

James Robert:

Hey guys, it's James Robert. Thanks for joining me for the 59th episode of the Banking on Digital Growth podcast. Today, we're going to go inside Digital Growth as I share a conversation I recently had with Joe Welu, the CEO of Told Expert, during a fireside chat hosted by the financial brand. Joe asked me some really good questions as we talk about what digital growth really is, the need to stop and pause to define digital consumer journeys. And, how to maximize growth and build trust through technology among many other good areas of focus to educate and empower you. Enjoy the show.

Joe Welu:

We've been talking about getting together for a while, having a conversation about this topic and now, man, your timing was amazing on the book. Obviously I know you didn't anticipate what was going to be transpiring this year. But talk us through the book a little bit. Let's start out there, and give us a little overview on the book.

James Robert:

So the book is a strategic marketing manifesto. It has 12 key principles or calls to action that I would like to see financial brands move forward with, to help them escape the circle of complexity that is really holding so many back, the circle of chaos. And now, we can look at this as an opportunity to turn inwards, or we can look at this as an opportunity to turn outwards and really help those in the communities that we serve.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, for sure man. Honestly, we look at the past few months and we've seen so many of the institutions that we work with, that you work with, that have all of a sudden become the financial first responders to everything that's happening in the country.

James Robert:

Yeah.

Joe Welu:

And we saw them respond in a way that was amazing in my mind, because we're used to seeing things take years when it comes to digital transformation. And we saw so many organizations completely do huge transformation and change in the way they were doing business in 30 days, what would have taken before maybe two to three years. Do you agree with that? I mean, what are your thoughts on what you've seen?

James Robert:

I mean, you are right. What we saw transpire was initially a health crisis, that as I spoke and I wrote about back in March, which quickly became a financial health crisis. It has been amazing to see the pivot, or almost COVID being a forcing function to transpire the digital first conversation. One of the things that I'm really encouraged about is really putting people at the center of all of the thinking, and all of the doing. And even though we're apart, digital has allowed financial brands to still be together with the people that really need the most help in the communities that they're serving.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, I would agree. And you see all of a sudden being there for your customers and staying connected to your customers had a whole new meaning. And with that, on all the events that have happened, all

the unfortunate things, many of the organizations that we've talked with said, "You know, we are looking at this as an opportunity to go deeper, move quicker on some of our initiatives that we had to improve our communication, to improve our entire digital strategy."

Joe Welu:

So, that leads us to really the topic of the day, which is digital growth. So, let's kick off by talking about how you define digital growth? I mean, you're one of, if not the most respected guy in this space. And I know so many organizations that have worked with you speak so highly of your knowledge and just your understanding, and command of the topic. So, enlighten us on what your thoughts are and what it means, and let's start there.

James Robert:

Let's actually start talking about why this is a problem in the first place. And one of the first problems that we need to address. When we go in and we work with a financial brand we assess, diagnose their situation. The question that we ask is what is digital growth? It's an open ended question.

James Robert:

And the responses that we see repeatedly, particularly at the executive team level, it's online banking, it's mobile banking, it's remote deposit capture. And they're like, "We're good." I'm like, "Eh, that's the service side of the business."

Joe Welu:

Yep.

James Robert:

We're looking at through the lens of digital growth is acquisition and retention. Growth activities that were traditionally built for the physical world around the brick and mortar of branches.

Joe Welu:

It's also the engagement side, right? I mean-

James Robert:

Oh, of course.

Joe Welu:

If you look at so many of the transformation projects that we have talked about and seen. And the banks are most, I would say, vocal about is the experience, the online applications as you mentioned. Now, it's this whole nother layer of how they communicate and engage with the customer through the first time they come in contact with the brand, all the way through, right? So the entire journey.

James Robert:

Communication is central to achieving digital growth. It's just the ways that we communicate with prospects, with leads, with customers, with members. That's been the big transformation over the years. But it's just communication, just like we're doing right now. I can see you, I'm reading your body language. I'm getting so much more communication, not only through your voice but also through the video as well.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, yeah. So, who would have thought that it would be completely normal that so many people would be comfortable on video, right? Now that's happening and we're starting to see that in some of the banks and credit unions that we're talking with. So, I'm going to ask you a point blank question here. And you can answer it as directly as you're comfortable with. But has COVID-19 really changed the way banks and credit unions are doing business?

James Robert:

It's been a forcing function. It is actually accelerated. I look at this as an accelerant to the future. It showed us, in a very short period of time, what is actually possible, what is actually achievable with a digital first and digital growth mindset. But when we look at this, this is not just about a marketing activity. This is a marketing, sales, operations. This is an IT, this is an entire organization transforming how they think about growth with a member first, a customer first perspective.

