

Solving the Sales Problem with Christopher Jones
***The Shred Coach Podcast* Transcription**

TOM

Christopher Jones, welcome to The Shred Coach Podcast. I'm glad you're here.

CHRISTOPHER

Hey, thanks, Tom. So glad to be here. Got to tell you, we're big fans at SRS of your podcast. Our entire management team listens religiously as every episode drops.

TOM

Well, thank you. That's really kind, and I'm glad it's supportive. So, let's dig in a little bit on you. Tell me a little bit about SRS, where you are, what you do, size of your operation, those kinds of things. Just give me an overall view of it.

CHRISTOPHER

Sure. So, I was born and raised in a small town in Southwest Georgia called Thomasville. And I grew up in an entrepreneurial family. Around the dinner table when the four kids complained about whatever problem of the day we had, our parents challenged us to start businesses to solve those problems.

I went into finance right after college and then came back to join my father, Powell, in business. And we started as a document management focused company, the traditional revenue about 85% storage oriented. And over time we've added service lines and also staff. Shredding is about a third of the business. And I know that'll be the focus of our conversation today, but I guess one thing that you should know about us is that we're always looking for the next thing. So, while we love the shredding business and we see a very bright future to grow, we're always looking for that next business to add on.

TOM

Right. So, Thomasville, Georgia. How big of an operate- let's go over to your... just focus on the shredding a bit. Is it plant-based, mobile based? What's the makeup of your business?

CHRISTOPHER

So, our team is about 35. Shredding, we have 10 trucks, it's a mix of mobile and plant. We just put in a new Allegheny plant that's a hundred horse. And our problem went from not having enough capacity to put all the stuff through, to needing to go and find some more stuff to put through this big, big piece of equipment.

TOM

A big beast that continually eats for a living.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, exactly.

TOM

Yeah, very cool. All right. So, you talked a little bit about your ancillary services related. Is there other related businesses within this context? So, it sounds like record storage is really where you came out of and shredding, and it sounds like you said scanning, sorry, I just want to make sure I got that.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah. Yeah, that's right. The full suite of document management services. Shredding came out of document management relationships. We really called them storage at the time. Over the last 10 years, we've made a pivot with the transition of the industry. While I would say the traditional RIM storage industry has consolidated by about 50%, our business has grown by, grown revenue by five times. Roughly two thirds of that is document management oriented, and our focus in that business is on helping organizations eliminate paper. We do that all over the country. In the last year we've done three deals in Alaska.

TOM

Wow. Wow. That's very cool. Well, now that we have the context, as you know, the focus of this podcast, because you're listening, you and your team are listening to it regularly, is a strategy, a tactic, something you've implemented that has had discernible influence on outcomes for you in the business. So, where do you want to go with this? What's yours? What do you want to talk about?

CHRISTOPHER

You know, I challenged our sales and client services team to tell me what they thought, based on their experience listening to the podcast, we should talk about. And the theme of this sales culture that we have kept coming up. And I started to think about where that came from. It reminded me of a story.

Several years ago, I was playing tennis with a mentor, complaining about a sales person that I was managing. And my mentor stopped the point, looked at me and says, "You don't have a management problem, Christopher, you have a sales problem. You're not big enough to put the responsibility for sales on someone else. You need to find someone to cook and clean so you can go hunt and kill." And I thought, game, set, match.

I'm still reflecting on that exchange today. I realized that I was blaming somebody else for our sales problem. And until we were 10 times the size we were the at the time, no matter how many other problems I tried to distract myself with the only problem worth mentioning was our sales. And it started with me.

TOM

Wow. What a revelation.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, it is one of the formative moments of my career. To realize that I needed to take responsibility for that and lead the change.

TOM

Right. So, you come face to face with that realization. A mentor drops that in your lap and it's like kind of a kick to the gut. So, what do you do with that? What transpired as a result of that? Where did you go?

CHRISTOPHER

Well, I think the first step was realizing that I was the problem. And then reflecting on the excuses that I had made to get to that point. In his criticism, which came from a good place, this is somebody that has given me a lot of good advice over the years who I really trust, was also advice. And that was that I needed to find somebody to cook and clean so I could go hunt and kill. And so, I think building out a support team in infrastructure to allow me to optimize my time was the direction that he gave me and we started building from there.

So, if I had to line up the objectives, I would say it starts with principal passion, having a team goal for what we're trying to accomplish, accountability on a regular basis (we do it weekly), leveraging technology, for example our CRM, and then iteration, making changes on a regular basis and testing things out.

