

Keeping the Customer with Nate Segall
The Shred Coach Podcast Transcript

TOM

Nate Segall, welcome to The Shred Coach Podcast. I'm glad you're here.

NATE

Hi, it's great to be with you. I'm honored that you thought of me and looking forward to this conversation.

TOM

You're a long-time veteran and I thought it'd be interesting to talk to you a little bit about some of the things or a specific thing you've done in your business to grow, to amplify, to get better results. But before we do that, if somebody doesn't know who you are, tell me a little bit about your company. Tell me where you are, your location. Tell me a little bit about AccuShred.

NATE

We are based in Northwestern, Ohio, we're in Toledo. We have a service territory that is about a hundred, 110 miles in any one direction. So, we got a pretty decent sized service territory. We have been in business for 20 years in January and we provide both onsite and offsite services to our customers. Got a staff of about a dozen and we're still growing nicely.

TOM

That's great. And you said you're both plant and mobile. Like how many mobile trucks are you running in terms of trucks with shredders on them versus just collection trucks?

NATE

Well, we started out all plant-based, we talked ourselves, we talked our customers into plant-based primarily and realized that we were starting to walk away from too much business. So, bought a used shred truck. Liked it, got into it. We've currently got three box trucks and a fourth is on the way and we are running three shred trucks also on the way this summer.

TOM

So, are you also doing other services beside shredding paper? Do you have any ancillary services you do or is it primarily paper in both of those methods on and off site?

NATE

We've added to our business product destruction, as well as electronics recycling and hard drive destruction in addition to offering at a breach protection services as well. So, we try and be kind of a one-stop shop as best we can. Have not gotten into storage, that's a completely different business model, but we do provide just about all the data destruction services.

TOM

Got it. So, it sounds like you've got a full range of services that you're working from. So, given that, given 20 years of history, the focus of this podcast is a strategy, a tactic and implementation you've done, a way of thinking that's made an impact your business. So, I'm interested in what you've been doing recently that seems like it's created some kind of positive return on investment.

NATE

Well, we're pretty big on, you know, it's always nice to get that sale. It's a win. Getting the customer's important, but for us, keeping that customer is probably more important. When we entered into the business 20 years ago, you know, in our market, we had a very established well-regarded customer that we're going up [*unintelligible*] and a company that employs the developmentally disabled. So, it was not easy for us to acquire customers initially. So, for us getting those customers was critical, but keeping them and finding a way of keeping them in the fold was just as important. So, for us, I think customer attention has been a focus for us and that takes a variety of forms.

TOM

Okay. So yeah, I mean, you raise an interesting point there. It's one thing to assume you can go out and just get clients. But in a really competitive market, getting the clients is the thing that gets them in the door, keeping the customers is what really makes you money in the long run. So, tell me a little bit about- did you initially start with getting them and losing them? What was the thing that really forced you to go "keeping the customer is critical to us"? What was the genesis of making that more of a focus of attention?

NATE

Well, we operate in both Toledo as well as other major metropolitan areas, Detroit, very competitive. And we really have not lost many customers at all. When we lose a customer, it's primarily because they close their doors, they move out of the area, someone up the chain feels it's a good idea to go with a multinational rather than a local company, to which those on the ground are not necessarily happy, but they have to follow suit. So, it's not a matter of losing customers. We built our business differently than some in our area in that, when we came in, our crosstown rivals had been in the business for 14 years. They had a pretty solid foothold, all of the hospitals, the banks had already been spoken for so to speak. And we built our business with the small to medium sized business. And for us, trying to keep them there and not give them a reason to look elsewhere was really important.

I would also say that when I first started the business, I wasn't a big proponent of contracts. I think contracts, some customers don't like contracts having to sign them. I think sometimes they lend themselves to you becoming lazy and not paying attention to the customer. So, we since have come around to it because of the nature of what we do. I think it's critical for both parties to have some kind of agreement in contract, but we needed to find something to keep them from looking elsewhere. And that's why we just start doing all the little things for our customers.

TOM

So, you've mentioned little things and we've got the big genesis of the idea. So, tell me what you've done over 20 years to keep customers. What are the little things that form a big result?

NATE

Well, I mean, everyone likes to say that they provide outstanding customer service. That's kind of an amorphous term. But for us, it's all the little things, it's... We run a very lean operation. There's only three in addition to myself in the office. So, everyone- and we always answer the phone and that's more important these days with the multinationals. You keep hearing people can't get answers to questions. They can't get phone calls returned. So, for us always having someone to answer the phone is important and always having answers for the customer. May not know them at the time, at the moment, but you can get it quickly and respond back to the customer. So, always having the customer know they can get an answer and fairly quickly is important for us.