Joe Welu:

I mean, it's really not about the digital side or the technology side. It's about the member or the customer. And, if you reverse engineer, ultimately, what is best for them, what's the best experience? What are the best ways to get them the outcome that's going to be best for them, it ends up being you have to have the digital capabilities combined with the people side, which we've talked about multiple times.

Joe Welu:

So, I want to go one layer deeper on that. And, we talked a lot about how organizations typically have looked at "I'm going to have my marketing running over here. I'm going to have my sales or my customer teams going this direction, engaging with the customers." And now, we're looking at it as one really ecosystem, and orchestration of those activities. How do you think about it? Is that how you think about it? And we've talked about the concept of it's really a growth team. It's not marketing, it's not sales or service.

James Robert:

So, if we look at this from the traditional lens, or the legacy lens, you do have marketing on one side. And marketing is controlling the brand positioning. They're generating leads, hopefully. But the frustration for marketing is whenever they say to the sales team, "Hey, we're getting you these leads. What are you doing with them if we're getting leads at all?" But on the opposite end of the spectrum, on the sales side, sales is saying, "You're not getting us the right types of leads."

James Robert:

And I think that type of internal friction and frustration is detrimental to a financial brand moving forward with digital growth. So, if we just removed the labels, per se, of marketing and sales and we combine them under one umbrella of just say the growth team, and unify them around a common purpose of growth; that's a transformative factor that can really accelerate the progress a financial brand makes on this journey.

Joe Welu:

And obviously that's easier said than done. There's a lot of the audience listening right now that say, "Sure, we'd love to have alignment. We'd love to have data integrated in a way to where our marketing and engagement side of the company, of the business, is really in tight lock step with the people taking

care of the customer." They'd love to do that, but where do you start? How do you even... It's so overwhelming. The data silos, in some cases, projects where they've invested huge amounts of money that they haven't seen the outcome. They haven't seen the results. How do you start, man? How do you start if you're in the audience right now?

James Robert:

This is something that I recommend to every financial brand that we have ever worked with. It's a little poem by Shell Silverstein about this girl named Malinda May. She tried to eat this monster as well, and the thing is, is she thought she could. She said she would, and so she started right at the tail. And everyone said, "Malinda, you're much too small." But that didn't bother Malinda at all. She took little bites and chewed very slow. And that's the point of that narrative.

James Robert:

We're going to achieve digital growth bite by bite, by bite. Let's measure the progress that we're making on this journey by looking at where we've come from, not by looking ahead of what we have to do because if we do that, it'll be like this impossible mountain we have to claim. So, measure progress, not perfection that we're making on this journey.

Joe Welu:

We've been a part of a lot of conversations and a lot of projects to where you can see the path that a lot of brands follow. And if they start looking at all the things there are that they need to do long term, it's somewhat paralyzing, right?

James Robert:

Yeah.

Joe Welu:

And they think about the barriers to doing it, and so, what we have found, the best plan if you will, is to carve out a focused set of things. Maybe it's just nurturing people that have shown intent or interests in the brand but they haven't yet become a customer. Maybe it's just that. And you're going to drive some engagement and nurturing there. That could be one example, right?

James Robert:

Yeah.

Joe Welu:

Do you have any thoughts on that first step maybe?

James Robert:

Yeah. Let's break this up into three key activities. We have triage, we have treatment, and then we have transformative activities. Triage is, it's what we can fix in the here and the now. It's the quick wins. It's the low hanging fruit that's just waiting to be captured. Treatment is where we establish some foundational systems and processes. For example, the nurturing as you referenced, to where we can build upon that progress because what this is really about, it's about getting quick wins, getting some momentum, because when we do that, we help to build the confidence of the team and the confidence of the organization that you know what? We are moving in the right direction.

James Robert:

And then, it's just a self-perpetual, self-fulfilling prophecy because as we move forward we're going to get more momentum and it's just almost like a fly wheel.

Joe Welu:

And the results of the triage can be different at each organization, right? If you're a mid size or small credit union versus a large community or a regional bank, that might look completely different when you start doing the triage. And triage, the way you're using it, I love that word in this context. It's really you're evaluating everything that's going on and saying, "Okay, that I can handle, and we can actually take action on it in the next 90 days or 60 days."

