then you've got schools and then you've got political affiliation, athletics, community... there's this big history with you of board activity. And it always seems to me that when you look at somebody's life outside of their business, there's an indicator of something. And so, I guess what interests me is that board participation has been a huge part of your world and life. And I guess the question that comes out of it for me is more how has that influenced how you run your business, how you lead... I mean, you, kind of indicated a little bit about your, historical stuff with NAID and i-SIGMA and the importance of that, but I'm coming at that from a different angle. It's how has board membership, board affiliation, being on a board affected leadership and your business? How would you respond to that?

CORY

I would say that, if someone's going to, A, volunteer or be elected to a board of some kind of, you're going to be around other people who are leaders in various degrees or want to be leaders. And I don't mean that derogatorily, there are people who are trying to better themselves or add to something. And when you can be a part of that group of people, inevitably things rub off on you and you learn about humans, you learn about yourself, and you learn how that's going to apply in your personal and professional life. So, I think that my time that I invest in that stuff, A, I really enjoy it. I'm kind of nuts that way. But B, it pays dividends and the things that I'm exposed to and I learn.

TOM

Yeah. So, can you point to something specific in how you run your business? That's a direct reflection, not of what you learned from somebody on the board, but the act of being on a board? Is there something that translates from that board activity to running a business?

CORY

Well, that's pretty varied. That could be if your board has employees that you report to, so like the school board, we had a lot of employees, we had a lot of human resources issues to deal with. And interactions with the employees, customer, and the parents as a customer, you just learn

things that you weren't exposed to in a smaller business. It can be the business connections and the people you're running into and the people you talk to. Wow. That's a thick question.

TOM

No. I know it's a thick question, but it intrigues me because you've been so engaged for years and you just don't yet- you know, a lot of times as someone reaches the end of their career or they've built a significant platform in their career, they start getting... but you've had it through your whole existence. It's such a unique perspective, I think. And I was just intrigued by it. And sometimes you don't think about it, you just go do your stuff. But it just intrigues me sometimes when you have the kind of history you do that, I wonder do you do Robert's rules of order in your meetings, like your business meetings or...?

CORY

No, I'm a kind of a Robert's rules, not because, you know, properly applied Robert's rules of order really puts a framework together for being an effective meeting and an effective organization. And not a lot of people understand that; I seem to have a knack for it. I've been able to teach people about it. I've been able to help people move forward with that stuff. But Robert's rules... Generally, when people are first exposed to it, it kind of pisses them off because it's a structure and it's somewhat limiting, but it's also focusing at the same time. And it's meant to keep people focused on the task in front of them and take some of, not all, but some of the interpersonal biases, and... I can't think of the right word, but it tries to take some of that out of it so that we're really making a decision. Now, you know, small business, day-to-day operations, there's really not that much of a place for Robert's rules of order.

TOM

Right, right. Because we're a benevolent dictatorship often as a business owner and we don't operate from the same structure rules, but... no I just think it's, it's really intriguing and, hence the reason I brought it up with you.

CORY

I'm also a slow learner. I keep getting suckered into things.

TOM

Well, is there any other, things that you'd like to share in terms of success of, what you've done and, if not, we'll call this. I really appreciate you processing this with me and talking it through.

CORY

Being on this show is an honor and success for me. I mean, for someone to think I have something to offer it as an honor for me. So, I do thank you for the time and thank you for calling.

TOM

I appreciate you doing that. And I just believe that 32 years in the business almost proves that you've got something together. Cause most businesses die in the first five years. So, if you can make it 32 years, you've made it like almost seven units of five. So, there's something good going on. I just really appreciate the contribution you've made over the years in our industry, in the shredding and information security industry. And I think you've been a huge proponent of it. And I appreciate that, and I appreciate you being on the call with me today.

CORY

Thank you, sir.