

An F-250 and a Trailer with Muff London

The Shred Coach Podcast Transcript

TOM

Muff London, welcome to The Shred Coach Podcast. I'm glad you're here.

MUFF

Oh, it's going to be fun morning.

TOM

Yeah. I'm so excited to talk to you in this format and in this forum. So, let's set the context, let's set the reality of the world you live in as it relates to shredding. Tell me about your company. Tell me about your city service area. Give me a sense of what you look at on a daily basis.

MUFF

Well, my twang probably tells you a little bit that I'm in the panhandle of Texas and our area is part of Western, Oklahoma, the panhandle. We go all the way down to Middle of Odessa, Abilene area and then on into all the Eastern part of New Mexico. So, we have two plant-based operations, one in Amarillo where we started and then we added Lubbock as a plant-based. So, we do both plant-based and onsite site too. We have mobile trucks, but I will tell you that the majority of our business is done by truck and trailer. So...

TOM

Truck and trailer.

MUFF

Uh huh. So, that's kind of, I mean, it's an interesting concept; kind of part of our story really.

TOM

Well, tell me more about that, because that's intriguing already.

MUFF

Well, when we got in the business, we actually had someone come to us that asked for, you know, they wanted, they needed funding and thought that because we didn't have anything in the Amarillo area that we should, you know, consider a shred company. And so, we kind of got into it, thinking about it. And my financial partner who I went to - I worked for an entrepreneur - and I said, "Well, I think it's kind of a good idea". And he kind of passed on it and I said, "Well, I'm going to do it anyway. I want to figure this out". And so, then he comes back and he goes, "Well, no, I'm not going to let you do it without me".

And so, we came up with the idea of using a company that was already in existence that had trucks. And when the trucks went out to do their distribution, they came back empty. And so, we kind of started with that concept and then decided to go ahead and do a truck and trailer. And

so... Yahoo! I mean, it was like we got this really cool marketing company to give us a great design and we had great looking, you know, black and red trucks and trailers. Well, you know, obviously we just took the business just like a reasonable approach to getting into a business, where you didn't have to have a whole lot of capital.

And we didn't do our research, like go to a consultant within the business. And so, while I'm not sure that was the right approach, it is the- it's just got us where we are today. And a lot of people have ridiculed us and everything, but I think it's ironic that now the big boys have already figured out that, you know, the shred trucks are really an expensive way to do shredding. And to do it on, you know, plant-based is just a lot less expensive. I mean, plus you fill your own paper, you get a little bit more in, you know, for your paper and everything. So, we just took a reasonable approach, which by the way, in this day and time in an unreasonable world seems kind of crazy. But we didn't do our... we didn't like get a consultant or anything. And ironically, you know a consultant would've just said, "Well, this is how many trucks you need to buy. This is what we recommend for the best, you know, truck and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah". But we started the way everybody now is moving towards.

TOM

Yes. Yes. So, take me back just because I'd like to dig a little bit further into that. So, you buy a truck and you're recognizing that trucks are moving product and you're you have, what, *a* client that's giving you shredding back. Did you go buy some shredding equipment? How did you get this thing started such that you could receive paper and shred it? Did you just buy some equipment?

MUFF

Yeah, we bought a small... I don't remember the size of it, Tom. Now you're going to find out that that part of the industry, I'm not really good at; I'm more the visionary and the overseer and the marketing part of the company. But anyway, we bought a small used shredder in Baylor and we eventually sold that because we've gotten, you know, we have the big, big boys now.

TOM

Right.

MUFF

We started in a part of this... the company that we partnered with was a company that distributed to convenience stores. And so, they had all different kinds of product, but they had a lot of room at their plant location. And so, we just started in a, like, a wing of their plant location at a very low rental rate. And we used their trucks for a while, but we started getting too busy. And so, we bought us an F-250 and got us a really nice-looking trailer and then got a great design on it. And what I got tickled about was everybody would, you know, that moving billboard on that big trailer, people would go, "God, y'all are just all over town. You must, you know...". I'm like, "No, we're just driving up and down the streets, trying to get people to know what shredding is about!"

TOM

Right. Right. So, here you are in Amarillo, you're using a distribution company or a convenience store company's trucks. They're taking their product to their stores and then they're going somewhere else to get your paper and bring it back to the plant, their plant, where you're located and you're shredding paper, but you get really busy really quickly. And so, you start buying your own equipment. But that now the model is set. You've got a model and you start growing. So, when in that process did you add, like, the shred truck? Or did you grow so that you had 10 trucks and 10 trailers or did you move to transport and 52-footer behind? What's kind of the evolution of this story?