TOM

Well, you've packed a lot into that sentence. So, are you okay if I go back and pull that apart a little bit? Cause that was a heading of stuff. So, principal passion was the first thing you said. Tell me what you mean by that, firstly by principle, I assume that means you. It's your passion, your personal passion was the secret here.

CHRISTOPHER

That's right. I remember when I was starting my career at Morgan Stanley, I hated sales. I hated the idea of taking advantage of someone's time. And I think something clicked when it came to this business and taking responsibility for our success, when I realized that we are in the problem-solving business. That at the end of the day we are going to improve people's lives with what we do. And if I do a good job of getting that message across of truly understanding what their problem is and not just trying to sell them whatever I have to sell, and listening to what their needs are, and take them through that process and they still don't see the value, then I'm not taking advantage of their time. They're just not ready to have that problem solved.

CHRISTOPHER (cont.)

And I think when that mindset shifted, I took on a whole lot of confidence about going out and representing what it is that we do. As long as I can go back to, are we really solving problems, seeking to understand what a client's problem is and seeking to improve their lives with that solution, then I have a lot of confidence picking up the phone and calling strangers.

So, it started with that confidence. But I'm also really competitive, Tom. And I've got this kind of catch me if you can mentality. So, as I encouraged the rest of our team to come along into sales, I've tried to lead by example and not by setting expectations and then coming back a week later and saying, "So, how did it go?" I prefer to compete with everybody live.

TOM

Hmm. Interesting.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah.

TOM

So, but how does that play out? I mean, competing with everybody live. What do you mean by that?

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah. So, if I am not the top sales person every year, there's a problem.

TOM

Got it.

CHRISTOPHER

I believe that it's my job to organize my time and my effort accordingly to set the example. And in a growth-oriented culture like ours, there develops this natural excitement around sales. It becomes less scary. As I mentioned to you before we haven't said, "Well, that's Tom's job. His job is to do all of the sales and if sales aren't coming in that's Tom's fault." Instead, it becomes a part of everyone's role. And we built this team to support that where everybody contributes something, if not the whole process. Think of it kind of like an assembly line where everyone contributes part of that Model T coming off the line.

TOM

Got it. So, that passion then seems to almost be- what is it? A viral, right? The passion that you exhibit with the focus that you take as a principal starts to impact the team. It sounds like that's how you're saying it?

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, that's right. And we use our results as our scorecard. We share with our sales team, our management team, our team as a whole in monthly meetings, our financial results as they come through. Because this is the scorecard that we hold ourselves accountable to. It's how we set our... one of typically three annual goals is based on sales. And so, everybody's familiar with that and knows that they have a role in it.

TOM

Right. So, there's a commitment. It sounds like there's a commitment across your whole team to this sales process, this sales focus that you have.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, that's right. It did not happen naturally. That was something that had to be cultivated. But yes, the whole team is proud when we announce our results and in different ways contributes to it. From our drivers, the folks answering the phone, who are listening for opportunities to optimize that relationship, or even for that next service line that we might roll out. We have cultivated that interest in desire.

TOM

Right. Interesting. So, when I think about sales, there's kind of two models. And in terms of your principal passion that you said, you had to realize you had to become this and you create a team to support that. But eventually, and you said, you know, just even the way you think about it, you're willing to, you know, you're much more comfortable taking people's time to find a solution to their problem. But ultimately it still means you've got to pick up the phone, doesn't it? Like what, how do you process that?

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah, you're absolutely right. So, I've been listening to presentations recently. You know, we just got back from the I-SIGMA conference in Orlando and a few other kind of industry-wide presentations. And I keep hearing excuses to avoid making outbound calls. Like important, but secondary strategies like inbound sales as proof that outbound isn't necessary. And I couldn't disagree more, Tom.

In fact, you told me that I needed to create \$10,000 in value in this 20-minute interview. And I think I can get that out of the way pretty early. Anyone listening, if you haven't made a sales call today, you should turn this off, get your phone out and start making calls. I think you could immediately generate \$10,000 in value if you would go and make five calls a day outbound. And do that every day, you're going to generate \$10,000 in sales in a couple of months.

TOM

Right. So, it sounds like this went from something that you weren't all that intrigued by, making these outbound calls, to changing your viewpoint of it, realizing that you're the critical component of this. And now you make calls like it's part of who you are now, it sounds like.

CHRISTOPHER

For those of you that are still with us, I'm a believer. Not only have our largest sales come from outbound activity, it's a creative activity. It inspires my best sales thinking. So, I get to test my ideas on live humans. The way that I say things... so for example, the way that we talk about document management versus storage or eliminating paper. These are minor differences in parlance that have come from thousands of calls, seeing split testing, what the reaction is to the way that we talk about things. The language that I use when I make a cold call, introducing the idea of outsourced shredding, has developed over those many calls so that I know it by heart. And I know that I'm going to get my best possible results by saying it this way.

