

Stop & No with Brock Miller
The Shred Coach Podcast Transcript

TOM

Brock Miller, welcome to the podcast it's really good you here. Let's set the context. Give me some big picture details about you and your shredding business. Shredding Northwest, right? That's the name of your company?

BROCK

Shred Northwest. Yep, absolutely.

TOM

Okay.

BROCK

We are out here in the beautiful Portland, Oregon area. So, the Pacific Northwest and, yeah, it's gorgeous. You have to love the liquid sunshine, but if you can do that, you can love it out here.

TOM

Love your city.

BROCK

Yeah, thank you. It's had a lot of, negative attention in the press recently, but we love it and the people are great. And I think a lot of that was just hype, but it's been a great place to build a business. We've been at it for about 12 and a half years. And right now, we have a whole arsenal of shred trucks. Not every one of them goes out. We send out about six routes every day and, you know, 15 employees on the payroll.

TOM

15. Okay. And are you both truck and plant, are you doing, do you have shredding equipment, both on trucks and in a plant or are you purely mobile?

BROCK

You know, we have sort of a hybrid approach. And I would say that we are predominantly mobile or transitioned. We used to have a shred plant and the plans are to re- go back into plant-based shredding, but we're mostly mobile.

TOM

Okay. All right. And so, you're in Portland. But what's your service area? It sounds like you've been at this for a while, so I'm guessing that you're bigger than Portland at this point.

BROCK

We are. Yes. So, we've made an acquisition in the Salem, Oregon area. So, the main freeway system that runs from California all the way up to Seattle, we pretty much have a territory that's from the Salem area, South, through Portland, North and into Southwest Washington. And then all of the Northern and central Oregon coasts, we do go into central Oregon as well, but the majority of the population centers are right here in the Portland metropolitan area.

TOM

Got it. So mobile, but are you doing more than shredding paper? Are you doing hard drives? Are you doing other ancillary services? Tell me a little bit about the related services.

BROCK

Yeah, we're shredding predominantly paper and digital media. We can do product destruction. It doesn't happen as frequently for us as others maybe. But we're mostly in that paper and hard drive space.

TOM

Okay. And in sort of knowing a little bit about you, Shred Northwest is an evolved name from Accu-North. It was Accu-Shred back in the day. Wasn't it? So, give me a little bit of the backstory on that.

BROCK

Sure. So, my wife's family has owned a garbage and recycling solid waste company since 1948. And so, when they decided to diversify, because the solid waste industry is very highly regulated in Oregon, much different than other states and locations. And so, shredding was a non-regulated space. And so, at the time they were like, let's come up with a name that starts with an A. It's in the phone book. And we had, you know, the team that was in place there. I was not there at that time at the inception. They thought that was important. So, they launched this Accu-Shred Northwest, and over time we've evolved away from a phone book, you know, A being the predominant thing. And for us, it was very important to have Shred as the first name. And if I could go back, I would still name it differently than what we are today, but Shred Northwest is who we are.

TOM

Okay. Interesting. Okay. So, there's history here, but the evolution has put you where you are today. Which leads me to the whole point of both the backstory, but the whole point of the Shred Coach Podcast, which is, practical, real-world shredding, owner, operator, leader, implementation, stuff that works. And so, my question to you, as I put you on the hot seat is tell me about a specific strategy, tactic, tool or resource you implemented that's made a significant impact on your business. Give me an idea of what you want to talk about today.

BROCK

Okay. Well, as you can imagine, there are a whole lot of things that I think are contributing to the success of the company. But one thing that stood out to me as I was thinking about what I might share is the effective use of "stop and no". And the reason that that's important to me and there's people, you may have even spoken on this at times, I don't recall, but it's just such a, it's a unique decision to stop something or to say no to something. And for me, it's also one of the more lonelier parts of leadership, right? Because everybody loves you when you're saying yes to things like, "Yes, let's do this. Yes, let's continue. Yes, I can see how this is going to create an ROI". But as soon as you start saying, "No, I don't think that's going to work", or "I'm deciding we need to stop", it can become a lonely space and changes relationships.