James Robert:

Yeah, one of the things I wrote about in the book is developing a digital growth mindset. And it's first diagnosing or assessing the situation objectively because a lot of times, we just don't know what we don't know. And there's no harm, no foul with that, but once we assess then we get some awareness into, well, hey here are the opportunities that we can capture. Here are the roadblocks that we need to element. And from there, once we have that awareness we can get some alignment and take action. When we take action we break things down smaller, 90 days, and then we can reevaluate, and reapply the prescription if we're going to say in these medical terms. Because then, it's that self-perpetual progress and that moment. So, take a year, break it down into 90 days and just focus on a few things.

James Robert:

Just make a commitment or two, saying we're really going to hone in here and then, we'll reassess after that 90 day period. And then, apply that learning going forward once again.

Joe Welu:

One of the things that we've learned that it's very difficult or challenging for a lot of organizations is that mindset shift that is required, not just within one piece of the business, but it's really required within the IT side of the business, within the business line itself, the executive leadership. How do you think about that in terms of order of importance if you're going to actually have a growth mindset as an organization, getting everybody on the same page is critical right?

James Robert:

Oh my gosh, and a lot of that problem can be solved by defining a common purpose and a purpose statement that becomes a positioning statement, that gets internal buy in and alignment, that helps to attract the right type of people externally. But you said something really critical. That idea of a growth mindset, because I think with all of the exponential change in consumer behavior, in technology, in the competitive landscape, and now with COVID, change is very hard. And it's very easy to fall into what I call the growth gap, or the gap is where we gripe about problems.

James Robert:

So, having a purpose that's greater than the traditional mission or vision statement, but one that is framed around the problems of the people that we're serving, I found that to be a transformative exercise to get the internal alignment, to get the buy in. Because when things do get hard, we can always fall back on that purpose, that north star.

Joe Welu:

I think that's a great comment, and I know internally personally in our organization we have a lot of young engineers and technical people that are coming in to our company. And, I heard a comment a few months ago that, okay, we help banks and lenders and credit unions get more business. That's not really inspiring, right? And said, "Whoa, wait a second. Actually, if you think about what our purpose is and what our goal is." And I know when you're working with customers your goal as well, you want the organization, you want to create a scenario where they can be a lifetime partner for that consumer. A lifetime financial partner.

Joe Welu:

And if they're accomplishing that, the outcomes that the consumer is having are going to be superior. Or it's not going to happen. If they're not a true lifetime partner, meaning they're helping advise and make decisions, offering products and services in a strategic way. Do you have any thoughts on that? I mean, that was sort of our takeaway, and I only go down that path because you mentioned it's got to be inspiring and have purpose.

James Robert:

Yeah, because here's the thing, products, and we all know this, the products in this vertical, and almost really every vertical today, they've all been commoditized because of digital. The way that we escape that commoditization is to define a purpose that puts the transformation of people far and beyond the traditional transaction because money is an epidemic. The stress makes people sick, and it's not getting any easier. People are hurting. It's taking a toll on their relationships, their mental wellbeing. And people are looking for someone that they can trust to guide them beyond that stress towards a bigger, better, brighter future. Transformations over transactions.

Joe Welu:

100% and we've looked at right now with the unfortunate events that have happened in the world. The financial system in this country has got an incredible opportunity to make a tremendous amount of progress in rebuilding trust with the consumers, was lost in the last financial crisis really.

James Robert:

Yes.

Joe Welu:

Right? Today, if you look at all of the programs, the PPP loans that are there for small businesses, they're really the stewards of these programs and the capital. And the money piece, it's so critical to the businesses and people's lives, and the impact that these organizations have the ability to make. And I know many of the conversations I've had with our customers is how focused they've been at taking action, getting money in the hands of people that needed money. And many of them that were able to do that at a really high level had said, "Okay, we've invested in some of the transformation." Now, we're seeing the benefit of being able to more fluidly communicate. Being able to get to the customer segments, communicate it with this group based on what's important to them right now.

Joe Welu:

So, I agree with you on just how important it all is. And what a great time this is to be in the industry. So, let's move on to defining, as we look at digital growth and understanding it and developing a playbook,

the customer journey is ultimately... It's so vital to understand it, to optimize it and to continuously focus on it. Break that down for us a little bit, and I know you go into it a lot in the book.

James Robert:

Yeah, so the customer journey, that is the central thesis of digital growth if we academically define digital growth, come back to the previous question. Digital growth, it's just systems and processes that are centered around the consumer journey. The challenge of a lot of financial brands is that they either, A, haven't documented the consumer journey digital first. Or B, maybe they've dabbled in that type of consumer journey mapping, but there's a lot of gaps in the journey that they can come back in and bridge.

