

Matt Monge:

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James Robert Lay:

Greetings and hello. I am James Robert Lay and welcome to the 60th episode of the Banking On Digital Growth podcast. Today's episode is part of the Exponential Insights series, and I'm excited to welcome Matt Monge to the show.

James Robert Lay:

Matt is the brand and marketing agency director for On the Mark Strategies, and I've known Matt for years. I trust the insights he shares, and I love the fact how he is helping financial brands to be more human, particularly in this post-COVID digital world. Matt's mission is simple because he wants to help organizations differentiate and he wants to help people to make a difference. Hello, Matt. Welcome to the show.

Matt Monge:

Hello, my friend. It is good to see you.

James Robert Lay:

It is good to see you and it's good to be with you. I always like to start on this point here, particularly as we are in a new year and as we reflect back on that great century of 2020 and look ahead to 2021. What are you most excited about right now, whether that just be personal or professionally speaking?

Matt Monge:

Most excited? Man, there's a lot to be optimistic about right now, I think. Personally, we have kids doing well in school. I hate to say in spite of everything that's going on, but there's certainly a lot of obstacles out there, but I think our kids; whether it's mine, other people's, whatever; the kids are doing fine. They're chomping at the bit and they are rolling with punches.

James Robert Lay:

I think you bring up an interesting point, though, with that in the fact that kids have a much higher AQ or an adaptability quotient than we do as adults, business leaders, professionals at financial brands. I know this goes back to a conversation you and I had years and years ago. Why do we lose the ability or why do we lose our adaptability the older that we get?

Matt Monge:

Boy, I don't know. Man, we were just talking before we turned on the thing about teaching and whatever. Some it is we unlearn a lot of stuff. We unlearn creativity. We unlearn that little bit of fearlessness coupled with playfulness. I was just reading... What was the name of that book... Essays In something that Einstein wrote where he talked about how important playfulness was in you being creative as an adult. But kids, they haven't learned how to be that yet, so they're still able to take stuff. Sure, they may be disappointed, but they get over it and they push through. I think some of us sometimes could certainly take a cue from that and be more resilient, be more adaptable and flexible and what have you.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah, it's one of those things. I've done this exercise probably a couple hundred times now to where we take some spaghetti and we build a tower with marshmallows, and really, it's all about what we would call agile or rapid prototype development, failing, fast learning, quick, failures, the fertile seeds from which new growth springs anew. It's funny because a study has been done hundreds of thousands of times if not millions of times in multiple different industries, and I forget who was the architect of the study, but what they had found when they quantified it was that kindergartners [inaudible 00:04:19] higher structures than the best MBAs or business leaders do. It's all because the kindergartner isn't afraid to build it, break it, learn from it, and do it again even that much better.

Matt Monge:

Yeah, that doesn't surprise me, not even a little bit.

James Robert Lay:

Let's talk about this. I know you do a lot around the areas of culture, of brand, of experience, and one of the biggest lessons that I have learned reflecting on 2020 and have been doing a lot of writing around because I think through my writing... I typically write around 2000 maybe 3000 words per day, more or less... is that financial brands have done a tremendous job focusing on the digital experience. COVID has forced that. So we're making some progress there.

James Robert Lay:

There are two opportunities that I would like to talk about with you, which is around, number one, humanizing the digital experience and then, number two, really, how will the humanizing the digital experience only come when we focus on improving the employee experience because from the research that we're doing here, there's typically a lack of humanity in the digital experience for financial brands, which is rooted deeper in a lack of clarity, awareness, and buy-in for the employees, which is why 60 to 80% of digital transformations projects failed to begin with in the first place. So what is the difference between employee experience and employee engagement? Let's start there.