And so, as I look through my career my success at Shred Northwest, which I would say has been highly successful, with my own personal critique, I think it's been those strategic stops and those strategic no's that have made very measurable differences for us.

TOM

Wow. That's interesting. Let's talk a little bit more. did this process for you of almost having the courage to say no first show up to you? Do you remember a story when it was like the first time you went, "Ah, crap. I got to say no".

BROCK

Well, I mean, it goes a little bit back in, into my personal life, but I think as a freshmen at the university of Colorado, Boulder were really some of the first adult thinking moments I had where I was like, "Wait a minute, is the path that I'm on right now going to create the kind of success that I was raised in and the kind of success that I think I deserve, and the people that I'm going to be with for the rest of my life deserve?" And so, I stopped a couple of different things. I took a break out of college for two years, I came back, I transferred school. And then even later in life, I was in the middle of an MBA program and had an opportunity that I didn't see coming to stop my MBA at Utah State University, leave my job, so quit my job, where I was gainfully employed and move out to Oregon to take over this start-up shred company, which I had no idea about. So, it was a very difficult stop and a very difficult, "no" but we did it.

TOM

So, you're in the middle of that moment. Let's just go back to that moment. And you're in school, you're doing your MBA program and you get this invite. What's the evolving adult, the process of going, "No, I'm going to stop this"? How do you process that internally? Like, do you get like a feeling in your gut? You know, they talk about gut instinct. Or is this a where you write down on a sheet of paper, pros and cons and, you know, the very traditional way of thinking about yes/no decisions? Like, how do you process this back then? And I'm going to ask you how you do it today, but how did you do that?

BROCK

Yeah, well, I wish that back then someone could have talked me through it because I really felt like, you know, I'm a newly married young adult with debt and dreams and I had relationships, you know, I was working, I'd been working for several years. I had a path that made sense I was being recognized. So, it was a very bold, very daring, very risky decision for me to stop that, to just end my relationships in the business world that I was starting to make a name for myself with. I think that I waited out and I thought to myself, "Oh my gosh, could I really work for a small business that's owned by my in-laws? Is that a recipe that's going to work?" And it was like, all good decisions. And this is why I think saying no and stopping stuff can be so hard. was not a perfect set of information. And it came inconveniently into my life. And so, with an imperfect set of information at an inconvenient time, I had to just make a decision and the decision was to stop the path that I was on, and course-redirect and head to Portland, Oregon and enter a new industry in a new space.

TOM

So, that's a really cool "Stop and no" origin story, but tell me how are you dealing with that today? You've reached obviously a level of success that has given you the capability to go out and acquire other companies. Enough stuff must show up on your plate every day, in terms of you're currently the president of I-SIGMA, your undoubtedly in your local community... I've looked at your LinkedIn profile and, you know, everybody loves you. So, undoubtedly, you get lots of invitations to be involved in stuff. Boards, advisory, involvement in, I know you're involved in your community, I know you're involved in your church. I mean, there's a lot going in your life, plus you got kids. How do you take that "Stop and no" when you're in demand?

BROCK

Well, it's all about prioritizing the good, the better and the best. And that can be very hard. And I will not say that I feel like I do it perfectly every time. And so, I'm thinking about, for example, in 2016, we had... my brother-in-law and I were representing the fourth generation of this family business that's been very successful. And he's going a million miles an hour in his life and I'm doing the same. And we had one of those family difficult moments where he wanted to go a different direction with the business. He saw me as an outsider and I just thought to myself, "Okay. I am my own person in my community, I've built, I didn't start Shred Northwest, or then Accu-Shred Northwest, but I built it. It was floundering. And so, you just have to make the decisions that are the best decisions for you. This is what I've done and know that the better decisions and the good decisions just have to go secondary.

And so, I've tried to do that. Part of that included, we sold- I mean, we spent \$2 million the solid waste company growing the business that I have now. Had they never diversified and this intrapreneurial launch, there'd been \$2 million, over \$2 million that they could have invested. And so, we stopped records management, record storage, we stopped scanning services, we sold them and we just said, what can we be the very best at? It wasn't those other lines of business. And so, it was just like, prioritize, prioritize. This is what we can be the very best at.