James Robert:

And so, the way that we look at this is an acronym called BANCER. It is the BANCER-

Joe Welu:

Did you come up with that on your own? Is that James Robert original?

James Robert:

You know, I have a lot of acronyms. And it's a self serving tool. With a little bit of ADD it's very easy to get distracted. So, I've found over the years that acronyms are just a way to help me remember something, a process and methodology. So, BANCER is actually B-A-N-C-E-R. I couldn't come up with anything for the K. You want to break that down and talk through it because-

Joe Welu:

Yeah, let's do it, man. I want to hear from your words on how you... the flow, what each of those letters mean, because I do think it's succinct, it simplified it, and these are concepts and where we're talking about a lot of content here today. But ultimately we want to give people bite size chunks that they can take away and use day to day as they're back running their organization. So, break this down. I think this is an important piece.

James Robert:

This strategy circle is one of the most practical models a financial brand can apply and think through, can optimize around. So, let's break this down step by step, and we can dialogue with each of these points. How ever you want to go down it.

James Robert:

The B, step number one, is to build an audience with data. Once we build an audience with data we can then begin to move to the A, or attract leads with personalized offers. Then, and only then, can we nurture those leads, the N, with automation and content. Because as we're moving someone through this buying journey, people have to know us first, then like us, and then through the nurturing we're placing deposits into a consumer's trust fund that sits between their ears. And once we reach a level of trust that, you know what, I really like what these guys stand for. It's more than just about dollars and cents. I get a sense that they're caring for me and my wellbeing. We can finally move to the C and convert those leads for loans and deposits.

James Robert:

So, build an audience, attract leads, nurture leads with automation and content, and convert those leads for loans and deposits. Once we convert those leads, we can expand the relationships by delighting accounts, and one of the greatest blue ocean opportunities is the R. Repeat the entire process with ratings, with reviews and with referrals because that's just going to move someone else right back through that whole process once again.

Joe Welu:

What we call the fly wheel, right? Ultimately, if you're running a true fly wheel of growth, you have that attract, engage, amaze happening all the time. It's creating advocates. It's creating people that really love doing business with you because you've added value in a way that maybe others hadn't. You made them feel special.

Joe Welu:

I want to talk a little bit about the first parts of the journey here, and building an audience in the attract phase if you will. And I think a lot of organizations, they think about this in far too simplistic terms. They think if I run a product promotion and we've got a great rate, or an incentive somewhere, that is a great strategy. That might be part of the strategy, but where we've seen organizations fall short is the trust building phase that is really where the magic is.

James Robert:

Yes, I agree with that. If we look at the BANCER strategy circle, one of the biggest gaps we find is in the nurturing component of the relationship. And that nurturing has to happen, here's the key, it has to happen digitally. There's never been a financial brand that we've worked with that has an active nurture component before working with us.

Joe Welu:

At least, from what we've talked about, at least not a well thought out one, right?

James Robert:

No. No.

Joe Welu:

Maybe none of them do, I don't know. But one of the things that we see as really a big opportunity for a lot of organizations, those of you listening, here's what the consumers crave knowledge, right? They ultimately crave knowledge and education centric content. And if you can educate them on what's relevant to them, meaning you have to have, as you mentioned, the data side. So, you have some data about the segment that you're going after, or where they came in through. What channel they came in through, what content they were looking at.

Joe Welu:

And I can educate them on what might be most relevant to them. And give them some value. That part of that whole nurturing process is something that almost always gets blown or missed that we see. I'd be interested in your experience.



James Robert:

It's a very simple mantra. Once again, easy to say, easy to understand, easy to remember. Harder to get the cultural buy in, and that's where we come back to the purpose. Help first, self second. People are looking for that guidance.

Joe Welu:

They want to have a guide, right? They want somebody to guide them. If you think about, assuming the organizations that are talking with us, assuming that everybody says, "We want to have a relationship with this consumer that last their lifetime, at least theoretically, right?" What does that mean? I want to be able to self to them or help them with additional financial products and services that will be impactful to them at what's going on in their life at that time.

Joe Welu:

Well, the only way you get there is if you start at the beginning of the process and do it right. You can't really get there if you've already had a lack of... if you were really just only transaction through the whole time, and you say, "Okay, now I want to have a lifetime relationship with this customer." You haven't put the work in. You haven't had the trust building that you need to.

James Robert:

It's an investment. It's an investment into someone else's wellbeing. And if you take a step back and you think about what someone wants in life, it's really three things. They want to be healthy. They want to be wealthy, and it doesn't mean to be a bizzilonaire. It's just I don't want that financial stress at night.

Joe Welu:

Right, they want that to go away.