MUFF

Well, the majority of our- I'd say 70-80% of our business is done by truck and trailer. So, we've got a lot of trucks and trailers. But we finally added the shred truck just because there were certain entities that we really wanted and we tried and tried and tried, they would not do it except on site. And so, a couple of the municipalities especially kind of pushed us to get our first shred truck. And you know, it wasn't pretty. I mean, I'm just going to tell you, it just, the... that whole shred truck scene wasn't pretty, I mean, I think within the first couple of months the driver left the chute up, you know, and it got knocked off over an overpass. And then...

TOM

Oh dear.

MUFF

I think a month later we had a fire in the shred truck. And we had a really tough competitor in town that was pretty upset that we were coming in. And yeah, I'd say his soul was pretty sour. Just one of those. And I remember we got put on LinkedIn about the fire truck. He made fun of us on LinkedIn. And this is one thing I loved about NAID, this is when I really respected all friends and everybody in NAID. Boy, they came to rescue with us on LinkedIn and said, you know, "That's just not right to say anything because we've all had that problem. I mean, it's just, you stay in the business long enough, you're going to have a fire in a shred truck. It's just going to happen". And boy, I'm telling you, they shut him down on LinkedIn. And I loved that part of NAID and how they came to support their members, you know, by saying that's just not right. It's an issue for everybody. But anyway...

TOM

Yeah, that's really cool. So, let's jump forward to today, just to give... So, Document Shredding and Storage is the name of your company, and you already told us your service area, but like roughly, like, how many staff are you running today? Like what's your overall size and scope? I mean, obviously scope is big because you've got two plants, you've got multiple trucks, you've got lots of equipment. But just gimme a sense of how big a company you are in terms of full-time equivalent staff or something like that.

MUFF

We have 21 employees.

TOM

Okay. Nice. Nice. And are you doing other services besides shredding, plant and mobile? Are you, do you have any other lines of services attached to Document Shredding and Storage company?

MUFF

Well, yes, we do. That's why we said "and Storage", because we do record storage and record management at both locations. And we do hard drive destruction. Those would be our top. I mean, we also take care of x-ray and some things like that but the majority of our business is that. And in the last couple of years, our scanning business has really kicked up. And it's funny because we really went after that business, I'm going to say eight years ago. We hired someone and I mean, we just went out in the communities. And I mean, we begged people to let us do their... we just couldn't get any takers, but, you know, recently we have a lot of people that seem to be interested. And I think it's because they really do want to get rid of paper storage and they want to get everything in a different format. And so, you know, our scanning business has been good the last few years.

TOM

Hmm. Okay. So, now we've got a sense of who you are a little bit of your growth story. So, what intrigues me, Muff, is what are some of the big lessons? What are some of the big insights that you've gained in building this business, in growing this business, what you've learned, what you've experienced, what you could share?

MUFF

Well, you know, I thought about that because you do a good job of making us prepare a little bit for our talk. And, you know, I do think it's because we have been in so many different businesses, Tom. And so, to take the approach the way we did was really not- our normal way is to get a consultant or to hire somebody in an industry to have them come on board. And we kind of went just our... went back to our basic business instinct on how to run a business. And it was all about what made common sense to us. I mean, like we set up and started a business before we ever attended a NAID conference. And so, we didn't even have contacts. I mean, we knew we needed to eventually be with NAID and we knew we were going to have to be certified, but it was more that we took just the basic business principles on how to start a business and how to run a business.

Now I'm going to say the industry has been very good to us as far as it's a very open industry. People share their knowledge, their education, their experience. It's a great group of people to be involved with. And I appreciate that. And I think, as we got in, I think it was just maybe lucky that we kind of took our own direction. You know, we don't... out here, we can't be compared to anybody else, because the distance between our little communities and everything is pretty vast. I

mean, we live in rural America and you have to look at the way we do business differently than if you're stationed in a metroplex or like in the Austin area or something where, I mean, you can do a lot of dense routing. Well, we really can't. And so, we have to figure out the best strategy. And I think the fact that we were really, really lucky on just setting up some basic principles of putting in affordable ways to pick up the shredding and to get it to our plant.

TOM

So, was that basic principle, because you've spoken about this principle, that first basic principle that keeps emerging out of this conversation is that affordable way to do it. So, I go back and go your initial pickup strategy was using somebody else's equipment, like, and somebody else's plant, you didn't even have your own plant. Which to me is such a cool insight because it's, how do we do this so cheaply that we're not even, we don't have to own the equipment at this point?