Matt Monge:

Well, that's one of those dangerous questions because it can be that you ask several people and you'll get 18 different answers on it, but it really is one of those deals where if you want to engage your team, you would do things like you'd coach them more. You'd do things around learning and development and leadership development. You would improve other things, but all of those things play into how they experience their environment, but when you're talking about holistic employee experience, now you're talking about literally everything they're experiencing, their entire life cycle, so birth to morbidity, but birth-to-death employee life cycle, all the touch points, all the senses, everything that's happening, everything they're sensing and experiencing. So when we're looking at that, it becomes way more holistic in nature than... I'm doing big air quotes that no one will see... just employee engagement. So employee engagement can have an effect on the overall employee experience, but it's a little bit more limited in scope.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah. When we look at the importance of employee experience, particularly through the context of digital growth, where are the biggest gaps or the misunderstanding of just digital because I see even now post COVID, there's a lot of fear, particularly for those who maybe are on the front lines or those that have been in this industry for 20, 30, 40 years and they've built their entire career around the world of brick and mortar. Where are people getting stuck still?

Matt Monge:

I hate to paint with a broad brush. I think it's going to vary from person to person, but you see things like false dichotomy, false dilemma, two very similar logical fallacies, but it's one of those things where it's an either or. So either we can be physical or we can be digital, either we can be human or we can be digital, either we can be really good at member service in a branch or we can focus our efforts on digital. Well, that's a false dilemma that you're kind of propping up in your mind, and it's subconscious and it's often accidental. It doesn't make you a bad person and it doesn't make you dumb. It makes you a human being who's struggling with a complex issue strategically.

Matt Monge:

So it's almost like you have to get at that presupposition that you're holding on to, realize that's what it is, and think, "Okay, what if I can clear that out for a second and start from both of these things can and do coexist. Now, what do I do? How do I wrestle with that seeming paradox that I have and realize that all of this is going to stay very vague and messy, except that they both are going to be very real strategies that I have to address and be very good at and then move forward." Digital is going to have to involve the human element. It absolutely is going to. The better I get at one, the better the other is going to get and vice versa.

Matt Monge:

So if you can start all the way back there, get at those presuppositions that you have, those mental models. It's systems thinking at work is what it is, but if you can understand those types of things at the very beginning then work towards strategy, then you're going to be way better off if you're talking about executive level kind of stuff.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah, so start it once again. I mean, it's starting with the end in mind versus just starting and trying. I know one of the things that you've written about is this idea of an employee experience strategy. The reason I'm wanting to talk more about this is I feel that all of the massive changes that were brought on by COVID put people in a very uncomfortable situation. It put people in what I write about as the circle of chaos, where they feel confused, frustrated, and overwhelmed, and that keeps them trapped in a new model that I've been thinking of writing about called the cave of complacency. I know you and I had been having a conversation before I hit record about the elements of story and narrative.

James Robert Lay:

So I've written a lot about the digital consumer journey, but you're actually writing about the employee experience journey. I love the perspective. So can you unpack this idea of the employee experience journey and how the employee experience journey might help someone, A, escape the circle of chaos as an employee or a team member or, B, help them to come out of their cave of complacency with courage and confidence?

Matt Monge:

Yeah. Again, it's a holistic thing. So we can't even think about an employee experience journey without understanding how connected it is strategically to everything else that the organization is doing. So organization's leadership has to be thinking through, "Okay, I'm so worried right now about what our members are going to say... credit unions... what a member is going to be doing or... any bank, for example... what our customers are going to be doing right now because of the pandemic. We need to make sure that we keep making that dollar."

James Robert Lay:

Yes.

Matt Monge:

So that has to be on point. We're going to be taking a look at it and make sure digital is this and this and this and whatever, and it's not wrong. It's critical. Just as critical though is making sure that that employee experience is nailed down with just as much specificity. What are all those touch points? What are all those portions of those journeys? What are all the stop gaps? What are all the things that are happening there, mapping that out in the exact same way. So when that happens, those folks, you can expect one of two things. Because if they are ignored, you would expect a fall off on the customer or the member side if members were ignored like that.

Matt Monge:

Well, imagine what is happening right now on employee side, especially given what 2020 is. It's going to be magnifying, I think. So then we'll see that folks who've been doing the hard work on the culture employee experience side prior to 2020 have employees who are locked in, adapting, they're autonomous and they're pushing forward. Whereas others now, they're having to figure it out on the fly. You have folks who are just internally wired that way, then they're able to push through. Others now, we're having to figure out, "How do we help these folks along?" It's been a significantly more difficult struggle.