James Robert:

Exactly, because whenever that goes away, then what I can be? I can be happy. And money is the thread that connects all of those dots together. The opportunity, coming back to your point of being the helpful guide, something I write about in the book it's a methodology called story selling. And it really looks at the narrative structure that has been around for thousands and thousands of years, going back to the early stories of like Gilgamesh for example.

James Robert:

There can only be a hero and a helpful guide in the story, and that's the role that we play as a financial brand. We're the Obi Wan Kanobi's of the world. We're the Mr. Miyagi's. We're the Yoda's and we're guiding the Luke Skywalker's to help them get beyond whatever pain is holding them back.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, I agree in terms of the story side and how people want to be guided. And, what we see right now if you look at, and you take all the events that have happened, and you say, "Okay, how does this translate into digital transformation?" And you guys are talking about a lot of touchy feely type, building trust and everything. If you want to grow, and you want to drive profit and you want to drive growth, which you have to as an organization, or you're going to get stepped over. And you're going to go backwards.

Joe Welu:

So, I don't think it's really an option. I think as an organization you have to go there. And what is the best way to do it? Well, the best way is to do it in a way that's going to actually have a... you're going to have deeper relationships with the customers that you have. And as you're acquiring them you're doing it in a way that it doesn't have to mean that you're going to put all these additional resources on top of it. A lot of times it just means you're going to put some content and communication in place that's going to be complementary.

Joe Welu:

You're going to be surfacing to your customer facing teams what types of things they should be talking about to a specific customer as they're going through that journey. So, I want to hear from you in your experience, as you're talking to banks and credit unions and they're defining a customer journey. And their understanding of it. What do you see?

James Robert:

You talk about the touchy feely, and that's a big internal conflict that I hear and I get some objections to it. I'm like, this is a human game. It is about not the technology. The technology is the tool to bring people together for good, to create value. It's the way that we communicate. But we also have to have a lot of empathy when we look at the digital consumer shopping journey for financial product.

James Robert:

Here's the thing, from our research we have found that around 85 to 90% of financial brands have never shopped their digital experiences.

Joe Welu:

[inaudible 00:28:26].

James Robert:

Yeah.

Joe Welu:

Say that one more time because that's really shocking.

James Robert:

85 to 90% of financial brands have never shopped or secret shopped their digital experiences, while around 70 to 80% plus are continuously shopping their in branch experience.

Joe Welu:

Yeah. So, I think that the mistake that we see organizations make, particularly if it's on maybe the commercial side, or you're on the maybe the mortgage side, or some of the more... where it's more relate... There is some kind of a relationship. So, they're like, "Well, we've got relationships with those sets of customers." But it's the brands that combine technology and the human connection part, those are the ones that, in our minds and I believe you agree with this, they're going to win in the future. They're going to win more customers, and more loyalty.

James Robert:

If you want to apply that practically, it's formulaic. It's the DX, it's the digital experience plus the HX, the human experience combine. That then yields and equals growth. And that digital experience can actually be broken down into three subset experiences. The lead experience, the customer experience and then, the referral experience. And then, on the human experience side, traditionally delivered through technology and this type of a medium, it's help, and hope multiplied by empathy. And really what people are looking for is hope.

James Robert:

And hope oftentimes has to come before help. You combine those two together, that's an exponential factor for a financial brand on this journey.

Joe Welu:

So, I think empathy is a word that I've heard you use a couple of times. And I think as I'm looking, as you're looking, at the customer journey and particularly right now, we looked at a lot of communication from organizations across the country. Both that we're customers of and our team are customers of. And we're looking at a lot of the content and communication that has been sent out and so much of it wasn't in the right context. And, I think what happens is when people don't think you care, you don't have that empathy, they don't necessarily hear what else you have to say.

Joe Welu:

And, so as part of this strategy of really getting digital growth, having context in your communication and making sure that it's actually you're having empathy and you know what's important to these different types of customers. How do you think about that in terms of the hierarchy as importance?

James Robert:

Yeah, I mean, content is the fuel of the digital growth engine. It makes the gears turn. But the content is, I'm not going to say it's useless, but it's not as helpful if it's not contextual to a person's specific pain points. Their questions, their concerns, their fears, their frustrations. Because what we can do is we can use content to bring the cure, the solution, to those particular pain points. And when you think about the complexities of just money.