MUFF

Yeah, it's really what made our success get going. And then I would say now, I'm going to say just the networking within our industry has saved us. I mean, the mastermind group, the developing the relationships with people, our vendors, the people that we, that we do buy our trucks from, the relationships with our customers... I mean, I think our sales are so important because based on relationships.

And, you know Tom, I think the one lesson I've really learned, because at first, you know, I would just freak out if we lost a customer. And my favorite story is the customer that we lost... because you know, someone's going to lowball you, but we lost a customer to free. Free shredding. I mean, we're a lot. So, we had someone come in and take our largest customer. It was a bank that we do a lot of for, and we lost them to a customer that said they do free shredding for a year. And so I was, you know, we were like, well, we can't compete with that. And not going to. But it was just so like, first of all, appalled that they wanted it that bad that they didn't feel like they could even charge anything.

But anyway, we left on good terms and I can remember saying, "We hope you want us back at some time". Well, it, I mean, within nine months they're calling because, you know, sometimes free is not exactly the best. But anyway...

TOM

Yeah. That reminds me of that cartoon out there that says, you know, there's, \$8 haircuts. And then on the other side of the streets, we fix \$8 haircuts. It's kind of like we fix free shredding. Yeah, that's beautiful. So, they come, they eventually come back. Right? Because...

MUFF

Yeah. Well, or have you seen that TikTok salesman that talks about, you know, you could get two out of three things and it's either fast good or cheap. So, which two do you want because you can't have all three, you know, and it's pretty funny to watch to watch that TikTok on sales.

MUFF (cont.)

But, no, we... and that's just one thing I've had to learn is to be- it's okay to lose some customers and some customers you need to lose and, just to make sure it's not something that we've done on our end, such as service or the quality or professionalism or any kind of hiccup on our end. If it comes down to, we lose somebody base just on the dollar bill and everything, then sometimes it's okay. We've just got to, we got to move on and give incentive to find another customer that's going to take their place.

TOM

One of the things you stated earlier was you're kind of, you're not so much focused on the equipment. You're the visionary and the marketing side. But I know that you can't build a start-up business using other people's equipment and stuff unless you have a unique insight on how to market things. And so, what have you learned or what superpowers did you bring to bear on this unique way of starting up a shredding business that was driven by your marketing and sales expertise versus just being in the shredding business? Right? Because there's being in the shredding business and then there's knowing how to grow something even if you don't know the industry. And I believe... I don't know this I'm just guessing based on what you said earlier, there was some degree of leverage you brought from a marketing perspective, A) because of the way you wrapped your trailers. But there's got to be more; you did stuff that really brought you to the point where you could go buy your own equipment and get your own plant and all that kind of stuff. So, gimme a little bit of that story.

MUFF

So, Tom, I always think you have to figure out in your community how you can get your name out there and it just be kind of subtle. So, you know, we just try to do some different things. So, one of the very first things we did was at the annual chamber barbecue. So, the very first year, we went and we just did like everybody else: we served, we competed in the barbecue and we served the barbecue out and that was pretty much it. But the one thing I noticed when we did it that year was that there was plenty of barbecue and there was plenty of beer and they had bottled water, but they didn't have anything else to drink. And so, I said, "Well, I think we should just have iced tea next year".

So, we got these great cups with our logo on them and did iced tea. Both just plain tea and sweet tea. We got really good tea from one of our customers. And then over the years, what we do now is we just, we trade with this customer. We do their shredding and they provide tea for us at the annual barbecue. And we do anywhere, depending on how hot it is, we do anywhere from a thousand cups to 2000 cups of tea. And when you look at the crowd everybody's carrying around a DSS cup. And the truth is while we all have our, we love our beer, after a while sometimes you need something else. And so, it's always, they come up, "Oh, we just so appreciate that y'all serve tea every year at the barbecue". So that, I mean, it's just finding those little things.

We have the big golf tournament every year. And I didn't want to really be a sponsor because, you know, those sponsorships are like, they're thousands of dollars. So, I asked the chamber if

we could just provide a, like, a tent where they drove their golf cart through and they got, they had water, you know, those misting things where they got misted and cooled off. And so, we just got to put up this tent where all the golfers could drive through and get misted and cooled off. And we just had our sign there, you know, "Cooled off by DSS". You know, it's just, it's trying to find that just little fun, unusual things that you don't have to spend \$3,000 to be one of the big sponsors, you know?