TOM

Powerful.

CHRISTOPHER

In fact, it's such a valuable process to me that when I get stuck on any kind of problem in the business, what gets me out of that funk is to make cold calls. There's nothing that I look forward to more than dedicating an hour and having a list in front of me and calling down it because it's just so clarifying. It's like, it's a valuable activity as you think about improving your business. We even use it when we're onboarding new team members. I think it's a great way to show folks our message, how we think, how the public receives that. And it's not theoretical. They're getting to see this live.

TOM

So, they're actually watching, you make cold calls?

CHRISTOPHER

That's right.

TOM

Really?

CHRISTOPHER

It's a standard part of our onboarding.

TOM

So, they sit in your office and watch you make cold calls?

CHRISTOPHER

Yes.

TOM

Holy cow. I've never heard of that before. That's so cool. That's so cool. I'm deeply intrigued. So, like you're hiring a driver and a driver might come and sit in your office as a part of their onboarding process?

CHRISTOPHER

Sure.

TOM

Dang.

CHRISTOPHER

So, what does that accomplish? It shows the message, shows the principal commitment, right? The principal passion we talked about. It shows the kinds of questions that they might interact with when they're out and about. There's just so much value that comes from that exercise, even if it's just for 20 or 30 minutes to hear a couple of these, I think it creates a lot of value.

It also holds me accountable. I'm a big believer leading by telling, but leading by doing. And so, you know, periodically I'm out with the guys doing a pickup. Especially if we have one that's particularly difficult or that's overnight out of town, it's a chance for me to engage with them. And I think your best ideas come from where you may have gotten your start driving a truck or making those original sales calls where you started your business.

TOM

So, going back, you talked about principal passion, but the second thing that you outlined was something called team goals. Tell me a little bit more about your team goals.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah. So, this reminds me of a story. When we were thinking about growing the sales team, remember that, that original story where my mentor said, "Find folks who can cook and clean so you'd go and hunt and kill." Instead of just hiring additional sales people, as we continued to grow, we realized that there were parts of the sales process that don't require a sales-focused person. In fact, those people already existed in our organization in the client services department. And so, over time, we've conscripted members of the client services team to build sales functions into their day-to-day jobs.

So, we set a year end goal about two years ago. We'd always talked about this great client experience that we offer, but I thought one day, "Can we prove it? Can we prove that we're legendary in the way we do that? How do we establish and measure a legendary client experience?" And so, we came up with these key performance indicators related to client experience that we would measure weekly and have these client services team members report on. Well, the KPIs looked an awful lot like sales goals from asking for a referral when we do a good job, asking for a Google review, upselling when we see an opportunity, maybe a purge

client that calls back multiple times over a period of a few months, they should be on a regular service. Or a client that we start on a quarterly rotation or an on-call rotation and we see that they're calling in more regularly. How do we move them to a more frequent service, giving them a better service experience but also guaranteeing more sales for the organization?

TOM

Yeah, so good. So good. So, these team goals, then, you talked about you had to get yourself in alignment and then from there move into a sense of creating goals for your team. But from there, where are you going? Like, I think you talked about accountability, this weekly accountability that's related to those goals.

CHRISTOPHER

So, every Monday morning our client services and sales team, about nine people, get together and we go through a formal regiment. The backbone of it is our Salesforce CRM with reports from the previous week. And our team talks through each piece of that weekly sales meeting. So, first the pipeline activity, the paperwork, things that are left open that client services needs to follow up on, or sales depending on where in the process it is. And that's reduced slippage. That was one of the big values we accomplished putting this meeting together.

Then second are what we call our client experience goals. That's the upselling, the referrals, the cross selling. And each of our nine members of the team reports on each one of those categories. And so, we're able to hold one another accountable in a really positive and upbeat environment about the activities that you've been able to work into your day-to-day client services or sales role. So, it keeps those objectives at the front of our mind while also supporting our goal of a legendary client experience, which we know is reflected by success with each of these things.

Then we have a round table collaboration. So, we'll talk about our strategies from the last week. Maybe we were calling accountants after tax season was over, our big wins for the week, we celebrate those together. And then we talk about strategies for the next week. Have we heard that one of our large competitors is dropping the ball on service in a certain market? Well, we're going to focus all of our outbound calls to that market, or we're going to make sure that client services is paying attention to those kinds of concerns coming in so that we can stay on top of them and respond to them quickly.

And then finally, we do big picture sales-oriented training, or talk about a new tactic, or we go over an article that was inspiring to one of our team, or what I should talk about on Tom's podcasts.