James Robert:

Anything that we can do to provide clarity, to provide calm, to help reduce someone's anxiety, that's a step in the right direction. And then, we think about how do we apply it? It's kind of like what you guys are doing with your platform, because now we can bring empathy, content and context to the market at scale.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, it's really about connecting the dots. And to be able to have a really high quality customer journey. And everybody wants, if we called a thousand financial organizations, almost every one of them is going to list experience, customer experience, towards the top. Where I think you get a lot of different answers is what does that mean? And if you think about the fact that the experience, it covers every interaction from the first time...

Joe Welu:

You think about a lead for example. A lead might be somebody that looked at your sight and downloaded a white paper or a piece of information about a type of loan product. Maybe they're coming to you about the PPP program. So, at that moment every interaction that happens subsequently is going to either build trust, and improve experience. Or, it's going to decrease it. And that sets the tone to loyalty.

Joe Welu:

So, a lot of this is about when you start at the beginning of the journey from our conversations and our experience, when you start at that beginning of that journey, are you able to then utilize the data and drive those really personalized communications with some scale so that you don't have to say, "Hey, I got 100 or 500 or 5,000 people that are out dealing with our customers. How do we control everything they're doing?"

Joe Welu:

Well, you're not going to control everything, but what you can do is you can augment it and enhance it. And you can make sure that you minimize any mistakes. Right?

James Robert:

You said a word, you talked about scale. And I want to take a step back and actually unpack the idea of customer experience just for a moment because it's one of those big buzz words that I hear get thrown around in board rooms. Let's academically define customer experience. Customer experience, it comes back to system and processes that have been defined, applied and here's the secret, optimized over a set period of time resulting in a positive or a negative emotion.

James Robert:

It can take weeks, months, even years to get up enough deposits in a consumer's trust fund between their ears. It can take minutes, even seconds, to deplete that and have to start all over again.

Joe Welu:

All right, so we got quite a bit more we want to cover in the next 10 or 15 minutes or so. So, I'm going to keep moving here. As we look at the customer experience and we sort of defined how people look at, or how you need to look at it. Then, the most common way to start improving things in your organization if you look at what are your goals? I want to create growth and profit, of course. How do I do that? I want to be a better or a more frequent partner, a more consistent partner to my customers. Well, how do you do that?

Joe Welu:

Step one, in our minds, is I'm going to look for, as you mentioned in the triage conversation, I'm going to start looking for those gaps in the customer experience. Right? And, as I look at it, there's some common gaps that we see, but I'd love to know from your experience. What are... we alluded to a little bit of this earlier, so I don't want to make you repeat it, but I think it's important and I want to see what else you had to say about this topic.

James Robert:

So, three gaps. Gap number one, it's a gap in the nurturing of a lead or a prospect. The solution here is to take a proactive stance in a person's journey, versus taking the traditional reactive stance, waiting for

someone to raise their hand saying "I need help". But really, if we move our way down into the sea of the BANCER strategy circle, conversion. That is often one of the biggest low hanging fruit opportunities to create value, to capture value from simply for the fact that people abandon loan application and deposit applications all the time.

Joe Welu:

So, let me hammer on that really quickly because I think it's so powerful in what you just said. So, if I focus and I do what you said, and I focus on I want to improve my conversion. This is taking people that have already shown intent, right? They've shown intent to do business with your organization.

James Robert:

Yep.

Joe Welu:

And, nurturing, give me like a 30 second. What would you do? Obviously communicate, but talk us through, talk the audience through that a little bit.

James Robert:

In the nurturing stage?

Joe Welu:

Yeah.

James Robert:

Yeah, okay. So, I'm a home buyer. Buying a home is complex. I go to google, how do I buy a home in Houston, Texas? What do I need to do? Where do I even start? I end up on a community financial brand's website. They have the complete guide to buying the home you love as a resource. They're not trying to get me to apply for a mortgage. They're not trying to get me to check out their rates. They're just saying, "Hey, here's a helpful guide to get the home you love."

James Robert:

Well, that looks interesting. So then I put my name and my email address. They're not asking for anything beyond that. I download the guide.

Joe Welu:

They're not trying to get married right away. They're trying to...

James Robert:

No.

Joe Welu:

They're just getting a little bit of information. And then, it goes into a nurture phase.

James Robert:

Yeah, and so then it goes into using a marketing automation platform, kind of like with what you guys are doing. And I'm going to get additional helpful resources, and based upon my engagement with these

emails, they might be text message. Based upon my engagement, that journey would begin to become a little bit more personalized. The contextual piece of this. So, they'll be able to say, "You know what? He actually, he's a little bit further along in that journey."

James Robert:

Because here's the thing, when it comes to financial products, these are long buying journeys. They take some weeks, sometimes months even. And if we can just keep our name in front of them, not promoting a product, but helping first and selling second; we can become that helpful guide people are looking for.