TOM

Right. What I'm hearing from you is there's a subtlety to the way that you strategize this stuff. So you go, where are people that are most likely to buy our service and how can we get our name in front of them in a way that feels good as positive, is not in your face, but it actually creates a residual value for us. So, from those two examples, have you seen a direct correlation between getting your name out there in this subtle way that's supportive and business coming in the door?

MUFF

Oh, it's just, it's been tremendous as far as our community. I mean, we, in Amarillo it's, we're- I get accused all the time, it's like, "Do your trucks just drive around up and down?" Or, I mean, we do some of the typical stuff. We partner with Crime Stoppers for shred days. But we keep our name out there in subtle ways that we're involved in the community and that we care for our community.

And one of our better things that we did, and it wasn't a huge publicity but it was a great team building for our employees, is that we redid an entire apartment for a family through the downtown women's center. And it was, you know, it was a local organization that takes care of women who have addiction problems. And they set up, we had these apartments and they were just, they had to be totally redone. And we did it as totally volunteering from the employees. And it was such a good team building and a lot of pride on our end that we were able to do that for this apartment.

TOM

Which gives you, then, publicity. Right? Which then adds a layer of publicity, undoubtedly. Yeah. Yeah. That's so good.

MUFF

Right. It kind of was a double effort. I mean, double, you know, we got the publicity but also it was just great for us to work outside the shredding industry on a different level and see everybody's talents that they brought to the table.

TOM

Yeah. So, what else have you learned? What else? What other wisdom have you gained from building this company from sort of an outside-in perspective? Like you were an outsider, you did something that nobody likely would do if they knew the shredding industry or if they had hired a consultant, but you build it and now you've become engaged in the industry, you've talked about

the networking and the importance of that, you talked about marketing... Is there anything else you've learned that has helped you to create a solid, stable operating company that's very successful?

MUFF

Gosh, I guess the other would be the mentorship and the... of people in the industry, to be able to go to different people. When- it sounds weird, but when you get scared. I mean, it's kind of like, gosh, I mean, you know, just maybe being able to talk through it with other people that are in our industry, even though we all have such different operations. Because geographically things can... are so different, but just to be able to talk to them. I know we've been a third-party contract for some of the big companies because they're not out here. And during the pandemic, a lot of that, a lot of things changed with that. And that was a really scary point for me, but I was able to talk through it with another friend in the industry that had gone through something similar. And it's amazing, you know, just to be able to have those contacts. And I know that's kind of going back to the network, it's networking.

But I guess the other thing is too, is just it goes back to that, Tom, that gut feeling you have of what the right decision is or the right way to go. And could we always follow that initial gut feeling? And I don't know if you, if I've gotten that from addressing so many different businesses in my life, you know, because I've worked for a man that he's done a lot of different businesses. And I mean, Eddie Scott has been my mentor. I mean, he's been my boss, he's my partner. I mean, he's a highly intelligent man that I learned a lot from, but, you know, he had... he exposed me to so many different industries. And I think I just learned a lot, but one of the things I learned was man, that initial gut feeling you need to be aware, you need to notice it.

TOM

So, can you tell me a little bit more about that? How do you know your guts working? Is that literally a physical manifestation to you? Do you like get a tightness or a looseness in your stomach? What, how do you know what a gut feeling is; how do you manage that instinct?

MUFF

Well, you know, I do best when we are working with people or something and I'm there and I can see someone and in the initial conversation, the body language, the way they dress, the way they talk, the words they use, I mean, you know, it all affects us. And you usually get an instinct and a gut feeling with everybody or every situation. And I think that's one reason during the pandemic's really hard is that even though we've had Zoom, it's very hard to read a entire situation when you're not in a room with someone, when you don't notice how they handle their assistant, when you don't notice how they answer the phone. All the different things that you pick up on a person's real behavior contributes to instincts with people and how to be able to know if someone is being honest and being authentic with you, or whether they're just going down a, you know, a written script.

TOM

Yeah. So, if you were teaching somebody, because how you answered that was more what you see in people, but how does your gut tell you stuff? Like, how do you know when you've seen all this stuff? Do you get like, does your heart start beating fast if your gut saying no, or are you processing intellectually? You're feeling it in your stomach, like is, how do you do this? Because people talk about gut instinct, but they don't often define it. Like they don't actually say what it is they're doing. And I'm really interested because you're the first person I've ever talked to in this kind of setting that's talking about it and I'm really intrigued by what's happening in you. Not what's happening out there. What's happening in you?