TOM

Oh, that's great. That's great. So, in your own process of that, because I think that's such a good example of it is you stopped revenue production there. I mean, there's revenue there cause record storage isn't a bad business, but it's not necessarily the best is what you're saying. You're running through a decision matrix to actually get this result that gives you the best outcome, which allows you to say no. I guess I'm intrigued by how you actually do that personally. You got an MBA or you've got most of an MBA. I'm not sure. Cause you said you quit, but did you ever finish that MBA?

BROCK

I did. I transferred actually to Portland State and transferred those credits back. So yeah, we're, we're credentialed.

TOM

I mean, just the fact that you got an MBA means you're analytical. So, like when you're dealing with a go/no-go or a stop/go scenario, are you like, processing this in a notebook, on spreadsheets? How do you, like, what's your process? That's why I want to dig in on this because I think it's such a powerful tool. Like, what do you do?

BROCK

Yeah. Well, okay. It occurs to me that I've done this in my personal life. One of the things that it's just a, sort of a funny example. And if you know my wife, this is even a more meaningful example, but I had this conversation when I was engaged with my wife and I'm talking to my mom and they're like, "Are you sure you want to get married? You guys are, you know, 23, 22 years old". And I said, "Mom, like, I've never wanted to marry someone. And Amy just, she holds nothing back. There's like zero intimidation. We're like totally equals". And I've learned that when you surround yourself with people who treat you as a complete equal and have no intimidations, it can be a little bit contentious at times. And we've had to work through that, but I've followed that pattern in work. I cannot stand hiring people who don't know how to put alternative, creative ideas on the table. And that's a difficult skill set in and of itself. I mean, I can have a podcast just on how to communicate alternative ideas without being divisive or stirring the pot unnecessarily, but I've surrounded myself with people who just have been very, very good at requiring me to give my very best while they give their very best and its diverse thought.

My father-in-law who has been an owner of the shred company for a long time, in his seventies, he's been an incredible person to work with. And while he's not made decisions for the company, he's the kind of guy that says, "Well, Brock you need an expert on that. Brock, we need to find an expert in this. You can't make that decision, can you? You're not an expert." I've come to appreciate the value of bringing in experts.

TOM

Yeah.

BROCK

I've sued a union. You want to have an expert? Sue a union. You need a good attorney. My wife and I bought some property that has environmental contamination on it. And if you want to buy contaminated property you better have a very good environmental attorney.

TOM

Yeah.

BROCK

But I've learned with my decision-making when I have to say stop, and when I have to say no, I can't just say, "Well, the experts are telling me no", or "The experts are telling me yes". Because what happens is that experts always couch their opinion in these caveats of, "Well, we don't know all of the conditions". And so, it's this funny balance of making decisions where you go, "Okay, I don't have the perfect set of information. This so-called expert doesn't have the so-called information". And so, then you just have to be a very good listener and prioritize good, better, best and you just have to stop some things and say no to some things. I refuse to let experts overly weigh in on things that I owe it to my people to be expert in this company and I try to be.

TOM

Right. So, if I were to ask Amy, when you're making go/no-go decisions, stop or go decisions, do you tend to, in that good, better, best, do you tend to analyze it to death and grind away at it for weeks, or is it like this gut intuitive, or is it a combination of both? How, where do you lean in those two? Because there's people out there in the entrepreneur world who are all gut, all instinct, damn the experts. And there's others who process spreadsheets for weeks. I know I'm poking at this one, but I'm just trying to understand your process. Cause I think it's really good how you do this.

BROCK

I'm cognizant of what I would say are two primary ways that I think people can reach good conclusions. Sometimes, and for me, it's been on rare occasion, it's like you're in a dark room and someone turns on a light switch and you're like, "Oh my gosh, I know exactly what to do. This is the answer". That for me has been more of a rarity. More often it's like, I wake up before the sun rises, it's a cloudy day. And imperceptively, it becomes increasingly light that I can see until suddenly I can see around me. But the moment you don't see the additional and knowledge coming to you. And most of my decisions have been like that. So, it's a combination of like you've got good people speaking honestly to you, you've got good analytical data, you include expertise. And then you just say, this is the decision and you have to make it successful. You just have to.