Joe Welu:

So, mapping that out very critical. Next topic I want to cover here before we run out of time for the day. So, we want to talk about maximizing technology. Organizations, in order to really do this and scale it and make the leaps so many of these brands would like to make, they've got to maximize tech. And, what's the biggest challenge for them? What do you see and any thoughts on maybe how to avoid it?

James Robert:

Mar Tech, Sales Tech, it doesn't matter. A lot of financial brands are getting sold rainbows and unicorns.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, we've talked about that before. What do you mean by that? Break that down a little bit more for the audience.

James Robert:

They buy technology from a third party. The third party oversells it. It's going to be so simple. It's going to make life so easy. And then, after they go through their 30 days of onboarding, financial brand and their team, they're left to their own devices. So, where do they end up? They feel confused, they feel frustrated, they feel overwhelmed. And they're like, "What do we do next?"

James Robert:

It's kind of like buying a car. They're going to buy the Rolls Royce, but the Rolls Royce just sits in the garage when all they really needed was just the Lexus.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, and I think you alluded to one of the things that we always make recommendations on. And this goes across the tech landscape, not just with people that are looking to do two things in the customer engage and marketing space, which is where we are at. But really, any of the tech transformation that you need, partner with organizations, partner with vendors that are going to stand by you for the life of the agreement and partner with you. And we see that as well. We see a lot of... because it's hard. This stuff is hard. It's heavy lifting and the first 30 days is, generally speaking, getting started. So, having that alignment with not just one vendor but the core vendors that you have in your stack. Make sure you have the partners because that's the iteration that has to happen.

Joe Welu:

Without that iteration, you really don't end up getting the value. I think that's ultimately you're saying. Is that accurate?

James Robert:

It is, and it's kind of like, you know how you guys operate from. We're not only just going to provide the platform. We're going to show you what to do. We're going to coach you. We're going to guide you. We're going to teach you. We're going to empower you so that you can take this and do it even better than ever thought possible. Once again, define, apply, optimize. Make it even better over a long period of time because what we're building here are marketing assets that create exponential value over a year, two, three, four, five year period. It's not just the here and the now. It's value creation over an extended period of time.

Joe Welu:

And to just kind of summarize some of the things that you've said that I think are really valuable, obviously. Starting on that triage side, identifying the areas where you can make an impact, right? Of course, when you're deciding and working with tech providers, having the ability to do walk, crawl, run. We've talked about this, and feel free to correct me if I'm off base on some of the things that you've said in our conversations where I'm generally seeking out your opinion on the best approach.

Joe Welu:

And a lot of times, it's partner with vendors that can do a walk, crawl, run to where they can prove some value to you in a fairly short amount of time. And then, go on to the next chunk. Is that still how you think about it? Still consistent, even with everything that's going on out there lately?

James Robert:

Walk, crawl, run, this is like running a marathon. You just don't get up and say, "You know what? I'm going to go run 26.2." No, you have to go through I got to get myself conditioned. I've got to build up my confidence. You don't run by yourself. You get a running partner. You have someone to hold you accountable. You do a 5K, then a 10K, maybe then a half. So, what you're doing is you're building your confidence up over time with this partner. You're not doing it alone.

James Robert:

Pilot programs are a great way to get proof of concept because you're not overselling anything. You're not making unrealistic expectations because what happens when expectations are not fulfilled? People get upset, they feel frustrated. So, pilot programs, quick wins, low hanging fruit. And we talked about this, reinforce it. The nurturing stage of the buying journey, the conversion stage of the buying journey. Keep it simple. Keep it focused.

James Robert:

The only way to escape the complexity of digital is through a path of simplicity. Don't try to boil the ocean.

Joe Welu:

Yeah, so go simple. Attack the nurture and the people that have shown intent that you're just forgetting about, that are what we call slipping through the gaps in the journey.

James Robert:

Oh my gosh.

Joe Welu:

And if I want to get more advanced, I would say the next step, and love your feedback on this, the next step would then, how am I going to expand on that relationship? And part of what you said was having a ratings and reviews program. And then, also it's being able to use my data to engage with those people that have already become a customer member. Is that...

James Robert:

Yes. Let's break-

Joe Welu:

Is that kind of how you think about it?

James Robert:

Yeah, let's break up both sides of the equation. The ratings and the reviews, and really even the referrals. Building referrals into the process, because of a lot of financial brands will measure net promoter score. It's a vanity metric. I mean, great, your net promoter score is like 9.2 or 92. What I want to see is to turn that insight, that data to your point, I want to turn that into action. I want to take my promoters and ask them to refer their friend or their family to the financial brand. And let's throw an incentive behind that as well.