You know, we do little things. We have leave behinds. We have goody bags. When we first service for a customer, we have goody bags that we leave that's got reminders of who we are, it's got a phone list of who to contact if you've got certain problems. It's those things that we provide the customer that they have a resource to go to if they have questions.

TOM

So, in that goodie bag, is it predominantly just information and phone numbers or is there like tchotchkes and stuff like that in there too?

NATE

There are tchotchkes and we have kind of become known for the cookies that we provide our customers. We have very high-quality chocolate cookies that we leave behind that's imprinted with our logo that people, our customers have started to ask for them, you know, "When you do our service, can you remember to bring us some cookies?" That type of thing. I order them in 2,500 batches and they're delivered 1250 at a time so they stay fresh, a couple of times a year, but that's just a little thing that we've kind of become known for.

TOM

Really. That's so interesting.

NATE

And I tell my drivers our customer's experience with us to be the best of their vendors that day. So, if it's going there with a smile, it's making them feel good about their interactions with us. We don't need to give them any reason to look elsewhere.

TOM

Right. So going back, there's the little things that you do. So, one of those is that, the answer the phone, there's the leave-behinds, there's the chocolate cookies. But you've kind of gone into now

your team activities. How do you train drivers to be the very best that they can be every day? Like how do you get that? Because, I mean, this is obviously an area a lot of people are struggling with these days. But if you've made it a high priority to make sure that they're the best experience, a customer's best experience of the day, how do you get that out of them?

NATE

It's challenging. It starts with getting the best people in that you can. And I would tell you, it takes me forever to hire drivers. I think it takes the right person with the right work ethic and demeanor and personality to do what we ask them to do. And there's not a lot of those people out there running around. I probably interview people the exact opposite way that they tell you to do it. They tell you to interview as many people as you can, bring them in and find who you're looking for. I'm uber particular when it comes to who I bring in to interview. So, I may not interview- I may not throw the net out for everyone. I'll be very particular. I'm looking for something very specific in their background, in their experience that I think will translate well to what we do here. And that's also true for who I have in the office. We have very little turnover. I'm blessed to have a phenomenal staff. I've got my very first driver that we ever hired still working for me.

TOM

Wow.

NATE

He's 87. No-

TOM

What?!

NATE

No, I'm kidding. But we try and treat them well. If you treat your people well, then they're going to treat your customers well.

TOM

Right. So, that person that you have, who's the direct interface, the driver, the person answering the phone, you've taken a long time to hire them. Do you have a process whereby if you get the right person, you're still training them to be that optimal agent of yours, agent by means of employee team member whose job is to keep the customer sticky? Like, what else are you doing to ensure that?

NATE

We do. And we certainly have them spend time with our other drivers that know what they're doing to get a feel for the proper customer interaction, what a good customer interaction looks like and feels like, and the time that it takes. So, we do spend time with our drivers, honing that skill. We'll send...

NATE (cont.)

You know, my sales manager used to be a driver, so he showed a propensity for sales and we slid him into that. And he's done very well with that, but he'll go out from time to time, even with experienced drivers to see what their experiences are like. And we also get that feedback from our drivers too. We'll have driver meetings with regularity to get a feel for what they're seeing out there, what they're experiencing, and if there are things that other drivers need to see and hear to kind of fold into their day's routine.

TOM

Interesting. Yeah, that's a powerful part of it. So that, to me, I mean, you do all these little things, but it sounds like you do some big things in terms of hiring the right people, ensuring that they're stable. And for some reason, you've had little turnover. So, how has the turnover or lack of turnover affected keeping the customer? Do you feel like that has had a profound impact in some way?

NATE

There's no question. We've got drivers spend a lot of time with our customers, and they've gotten to know who they are. We have, some of our older customers will want to know if someone missed a day, how they're doing, you know? So yeah, that has a pretty strong tie for us because I've learned long ago, this business is not about me. This business is about our drivers and they're the ones that solve the problems for the customers, they're the ones that see them on a regular basis. So, that's really critical.

TOM

Right. So, what other little things are you doing to fill in this "keep the customer" focus? What other things? So, we've got how you answer the phones, you're answering the phones to start with, they're not going to voicemail, you're answering. You're doing leave-behinds, you're doing these really cool cookie things. You're training and teaching your people, your frontline people, and the people in the office who answer the phones. There's this solid sense that you have a very particular way of doing things. But there's got to be more, cause that's all great, but is there more stuff you're doing? What else is happening?