James Robert Lay:

Yeah. That's why I think of the formulaic approach of AQ plus EQ, particularly in the age of AI, is going to be far greater than IQ because I look at COVID as this is just the preview. This is just the things of yet to come of all of the massive changes that we're going to live through and experience both at a macro and a micro level. As leaders, I think we need to create an environment where people feel safe. We need to empower them, to educate, to provide clarity into what that role of transformation might be for them because otherwise, to your point and maybe you can unpack this a little bit further, a lot of talk has been made over the past, I would say, two to three years around CX, customer experience. That's great. That's fine. That's dandy, but I'm predicting in 2021 going into 2023, 2024, I think EX is going to be the next big thing that we start focusing on at organizations because EX informs the CX. I got another model, but how do those two play hand in hand together?

Matt Monge:

Well, who is providing the CX, or who's designing the UX? It's one of those things that this is where I get in a little bit of trouble because some people don't know me as well. I'm saying some of this with tongue firmly planted in cheek, so please don't misunderstand the tone, but who do we suspect is providing the customer and or member service? Who do we suspect is trying to design the user experience if we're starting to get into the digital space with apps and the website and the web design and all that stuff? These are still human beings. So the degree to which we invest in those humans and invest in understanding how humans work and consumer psych and all that stuff, that's the degree to which we will get the member experience right or the customer experience right. We can do all the maps we want to, but if we don't understand the humans who are navigating those things, we're done. We won't get it. We'll build these pretty little things, but it just won't matter because you'll have miserable people trying to navigate them and they won't perform as well.

James Robert Lay:

This might sound a little paradoxical, but I've never said this before, but the thought just came to me.

Matt Monge:

Do it.

James Robert Lay:

A competitive advantage for a financial brand or any brand for that matter in the world of AI automation is to double down and invest more in your people, whether that be through training and education to provide clarity in the unknown so that they can overcome those fears or to provide some hope as well to upskill them and just to say, "Hey, you know what? Just because automation and AI is coming on the scene doesn't mean that you're irrelevant. It actually probably means you're even 10 times more relevant because we're going to use automation and AI to take away the mundane tasks that you're having to do day in and day out so that you can spend more time creating more value for even more people."

Matt Monge:

You're a thousand percent right. People who are adaptable who can look at situations with a member or a customer and actually possess the ability to on the spot be creative in a real way with what they see on that screen and be analytical and put together solutions from disparate sources actually possess that ability because they've been in a culture that is a safe space to try things like that, not get pummeled over the head because they didn't take the cookie cutter solution that's always been presented. That's where you see the real impact of it because that creates revenue over and over and over again. But that doesn't happen on accident. That is an intentional context that's been created for those people and intentional experience and culture. That is a sustainable competitive advantage over time. That's a big, big deal, but it's also very rare.

James Robert Lay:

Well, I can't help but just think. You said something that was key. Give our people, and particularly those on the front line, whether the frontline... I think the idea of the front line has to transform beyond that's someone in the branch. No, that could also be a digital salesperson, a digital service person, but the context of how they're delivering that sales or service experience is going to be vastly different than doing it in a face-to-face context.

James Robert Lay:

So when you think about empowering them to make those on the spot decisions, I cannot help but think the world lost a great mind way too early, Tony Shay, who was the CEO of Zappos for the longest time. He was all about humanizing really. I mean, he was so far ahead. He was humanizing the digital experience before that was even a thought with the whole perspective of. There was a video that had shared recently where he talked about if we can get someone on the phone to help them, just not to sell them but to help them, and if we can't help them, we're going to find other places that can help them, we have a higher propensity... He gave a certain percentage and it was pretty high... of converting them if not now then down the road. Is this kind of what you're thinking here?

Matt Monge:

Yeah, absolutely. Who was I talking to? I alluded to him as well when that that example... Man, I'm stumbling over everything here. I'm having a very human moment... where he was talking about the

example with the call center and how some of their metrics are so wonky when put next to everyone else's, but one of the things they brag about is they look at call times entirely differently. It's not so much, "Hey, we need to keep those call times down so we can plow through as many people as possible," it's, "What did you do on that call?" They have this hall of fame where one of those calls was seven hours, but it was because they wanted to talk about everything, ordered that person pizza on the other line, and whatever else.