MUFF

It's in my mind. It's like some of the first things that pop up in my brain. And it's like... lots of times, Tom, it will remind me of maybe of a previous incident in my life. You know, it just, it pops up in my brain, like, "Ooh, notice that, you know, that, you know, notice that. What's that about?" It's like, "Don't forget that. Don't forget the word or how he phrased that" or... It's in my mind, it's in my brain and it's usually in reference to something else that I've already been through. Like, "Ooh, Ooh. Been bit by this before. Be careful now". You know? So it's... I'm going to say it's, when I say gut instinct, it's like, huh, I need to find out more about that. Take note. Or something like that. So, that's how it pops into my life.

TOM

Right. It's like a filter for you somehow. Like a...

MUFF

Definitely. Definitely.

TOM

Yeah, you get this thing and all of a sudden, these questions come and if those release it's like you can move forward. But if those stick with you, then you sort of hold or you take your time or are more deliberate about checking and those kind of... that's how I'm hearing what you're saying. So, it's like these little things pinging off in your mind going, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, hang on. Hang on. Not moving yet".

MUFF

And you know what the problem is in today's time is that we have so much coming at us. We have our phone dinging, we have an email that's popping up on the computer and we are not taking the time with the situation that we need to be totally focusing on. And so sometimes we miss it. And that's why I'm saying I think you've got to make sure you're fully focused on the important subject topic, who you're with, whatever the- you know, so that you can notice the stuff that influences your gut instinct.

TOM

Yeah, no, that's that is so helpful because it really is something that I think years and experience hone that instinct, but it's also trusting it and knowing how to be quiet enough to experience it.

MUFF

Yeah.

TOM

Yeah. Yeah, that's good. Well, you mentioned Eddie Scott and a lot of the work you've done together, but, you know, when I went digging into your LinkedIn profile, I noticed you've done a lot of work as it relates to community development, community building, large scale development projects, in terms of planned communities and things like that. So, outside of the shredding, records, information management industry and looking back into this deep history that you've had, what did you bring from that? Other than these experiences that were gut instincts and stuff like that, but what maybe is the biggest lesson that you brought from say the development world into the shredding business that has really helped you?

MUFF

Probably, in the development world, we did a very large upscale residential and commercial development, and we had an HOA. And I got to work with all the residents in all the great things that happened in a residential community. And then all the people that have lots of complaints. And I think I learned how to handle people that are not happy, that are just... I think that is the biggest thing I learned on how to communicate with someone that comes in that is furious over something going on and how to cool them off, get them calm, have a discussion with them that you don't have to yell or say any bad words. You know, it's like, and I- it really... It's amazing how much you learn.

And my example is going to be my phone call to a doctor had bought a home and he had a violation. And I explained to him that... he's a brand-new owner. And I said, you know, "I'm not real sure how this happened or why the builder didn't do this, but your air conditioning unit can't show from the street. And I need you to put a fence that matches your home in front of your air conditioning unit and blah, blah, blah, blah". Well, you know, that doctor just told me immediately yelled and screamed that he was going to take me to court and sue me because I didn't have the right to tell him that. And I just, I said, "Oh gosh, well, I didn't mean to upset you like that". I said, "I just, you know, I'm the unfortunate one that keeps the neighborhood looking the way it does and everything. And I'm sure we can work this out", but I said, "I am surprised that a doctor who, to me, would know the frustrations that the first thing out of someone's mouth is that 'I'm going to sue you'. I'm just surprised that that's your reaction to me because I know that that is something you probably see every day, or I know you have insurance that covers the type of people that that's their first reaction. And I'm kind of surprised you reacted that way to me. But anyway, you can think about it and get back to me". And so, I hung up. And so of course, five minutes later, he calls me back and apologizes to me and says, "You're right. I did

react the way I hate people to react”. I’m like, “Well, I’m not calling to be ugly to you. I just, I’m calling to do my job, you know, is all I’m doing”.

So anyway, it’s... you just learn. I just learned so much on how to get people un-mad, see the situation, let’s be reasonable. How can we handle it?

TOM

So good. So good. Well, that’s such an amazing lesson and one that all of us have to learn more effectively, is how to maintain our own sanity when someone else is losing theirs. And so, I really appreciate you sharing that.

Muff, this has been delightful. I’m so glad that you’ve chosen to both spend the time but also share so many nuggets of wisdom. I love your story. I love how you have built and marketed and made DSS successful. But more than that I just love your presence and I love what you’ve contributed to the industry. So, thank you for being here. Thank you for being a part of this today.

MUFF

Well, thanks for having me. And thanks for everything you do, Tom, for our industry. We appreciate you.