

myweeklymarketing.

Janice Hostager: 0:04

I'm Janice Hostager. After three decades in the marketing business and many years of being an entrepreneur, I've learned a thing or two about marketing. Join me as we talk about marketing, small business and life in between. Welcome to My Weekly Marketing.

Janice Hostager: 0:29

Hey, hey, today we're taking a deep dive into strategic marketing with Austin LaRoche, CEO of ATAK Interactive, a marketing agency from California. We're talking all about what he's learned working with global businesses that can help you, the small business owner. We'll cover where to focus your efforts, how to invest your time wisely and how to set up systems that get results. We're also going to hear Austin's story about how he went from intern to CEO literally overnight and what it's like for him currently to run a business in the midst of a crisis. So let's jump right in to my talk with Austin. Hey, Austin, welcome to My Weekly Marketing.

Austin LaRoche: 1:10

Hey, thanks for having me, Janice.

Janice Hostager: 1:13

So I geek out on marketing strategy, which I think that makes sense, since that's what I do for a living. I think it's the missing piece to an otherwise siloed industry. But before we get into that, I want to hear your story. Like how did you arrive at running an ad agency and doing all the things that you do?

Austin LaRoche: 1:34

I almost describe my journey as being a pain in the butt entrepreneur. And that I wasn't good at working for other people. I went and I got a graduate degree in communications. I got an internship in social media in 2008, when social media was starting up, and then I parlayed that into an internship within SEO all within the Tribune company, the media company and I decided after those two internships I was ready to start an agency. And so a lot of growing pains. I wish I had been more taken more of an apprentice approach and really learned from people who knew what they were doing for a longer period of time.

Austin LaRoche: 2:25

But I always wanted to work for myself, and so I actually started a little bit more on the social media and B2C side with my agency. I started it in the New Orleans area in 2009 and got some local franchise chains across bedding, coffee, restaurants and I just kind of doing social media and content marketing for them. And I brought my agency out to California in 2011. And I started doing a little bit of work on the side with some startups and I quickly realized again that you know, anytime, like when, I could be the one who said, hey, here's what we need to do, and then we would do it. I was happy when I was working with people and I would and I had to kind of, you know, take a backseat and just be you know just be part of somebody else's vision. It was much harder for me and that's not something I think is good. I'm not recommending that to anybody, I'm just saying that's how I got where I was, and so I merged that company with ATAK Interactive, a web development company, in 2014, and a lot of things came to fruition. It was almost like the bump I needed to go from solopreneur to really being able to help clients solve really big problems. What ATAK gave me that I didn't have before was structure. I am not naturally very structured. I'm creative. I like being able to run with an idea and just go with it.

Austin LaRoche: 4:11

But to get the best out of me, I recognized, as I was partnering on some projects with ATAK Interactive, when I was in that structure I was able to really flourish, and so that happened in 2014. And a lot of, back then, people would always talk about hat clients do you want? And back then it would just be like, the people who would pay me. And so, there was a lot of learning but we realized is that we had a really good knack for B2B marketing and it felt like we were able to talk to other business leaders about how to market to other businesses more than mass adoption on the B2C side. And so we evolved into a B2B marketing agency and really started honing in on software like HubSpot and Salesforce towards the end of the 2010s and really started recognizing, as we were growing our business, that marketing was happening well beyond your traditional marketing operations teams and really a lot on your sales operations side, your customer success side. And so we've been trying to unify marketing and sales teams together through technology for about the past four or five years and we're going to break down that silo for every one of our clients or we're going to die trying, and that's kind of where we are today.

Janice Hostager: 5:42

I really love that you said that, because one of the things that I have a framework, I call it the Trail to the Sale. But so much of that when I work with clients and even in my own business, you have to recognize that, like you said, the sale, the marketing takes place

the entire length of the journey. Well beyond the point in which the customer lays down their credit card. It's even beyond that in terms of how you're serving your customer, how you're interacting with them after the sale. You know, because that lifetime value of that customer is so important. And I think you're right.

Janice Hostager: 6:23

I think a lot of small businesses are so focused on getting anybody. Like who do you serve? Anybody? You know at first, when you're first starting out, it has to be that way sometimes you know you just need to make bills or make money, so you pay the bills. But I love your story because I love that you had enough courage to go from an internship to an agency owner, because that shows that you have some real vision and that you knew what you wanted.