TOM

Ah, so good. So, you said there was two ways that was one, dark room...

BROCK

Well, yeah, the light switch immediately where it's just like a light bulb goes off and the other, is that-

TOM

Or it's the...

BROCK

Yeah.

TOM

Right. It's the evolution, like sort of the light unfolding,

BROCK

Correct.

TOM

Okay. But it's still there. You've done all the work. You've done the intellectual exercise. You probably have gut instinct, but it's allowing at a certain point, the light shows up.

BROCK

That's right. And to me, it's very important to not be the kind of leader who is looking for everything all at once. And there's been a lot of things where I've had to say, "Nope, that's not the case, that's not realistic". And we've had to course correct to make strategy on those kinds of things.

TOM

I hear you. It's really about this ability to make these decisions that long-term support the growth of the business, the best decisions that force you sometimes to say no, like we're just going to say no to this.

BROCK

Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's, it was that combination of illuminating decisions where you just, you have to make a small decision. This is what it is. Make a small decision, see the impact. Make a small decision, see the impact. And very sensitively... like for way too long, I've trusted on these experts, like I've mentioned, instead of being able to see data points. And seeing data points, like, for example, saying, no, I'm not going to trust just my controller's opinion on what he sees in the books. I want to actually see the data points in combination with their opinion. And so those kinds of things help me tremendously.

TOM

Yeah, no, that's really good. Really good. So, you, you mentioned earlier in terms of the practical input, you had invested \$2 million in certain parts of the business and you made certain decisions. So, the value of making "no" decisions is infinitely higher than \$10,000.

BROCK

Oh, infinitely. Yes.

TOM

Wonderful. Well, that's really helpful and that's exactly what I want from this show and from this is to get these really cool ways you do stuff. So, thank you for sharing that. I think it's really magnificent.

One other question for you and it's on a completely different path, but I like to ask a separate question in these shows and that is, you've just completed your year as president of I-SIGMA. What do you now know at the end of this term that you didn't at the beginning? What has been illuminated? What, using your metaphor, which is the lights have come on over the last year? What have you learned? What have you seen? What's been impactful in this year of being the president?

BROCK

Well, I would say one of the light bulbs that went off on me immediately upon becoming the president, not just the president elect, but actually those responsibilities changing, was just how remarkably fortunate we are to have trade association staffers who are very good at their work. They care deeply about this association. And I knew that, but I knew it at a different level, which was important for me because as the elected president, you want to leave an impact and you don't know, like, do I need to go in there and clean house? Like, will I find that these people are actually not doing that much? But I was, it was very clear to me that Bob Johnson and Michelle and Kelly and others are working very hard.

I would say the other thing that I have learned is I have learned how important it is to have directors on the board. And I've learned this- it's been a gradual learning process like that sunrise experience. But, when you have directors on a board who can think independently, speak independently without being contentious, because the contention becomes, it takes its own energy and it distracts from productive work. And I think sometimes as board members, it's easy to think like, "Well, I need to be independent, so I'm, you know, look out cause I'm coming". And I've learned that you just can get a lot of things done. We have done very important things. We've got a transition, a major transition of Bob Johnson's retirement and that succession, and we've been very productive and yet still maintain a lot of independence. I have been a pupil of how that works as much as I've been any kind of a leader.

TOM

Yeah, very cool. That's really good to hear. And, on behalf of the greater industry, not just shredding industry, but the greater industry. I want to thank you for the work you've done this last year. It's been a huge year, so thank you for your efforts in that regard.

BROCK

You're most welcome.

TOM

Brock it's been really good to talk to you. I appreciate your insight. I loved your topic. I just absolutely love it. It's such a valuable and important tool for any leader, owner, operator, CEO to know how to stop and how to say no. So, thank you for sharing that with us.

BROCK

You're very welcome. It's my pleasure. Thank you.