James Robert:

And in some use cases, we've seen like a 15 to 20% conversion rate on referrals. So, that's the ratings, reviews and referrals. Because the other thing, too, we have to look at is how much is a member or a customer influencing the buying journey of someone else. Those stars that you see when you go and google your financial brand and you see the google places that come up, those stars that you see subconsciously impact other future prospects. So, ensuring that we're asking for people to rate and leave those reviews, very critical piece of this journey.

James Robert:

The data side, that's something that we could have a whole nother discussion about because we can use the data. And there's really three parts. There's the data, there's the analytics. Then, there's the insights that come from that analytics. Looking for the-

Joe Welu:

And then, the last-

James Robert:

Yeah.

Joe Welu:

Last part is action, right? Being able to take action on it.

James Robert:

It is. It is. And looking for the opportunities that people might not even be aware of, that how you might be able to help them. Taking, once again, a proactive stance in a person's life, not just a reactive stance.



Joe Welu:

And so, if you look at the data side and so many brands out there, they're short on resources, their data set's complex. It's not connected. It's a massive lift, and I think going back and focusing on this is a marathon. There is no question. The good part that we've covered today is you can absolutely drive value for your customers, and ultimately growth in the business by starting small. Starting with whatever slice that you can get to, that you can start working on improving, and then as you have additional levels of resources, or additional layers of resources, start connecting all those different data sets.

Joe Welu:

And chunk that project out. And just to kind of put a bow on some of this, and if you attack that on the data side, you can start looking at... You can increase. I mean, we've talked about increasing pull through on application rates by 15 to 30%.

James Robert:

Yes, that's a low hanging fruit opportunity. Someone goes to your website, they click the apply button, they start the application process. And we know 85, 90, 93% abandon that application for one reason or another. It's complex. They got distracted. They needed to get some other piece of information. Simply by capturing a name and an email and a phone number to do some outbound outreach to them, yeah, we've seen use cases of 15 to 30% additional pull through with no extra effort at the top of the funnel. No ads, no SEO.

Joe Welu:

And this is no extra spend, by the way. Right? This is not spending more money. And many times, some organizations that we see, they've already got pieces of the technology. Maybe they need something to come in and augment that, or maybe just connect the dots for them. But it's really money that is just simply kind of falling through the cracks. And I think more important than the money, where we've seen lately, is the importance of being able to connect in a deeper way with those customers, right?

Joe Welu:

It's not just about the money of that transaction, but it's having a true customer for life.

James Robert:


It is.

Joe Welu:

And if you think about how valuable a lifetime relationship with a customer is, it's hard to wrap your mind around how, and we take part as it's our industry. Right? We partner with these organizations. But how is everyone not given more attention to creating customer for life scenario? And I think it's just been, give me your thoughts as kind of a parting thought here. It's just been the pace of everything has been kind of insane. And now, it's just netting it all out and where we've come back to is that it's still all about the customer relationship, isn't it?

James Robert:

It is. This is a human game. It's a people game. And whenever we put people at the center of all of our thinking and doing, it makes it so much easier, because the technology kind of fall... That's where I think



the complexity comes into. It's like, oh my gosh, there's so much technology involved, particularly if you've been in this industry for 20, 30, 40 years.

James Robert:

Parting thought, don't let fear, whether it be yourself, your team, your organization, keep you from moving forward along this journey. Don't let the fear of the unknown, don't let the fear of change, don't let the fear of failure, don't let the fear of success even hold you back from moving forward. And you don't have to do this alone. There are a lot of good people, like you and your team, doing great things to provide the guidance, the help and the hope for these financial brands.

Joe Welu:

Those are great comments James Robert. And as always, the knowledge that you bring to this space and the expertise is second to none. I know we've learned a lot from working together, listening to the stuff you're working on. And I know so many other brands that you've helped are extremely grateful.

James Robert:

This was such a fun conversation, and I really appreciate the questions Joe asked me. In fact, Joe and I enjoyed this fireside chat so much that we have a followup discussion that I'll be sharing with you soon. And as you listen to the good questions Joe asked me, maybe you have a question of your own that came to mind.

James Robert:

Now is the time to text me that question, that digital marketing, that digital sales question that you've been thinking about and you'd like to get answers to on a future podcast episode, text that question to 415-579-3004. That's 415-579-3004, and remember, the only bad question is the question that goes unasked. Until next time, and as always, be well, do good and wash your hands.