Janice Hostager: 6:52

So that's a good thing. So I'm sure there's a lot of lessons that you've learned in that. But what's one thing that you really wish you knew about marketing, and maybe you touched on it already, about the systems. But that would be helpful for somebody who is just in those early days and they're starting out and they're overwhelmed with marketing and like where do you start with a strategy?

Austin LaRoche: 7:14

I think the thing that marketing is so different now than it was even when I started, and back then a lot of it was about trying to find that creative genius inside of you to create that message that you put out to all of your customers that would resonate with all of them. And that's just not how things work anymore, because now everybody has different customer segmentation right, they're different customer segments, right. We've got different value propositions and so we now have all of these different methods to be able to diversify all of our messaging and so it's no longer the brand telling the customer like this is what it is about us that hopefully resonates. It's putting out a lot of different messages and, based off the data, recognizing what the customer is telling you that resonates with them. And that is a major difference and it's really hard to get past.

Austin LaRoche: 8:17

I remember probably like six or seven years ago, I was a creative writing major, so I was sitting there with my ad copy guy and we're just doing basic Google ads for our agency and I've got all these like cool copy that makes it sound awesome and fun and I'm just wondering week after week why nothing is converting. He's sitting there going hey, man, all these other guys are just being really simple and they're just saying this is what we

do. Click on us. I'm like that's so lame. I don't want to be that. I don't want to be that guy. I don't want to be that. This is lame. But you know, I'll appease you, we'll let you be tested.

Austin LaRoche: 8:55

And then, all of a sudden, the leads started coming and so that ego had to go down and recognize that maybe we're not in, Marketing isn't necessarily as much of oh my gosh, I'm a creative genius. It's not like Mad Men anymore, where a small sample size gets to really blow the socks off of four clients who come to your high rise office in New York City. Come to your high-rise office in New York City. It's sending out, you know, dozens, if not hundreds, of different messages to different customers and really seeing what's resonating with them and then being able to use that data to hone in on messages that you now know your customers are interested in.

Janice Hostager: 9:33

Yeah, yeah, I'm so glad that you brought that up because I think one of the things that I you know, I came when I graduated from college and grad school it was very much. Things were just starting to move, everything was online. So it was like right at the cusp, where everything was going online and the internet was up and running for an ad agency, so we just did ads and so you didn't have it was all push marketing, so you didn't have this feedback loop like you do now with social media and internet and all of that, and it really changed the whole industry and put it on its ear. But I love what you said about being creative, because I can remember sitting in offices and, like you know, with as I was an art director at that point and with a creative writer or a copywriter, and you know, throwing pencils at the ceiling and trying to figure out something that would be fun and creative and catch somebody's attention, our ideal customer's attention.

Janice Hostager: 10:32

But now I think you're absolutely right. You know and I tell clients this all the time too it's just clear wins the day. There's a place for creativity, for sure, but if you're being clear, especially on a Google ad where you've got minimum words to make your point, yeah, so yeah, clarity always wins and it's not as much fun. But at the end of the day, you want business more than you want fun, I'm sure.

Austin LaRoche: 11:02

Well, yeah, and I always try and break everything down. Again, this is on the B2B side. It can overlap a little bit on the B2C side, but I always just try and really simplify that customer journey right. Attract a prospect, convert that prospect into an opportunity,

close that opportunity into a customer, delight that customer, right, yeah. And so a lot of times what you're saying, clear in the attract phase, gets them in the door, right. But to convert, that's when you can bring out all the value props, that's when you can get it unique, that's when you can all of a sudden, you know, really show off who you are and why they should care. But just to get them in the door, I think you're right, I think clarity wins the day, and really, especially in the attract phase.

Janice Hostager: 11:48

Yeah, yeah, I like what Donald Miller always says, that you use so much brain power to think and it's something I never really thought about. You'd actually burn calories to think, and so when you have to think about something and it's fun, sometimes you know you see billboards that are maybe teasers or something of something that's coming up. But if you really have to concentrate on something, with all the media that we have coming at us every day, you're just going to blow right past it. Now it has to be clear and right to the point and right to your customer's problem. So, yeah, you're spot on about that. So, as small businesses, I think we have to grow or die, and as I grow my business, I've heard so many people tell me that it's all about the systems. I was kind of creeping on your website. I noticed that you function a lot with systems. Do you see that in your own business too, that these are necessary?

Janice Hostager: 12:49

And talk to me a little more about that.