TOM

Right, right. Yeah. Well, it sounds like your accountability also then goes back and supports your team goals. Like it's a virtuous cycle, it sounds like.

CHRISTOPHER

That's right. So, meetings are a double-edged sword. We try to balance having an appropriate number of meetings so that everyone's on the same page, so that we're collaborating, so that we're staying accountable to our goals while giving our team the freedom to go out and execute. And so, this is one of five really important meetings on my calendar every week. And I look forward to it every Monday morning.

TOM

Yeah, that sounds really cool. So, the fourth one you mentioned early on, and I noted these, was leveraging technology. Tell me a little bit more about that.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah. So, this is... golly, six or seven years ago now. I was limping along with an Excel spreadsheet because we're too cheap to buy a real CRM. And it was time to add a second sales person. And as I realized that it wasn't sustainable to go on without a software if I was going to give this person the best possible shot to be successful. And so, unlike the first time we looked for a CRM, we stopped talking about cost is a factor. We just wanted the best. And Salesforce, while it was going to be the most expensive, it was widely regarded as the best. And so, it made it a no-brainer when we stopped talking about whether we were going to spend a couple thousand dollars more by using Salesforce instead of the second or third best option.

TOM

Right.

CHRISTOPHER

And so, I swipe my credit card. And immediately, I think this is probably the most important thing, I set to work building it out myself. Countless hours putting my pipeline into it, adding our existing clients, not putting that on somebody else. And you might think, "Well, that's not a very good use of your time, all that data entry." But the fact is it made me learn it and it made me use it. And if I wasn't going to own it in make it the priority that we put data through this thing, it wasn't going to work. And so, as a result, the platform, the best platform out there in my opinion, has scaled as our company has. And as we've added more users, we've upgraded to their enterprise level, including spending tens of thousands of dollars customizing it with one of Salesforce's integration partners to make it work for us. That automates paperwork, it allows for great reporting and visibility. Some of the numbers that I've shared today, we were able to spit right out of Salesforce.

TOM

Interesting. So, it sounds like the leveraging of technology, then like- what I keep hearing is how it all kind of works together. Your passion, connects to team goals, connects to accountability, and then you throw the appropriate toolkit on the front end of it, that you have invested in and

spend a lot of time in, allows you to kind of keep that data flowing in a really powerful way, which supports accountability, which supports team orientation.

CHRISTOPHER

That's right. You're exactly right. The technology, the platform, which in the grand scheme of things is very inexpensive for the value that it creates, is the platform that we build all the rest of this on. Our reporting comes out of it in our weekly meeting, we're able to spin something up and look at it. Somebody has an idea related to outreach, to education prospects, then we can pull that list live in the meeting.

TOM

Wow.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah.

TOM

Yeah. That's really cool. So, the final point you made was iterate. And iterate, to me, sounds like the thing that, you know, allows you to keep fresh in it. So, tell me more what you think about iteration and how you iterate and how you think about that.

CHRISTOPHER

So, I have a short attention span, Tom. And so, when things start to feel stale, which can be every few weeks, we iterate. We say, "Look, this has gone well, or it hasn't". We debrief it, and then we look for the next list to call down or strategy to employ. And that keeps it fun. It keeps it dynamic for our group. There's always a new challenge.

The best example is probably what we talked about yesterday. Our conversation was about refreshing our document management sales strategy. So, I'd just come back from two conferences and a board meeting. And I brought the challenge to the team in the weekly meeting that I thought that our strategy was stale we needed to freshen it up. And so, we spend 10 minutes talking through different ideas and we split up the work. So typically, the result is that client services gives us the data create a list. And then the sales team is making the calls. We're kind of the infantry going in on the ground. And then we're followed by marketing who also participates in that meeting with air support. So, we end up with this kind of strategic list developed based on our experience in conversation with the commitment to call and actually interact with folks. And then the marketing collateral that's dynamic based on what we're talking about to support us in that. And we see how it goes. And then we iterate again.

TOM

Interesting. So, how like, give me an example of what that process may look like, or give me an example of how you think through then that iteration that you've done. You've just recreated a

conceptual framework for how you think about it, but like then how do you do it? What's the implementation of that?

CHRISTOPHER

An example from a few weeks ago, we were talking about the fact that school will be out in a few weeks. And for those of us with kids, we're trying to figure out what that means for our lives. But from a sales perspective, it means that our education prospects and clients are going to be cleaning out. And so, we asked client services to develop the list using Salesforce to identify our reoccurring education clients, our one-time purge that may happen annually education clients, and the prospects that we have. And then we use that list, marketing is developing our email drip campaign. One will go at the end of school, one will go a few weeks before school starts back in the fall. And then our sales team splits up the list to call down it and to check and to reaffirm the offer that we've made with that email drip campaign. We're using our technology backbone to come up with the list, our client services team, to come up with the messaging based on what they're hearing, our sales team to call down it, and the marketing team to reinforce it with collateral.