NATE

Well, fairly recently within the last couple of years, and interestingly right before it became part of i-SIGMA's certification program, we adopted GPS for our trucks. And what I think that's enabled us to do is, real-time we can see where a driver is. A lot of customers want to know, do we have any idea where or when our drivers will be there. That enables us to almost immediately be able to give them that feedback, to see where the drivers are to and to gauge how long it might be.

You know, interestingly, kind of a side benefit, I think for us, and I saw it almost immediately, was after having these units installed in the trucks, our drivers started finishing their routes a lot earlier. And I kept looking at the route sheet thinking, "We have light days, like back-to-back-to-

back light days, how come our drivers are getting back so early?" I think, as it turns out, they were a little concerned with me watching them all day long and the amount of time they spent in any particular customer. Which I wasn't doing, but it had a positive effect, I think, in just the efficiencies of their routes and letting them get done and get more accomplished on a day-to-day basis.

TOM

Yeah, that's great. One of the things I noticed on your website, and I'd be interested in how this impacts your "keeping the customer" focus, was the Susan Komen involvement that you have. I look at hundreds of companies in this industry and you seem to have an overt focus there, so much so that it's front and center as a hovercraft on your website. But you're also putting the pink bins out in the world. Tell me a little bit, is that of impact or is that just a decision that you have as a company to contribute in that way? Can you give a correlation in that one?

NATE

Well, I think it's important for folks who are in the industry to come off as a good corporate neighbor. Being active in our community is important. I think, you know, this industry is fond of saying this is a know, like, and trust business. And I think that's part of knowing, liking and trusting us is knowing that we're involved in the community in ways that make a difference.

You know, we've raised a little over \$163,000 for Susan G Komen over the course of about nine or 10 years, in partnership with all of our customers. So, it's been a phenomenal program. You know, a lot of people like to say, it's not what you make it, it's what you keep. And there's certainly truth to that. I'd like to say it's not necessarily what we make, but what we're able to give back to the community. And I think that feeds in also to that customer retention because they feel good about who it is that they're using.

TOM

Well, I love how you said that too. It wasn't just us that does the Komen foundation or the Komen- you called it a partnership with your customers. And to me, that is an immediate evidence of the way you think about customers in terms of the connection to them. It's not just something you're doing as a tax benefit or whatever. There is a deliberate partnership that you're engaged in.

NATE

Yes, correct. And I always think it's a partnership. We're not just a vendor, we're a partner.

TOM

Yeah, that's really cool. So, did we miss anything in terms of little things that you do to keep the customer as a part of this big strategy that is so important to you? Is there any other little things we missed?

NATE

I don't know. I mean, I think that our website is very deep and very informative for customers and potential customers. I see a lot of websites that just say "Here, this is what we do". Our website, if you get on it, tell us a little bit about who we are, why we do what we do. We talk about the industry, we talk about us, we talk about tips, what to look for, what not to look for. So, it's a pretty deep website. I think that feeds into having customers become familiar with us and become comfortable with us as well.

TOM

Good. Okay. Well, I was digging into your, some of your personal history and I noticed a significant connection to the Better Business Bureau. I raise this because I find it an interesting dynamic. I hear many people who, you know, maybe don't have a great opinion of the Better Business Bureau, but you've been engaged actively both in leadership and in, you know, board work with them. What do you know about the Better Business Bureau that the rest of the shred world needs to know?

NATE

I think it exists to facilitate better experiences between the business community and the customers. So, it's been fulfilling for me to see the different programs that have been brought on all in the name of membership. I mean, it is a membership driven organization and there are more and more phenomenal programs that are being brought on.

You know, a lot of people think you buy your way into that and you buy your way into good reviews and good ratings. And that's absolutely not the case. Based on customer feedback is how you, you know how you get ratings in their business bureau. It's a phenomenal group of people, at least on a local level.

TOM

Right.

NATE

I've been blessed to be on the board and contribute. Matter of fact, I've got a board meeting tomorrow.

TOM

Well, that's, that's really helpful. It's a perspective that I think someone who's deeply involved has a much more capable way of defining it. And I appreciate how you define it there.

Nate, I really appreciate you sharing this stuff. I think the focus and some of the stuff you talked about in terms of keeping the customer is really powerful and really good. I'm really grateful that you've been willing to share this with us and with the community. And as always, you have been a huge contributor over the years to this community in so many ways. And I, on behalf of the community and the industry, we want to say thank you for all you do for it as well.

NATE

It's been my pleasure. The industry has given me back much more than I could ever give it. We're thrilled to be a part of i-SIGMA; it's as open in communication as I've ever seen and very pleased to be a part of it, and honored to be a part of this podcast.