Austin LaRoche: 12:51

Well, I think the thing about systems is system scale right, one of the things that we always are debating. Because I am a really big stickler on custom solutions. I think if you come to me and you have a problem, I do not have a magic button that just solved it. I don't have the magic marketing button. What I have is the ability to listen to you and understand where you want to go, what's holding you back and taking my experience and my expertise and be able to help create the right path for you. Now to do that. So now you have to blend those two things, because I always will believe that the best solution for a customer is not from sort of one size fits all, but at the same time, to scale things, you do have to have these systems, and so that's kind of even when I was just discussing that temporal framework that you know track and very close to the light, I try and bring people into that. So, okay, here's a structure, here's a system. It's going to be different for you than it is for every other customer.

Austin LaRoche: 13:54

Let's break this down across sales and marketing who's doing what at each of these phases. And then let's figure out what obstacles that we might have towards doing this the way that we want to be doing it, because anybody can create a strategy, right? Creating strategy is the most fun thing on earth, it is the best, but none of it really matters if you're not fulfilling the strategy and getting the results that you want. So, you know, once we create the strategy, we always look and we recognize okay, this is the world we want to live in. What are the obstacles getting us there? And a lot of times, it's simple stuff, right? It's resources. It's content, you know. It's technology you know, we don't even have a CRM. So there's these different things that prevent you from living in the world that you want with it. So to me, I think there's a big part in between building a strategy and actually following through on a strategy is overcoming the obstacles that you have to actually, you know, be able to live in that day to day that you designed, you know, for your marketing strategy.

Janice Hostager: 15:07

So I see a lot of clients and potential clients that I've worked with. They actually they don't find the joy in the strategy. In fact, they don't know where to start with the strategies. What do you think?

Austin LaRoche: 15:21

So that's a great question, and I think a lot of times you have to understand who you are. So I had a client years ago that was trying to be like an Amazon support, a company that had this way of doing things where they could get you cheaper shipping and all this stuff, and it was kind of confusing. But whatever they were offering, nobody knew about it or was searching about it, right. So, on the other hand, my plumber, he knows that when I need a plumber, I'm going to search for a plumber, and so if you are a company that does something that people are actively searching for, I think you really should be investing in the world of search.

Austin LaRoche: 16:07

Now, five to 10 years ago, that 95% of the world of search was all Google, and now it's very diversified. So you've got Google, you've got YouTube, which is owned by Google, but it is a very big component of search. Now you've got AI tools, ChatGPT, Claude, all of these and they're scraping and they're finding things. TikTok. I don't know when this is going to go up. It's currently not banned, but it might be in the future. But that's very you know, very important, and people are looking across social media channels as well. So I am always of the belief that one of the easiest places to start, if people are searching for what you offer, is to really develop a search strategy, because those are for lack of a

better way, saying of warmer leads that are people who are seeking change in their life, and your product or service can come up and go. I can deliver that change, and so that gives you a really great opportunity.

Austin LaRoche: 17:10

Now, if you're on the opposite side and you're trying to do something really cool and unique, that whole hey it, I think. Hey, you know it takes five to 10 touch moments before people pay attention. It's going to take a lot more. You're constantly going to have to be explaining what this new thing is that you created and why it's different. So there's a lot of thought leadership that I would go into that. So I would invest more on um, you know, YouTube, uh, social media, in that educational side and also recognize that you've got a Harvard journey ahead because you've got that convert phase. You know, for somebody who's got, let's say, the coolest new SaaS tool, you know that's months to years where my plumbers convert phase is about 12 seconds. Whoever picks up the phone first and can get here immediately.

Janice Hostager: 18:02

Right yeah.

Austin LaRoche: 18:04

So it's like really kind of understanding what type of business you have, and then that's where I would then you know, based off that kind of choose your own adventure. Right, based on who I am and what I do, this is the direction I would go.

Janice Hostager: 18:20

Yeah, I was just thinking about that those books yesterday when I was writing a plan for somebody. So it's funny you said that. But yeah, and I think it's sort of like the old analogy whether you're selling vitamins or pain relievers, you know whether or not you're going to have to talk more to talk up your vitamins and why you need them and why you should need them. I should buy them now versus the pain reliever, as you say, plumber, when you've got water rushing in your basement, it's time to call the plumber.

Janice Hostager: 18:47

You're going to find one fast, right? So a lot of small business owners also. Because they've got so much on their plate, they really struggle with the consistency in marketing. Do you have any simple processes or habits that they can follow to stay on track?