TOM

Wow. So good. Like that to me was another \$10,000. So, we're up to 20 now. Just the way you described that makes so much sense in terms of how people can think about- like this sales strategy includes this multi-pronged approach that you've been iterating over a period of time. It's so cool.

CHRISTOPHER

It dramatically increases the chances of success when you're calling down a list when you're strategic about who you're calling, when you're calling the same kind of prospect a hundred times, when you have a message that you can refine that's specific to them, and then that you have some kind of collateral or second way that they're getting the message other than your call or email so that it has a chance to land with them.

TOM

Yeah. So good. So good. Have there been any other things related to this whole sales strategy or the sales orientation in your company that you've iterated on that are meaningful?

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah. I would say one of my reflections over time, as we built this great team and we continue to grow, is I do not see sales not being my responsibility anytime soon. As we grow and my responsibility grows, I am trying to build out a team allows me to focus on the biggest opportunities or the hardest problems; the large prospects where we have limited relationship and I can use my network or I could invest in a conference or a board to go and interact with those folks. It's the long game. It's not as gratifying as calling down a list of a hundred people and getting a few yeses. But ultimately those are the biggest opportunities. They're the ones that I'm

best equipped to follow up on. And so, as we continue to grow, I feel like my job is to hand things off so that I can focus on the opportunities that I'm the best equipped to pursue.

TOM

Got it. Yeah, that's really good. Really good. It feels like just the way you've laid it out has such a powerful structure to it that I think is extraordinarily helpful for anyone wanting to think through sales and an enhancement of sales. But going back to the original story, and the original insight which is it's your job to drive sales. That's your primary job, and you've done it through your team, through goal setting, through accountability, through technology and through this ongoing iteration. And I guess the question for me is, how has it proved itself? I know you've given some \$10,000 hits, but, since you began to make the whole orientation sales, what's been the result? I mean, you kind of indicated that, I mean, you have clients in Alaska and you're in Thomasville, Georgia, so something's happening here.

CHRISTOPHER

Yeah. Well, first I've got to start with our team. Our team has grown from five to 35 and they are really the reason for our success. This sales responsibility is something that we split among nine of us. And I'm so proud of them. Through their efforts our sales have grown by five times since we adjusted our strategy. And the bottom line by 13.

TOM

Wow.

CHRISTOPHER

Our team has grown from five to 35 and our clients have grown by six times. Last year, the goal that we set was 20% sales growth, and we hit 30. We're hoping to do that again this year.

TOM

Wow. So yeah, you've more than, significant return on that time, that energy, that focus investment, that starts with you ultimately believing you're the key driver of sales and then radiating that through your team, which is really cool.

Man, that's powerful stuff, Christopher and I really appreciate you sharing it and I know we're at the end of our time, but I was digging into your LinkedIn profile and I find that you have a degree in comparative literature. So, I'm scratching my head because like you also did... you were in banking. So, tell me about the comparative literature and how that impacts your thinking about business and sales, if it does. Like what did that give you terms of what you just described today?

CHRISTOPHER

Wow. You know, I'm surprised. I thought that every business owner came from the Joe Brown school of comparative literature. It was started by selling my parents on why that was a good

idea. And then, selling Morgan Stanley on why comparative literature majors should be working in their offices.

Tom, when I went to school, I knew that it was a special four-year period that I would never get back. And while I started with a triple major in economics, international affairs and Chinese, I hated every one of my classes. And the class that I loved was an elective that I took with Katarzyna Jerzak and she introduced me to French literature. And I'd always loved to read, I grew up loving to read, but through that class I realized that I had a choice. I could spend college just trying to perform or achieve or I could spend it expanding my worldview. And that's followed me far since graduation. It still inspires me and our family as we think about how we like to spend our time. But it was a great use of time, even if it was hard to defend as I was getting started in my career.

TOM

Oh, that's beautiful. I just, I'm blown away. It's such a cool story and such a cool perspective that I believe will have massive influence on those listening. So, thank you. Thank you for your time, your thoughtfulness, your sharing of your story, and yeah, go back and tell your team how much I appreciate them and you in terms of what you've delivered and offered us today. So, thank you.

CHRISTOPHER

Tom I'm flattered to be here. And, we're big fans of yours.

TOM

Thank you.