Austin LaRoche: 19:38

I think when you're working with a team like ours, we have a very structured engagement. So we're meeting every single week, we're following 30, 60, 90 day plans. We create a scorecard for all of our clients where there's KPIs every single week with a weekly goal attached to it and we look at those. So being able to really dive into the numbers and not like weekly, like really looking at them weekly, helps you to make data-driven decisions right, and you obviously have to understand certain things like hey, why are leads down? Well, I don't know, it was Thanksgiving week. Versus. Hey, we're now looking at a three-week trajectory where our leads are down. What is going on? Yeah, I think we call them KPI trackers, scorecards, whatever, but every week we have a list of KPIs that matter to our clients and then we go through them with them and we see where we are. We compare them to the previous week and then we say, hey, based off what we're seeing, is this an issue? Hey, things are going really well. Do we want a double budget here? Those kind of things.

Austin LaRoche: 21:10

But I I think like and the numbers can be scary when things are not going well, like I've, I've got massive ADHD. So my brain is like, wait, bad numbers go the other way, um. But that's why we have to face them right, because it's not natural for us to go like, oh hey, let's really face the bad news and just kind of deal with it. So I would say that really looking at the numbers at least weekly, that matter and then being able to tie that to revenue is going to keep things consistent, because you're going to consistently go okay, well, this is what we're doing, and we've said we need four to six weeks. We're now in week seven and we don't have what we want. It's time to pivot, you know, versus hey, we said it was like four to six weeks, my gosh, we're already getting results. It's week three.

Austin LaRoche: 21:49

You know, you don't know that if you're not putting the numbers under the microscope

Janice Hostager: 21:54

Right, right, and I think that's good advice for anybody to put something on their calendar, like every Friday, to check and see how things are going. Are there tools out there that can kind of mitigate the fear, you know, that kind of guide people along, that are a little less overwhelming, I would say, than HubSpot too?

Austin LaRoche: 22:17

Yeah, I guess. Maybe not tools, but I would say that I feel like laser marketing works better than lantern marketing. So you know, to me, when it comes to marketing, really all you're looking for is to have the right message, go to the right person at the right time to make them take action. Right. Right message, right person, right time equals action. So I didn't tell you this in the pre-roll, but a month ago today, I evacuated my home here in Southern California and then I woke up the next day and I lost my home. I lost my home in the evening fire.

Janice Hostager: 23:03

I am so sorry.

Austin LaRoche: 23:04

It's all right, but I can't tell you, when you're going through something like that, how much the right message to the right person at the right time means. And I'll give you on the positive side first, all of a sudden, all these people coming out of the woodwork, who you've met, you know, who you haven't talked to in forever and who are you know, sharing your story and telling you how much they're there for you how can I help? How can I help? How can I help? My god, you've never felt emotions like that.

Austin LaRoche: 23:32

On the negative side, if you think those annoying uh like spam cold emails are stupid on a normal day, wait until you're going through something really, really emotionally impactful. Nothing seems dumber, cold outreach. Some guy I've never met before on LinkedIn going hey, Austin, have you heard, have you thought about, as we kick off the new year using this tool or this tool, you're like I've never thought somebody was dumber in my life. And it's because, if you really start looking at your target especially in B2B, where you have less customers who pay more, as opposed to B2C, where that's usually flipped you are constantly trying to make sure that this person knows that you want them to be able to go to where they want to go.

Austin LaRoche: 24:30

You mentioned Donald Miller, so you know the story brand, right, it's they're Luke Skywalker, you're Yoda, your product or service is going to take them to their version of the promised land. And so if you're just reaching out to somebody cold, like at least you know, do some research on them, right, you know what I mean. Like, do something so that, yeah, so that before, before you send a message to somebody, and just you know, pray and spray that you get the right message to the right person at the right time, you

don't accidentally send the absolutely wrong message to the absolutely wrong person at the absolutely wrong time.

Austin LaRoche: 25:34

And so I really think that approach of being able to look at who this customer is, care about them, do what it takes to be able to connect with them organically, and really understand what they want is always gonna be better than you know, spray and pray, and that's, I definitely feel like I learned that lesson a couple weeks ago and I don't think I will ever recommend anything like that for a client again.

Janice Hostager: 25:45

Right, yeah, that's not usually a system that I endorse anyway, but can I ask you?

Janice Hostager: 25:54

How you do now. Everybody's okay.

Austin LaRoche: 25:56

Yeah, Everybody's doing well. I used to work out of a home office. Now I'm here and we work in Pasadena, California. So my family is doing well, we're in the town over and in a few years we're going to have an awesome new house on our land up in the foothills here in Altadena. But yeah, it's definitely one of those things you don't expect to go through in life and if you, you know, look at your life and you realize that there's. There's peaks and valleys, um, you know, I feel like I've been. I've been on a bit of a high for a little while and now I'm down in the valley looking up at the summit. But we'll get there, We'll get back up there.

Janice Hostager: 27:02

Yeah, yeah, the amount of calls and I'm sure the learning curve is tremendous for just dealing with something like that on every level, right?

Austin LaRoche: 27:04

Yeah, and there's a lot of marketing lessons to be learned from something like that. So there is, there are a lot of people who get out quickly, but again, trying to get that right message, that right person at the right time. Can't tell you how many of my neighbors are just, you know, complaining about, you know people way too prematurely reaching out. Are you selling your land or you know like the kind of things that just are just not, you know not good business, right, and maybe sometimes we get to, hustle culture tells us to you know, go, grind, grind, grind. You know don't take no for an answer, it's okay.

You know you take 99 no's before you get a yes. And I think that might be somewhat of the difference between sales and marketing, right, I think marketing, you're always trying to put yourself in a light where you are in a place of helpfulness and where you can help people get that change that they're seeking, whereas I think sales can be a little bit too immediate and sometimes rushed and sometimes not as tactful as us marketers.

Janice Hostager: 27:53

Right, I like to think that, yes, but I do think that actually. But yeah, so I think that's the point of marketing altogether is to grow from that awareness to that sell stage. And I like to go beyond the sell stage, of course, like we talked about earlier, you can market throughout the entire process to where they refer you again and so on, and become super fans. But really the sale is jumping to that sale and I see this all the time. Like you, I get messages on LinkedIn. You get people at my front door trying to sell me something and I don't know who they are or if they're even legit, and so, yeah, so don't be fooled by that. That's not a shortcut to a sale. It's a lot of wasted time and energy and effort and you could not only do people not get to know, like and trust you, but you can make some real enemies doing that as you found out this week.

Austin LaRoche: 28:51

Absolutely. Yeah, you know, I mean, I think a lot of times, like with marketing nowadays, like you know, and kind of going that part of being helpful, you get like things like community groups, right. And so all of a sudden, now we know all the people that we were never going to do business with because we've all been exposed at this bad time, and that's one of the things, too that I've always thought. I was talking to my team recently because they were asking about, like, marketing on Reddit. I said the thing about Reddit and why Reddit's so great is because it's a lot of people who care about a subject and they are honestly there to help.

Austin LaRoche: 29:40

So if you want to tell one of your customers how to market on Reddit, tell them not to put their brand name, but tell them to create a personal profile, be an expert in something and help everybody they can and expect nothing in return. But something probably is going to come in return, because that's just the law of reciprocity, right the more that you give, the more that you give back, and I think that ends up happening a lot with marketing. And it's a good marketing lesson that if you're giving people the advice and information they need, they're going to come to you. Maybe they don't need your product or service right now, but if you built that trusted authority like, they're going to listen to you when it's time to get there, right.

Janice Hostager: 30:13

So yeah, yeah, and I will tell you that recently I just responded to something on Reddit and shared a resource that I have and I think I got I don't know 40 new subscribers or something like that, just on Reddit. I had no intention of doing that. I mean, it's always a nice thing that happens, but, yeah, reddit, I think, is also showing up in Google search results, now that it didn't really use to do that, yeah.

Janice Hostager: 30:39

So that is a real benefit to being, you know, doing the right thing, right. So where can people find out more about you?

Austin LaRoche: 30:48

Well, you can go to our website, www.watakinteractive.com. You can find me on LinkedIn Austin LaRoche, l-a-r-o-c-h-e, and always open to have any connections or conversations, even if it's just to be able to help somebody as they're trying to go through their marketing journey and go from where they are today to where their version of the problem slams right.

Janice Hostager: 31:13

Absolutely. Yeah, Well, I appreciate you taking the time today.

Austin LaRoche: 31:17

Absolutely. Thanks so much for having me, Janice.

Janice Hostager: 31:20

Thank you so much for joining us today. To learn more about Austin Attack, Interactive, or anything we talked about today, visit myweeklymarketing.com. Forward slash 98. And don't forget to subscribe to My Weekly Marketing for more insights into growing your small business too. Remember, marketing isn't just about what you do. It's about the stories you tell and the connections you make. So keep hustling and innovating to watch your business grow. See you next time. Bye for now.