Matt Monge:

It's just an entirely different way of looking at it, but it's an entirely human way because it's all about that interaction and building that relationship. I can't imagine what would happen if someone stayed in the lobby with a member, the same one for that long. I mean, seriously, can you imagine what would happen?

James Robert Lay:

Yeah. As you're talking through that, and this is a question for the dear listener, and maybe if you're not in this direct role, you might need to go talk to someone else, when was the last time that you just had a conversation with one of your account holders or prospective account holder just to ask them how they want to grow... This is something that we teach around, but it's what are their goals, what are the roadblocks, what are their opportunities... and just listen?

James Robert Lay:

I just had Jay Palter on a couple of episodes before as we ended 2020, and he was talking about this idea of relationship and the need to just ask good questions, keep our mouths closed, and then listen. What are you seeing through the work that you're doing around that, and is there movement in that direction of asking good questions, listening, and then to your point coming back, and then taking action and providing guidance off of those insights?

Matt Monge:

Candidly, it's really hit and miss. My team gives me a playful hard time because of... I deserve it and 10 times more to be sure... because I am an oddball proudly, an oddball with certain things, but I believe in questions... I really do... the Socratic method. Questions are so, so powerful and listening, of course, to the answers, but think about the potency behind pointed specific questions like, "Really, do we know what we want from members, what we want them to feel, think, and do at all these points throughout the process of them interacting with us?" Really, can we answer that question like, "What do we want them to feel, think, and do when they first interact with us on the phone?" Do we know that? Do we know what those gaps are? Do we know what they're probably feeling versus what we want them to? What's the gap? What that we do could bridge that gap? Do we have specific conversations like that? Are we gathering that data from them? Are we conducting ethnographic research? Usually, we just kind of assume we want them to feel good.

James Robert Lay:

What does that mean?

Matt Monge:

Right. I have no clue.

James Robert Lay:

It comes back to what you said before to take this conversation almost full circle now is the difference between employee experience versus employee engagement. You said, "Well, you ask 18 people, you're going to get 18... I think, particularly at an institution, there has to be a unified definition. That's one of the reasons we have a definition for digital growth. We have a definition for experience. Experience being nothing more than well-defined systems and processes that have been defined, applied, optimized over a period of time resulting in one of two things, a positive emotion or a negative emotion.

James Robert Lay:

I love your question, which asks how do we want people to think, to feel, to do. To answer that question, particularly from that of the lens of a financial brand leader, whether that'd be in marketing, sales, the leadership team, we have to escape our own doing to create space and time to stop, pause, review, reflect, to learn, to think, to then apply that thinking to do even better, and then create that space and time to do it again because otherwise I see a lot of financial brands just get in that doing mode and we just keep where I think it's... Maybe you even used this word before... it's intentionality.

Matt Monge:

Yeah. It takes constant humility and organizational self-awareness and this constant organizational stance of we're never going to be there. We're always going to be learning. We're always going to be listening. We're always going to be humble enough to say we want to just keep tweaking, keep learning. Every once in a while, it's going to take a violent adjustment when we discover, "This is a gaping hole we have here."

James Robert Lay:

Yeah. Sometimes we'll be the student and sometimes we'll be the guide or the teacher, but I think we have to commit to playing both roles on the journeys that we're all taking as an individual, as a team, as an organization because-

Matt Monge:

Absolutely.

James Robert Lay:

... transformation of any type, whether it be personally, professionally, digitally, doesn't matter, always begins with some type of training education to provide awareness and clarity into the unknown, to help the unaware become aware of what those opportunities are to begin with in the first place.

James Robert Lay:

Matt, it's been such a great conversation. I want to look ahead with you into this year of 2021. If we could just focus in on one specific action item recommendation that you could give to financial brand marketing sales and leadership teams, if they could just focus on one thing in 2021 to make this year even that much better, what would that one piece of advice be from you?

Matt Monge:

I think it would be to keep that same urgency that we've had this year to look at everything, every possible way that we can grow and adapt and keep pressing forward with ways to serve the people that we're to serve, that same level of urgency and passion and excitement that we had over these past several months, to make that who we are now because that has produced something inside teams and

groups and organizations that we've not seen before and some speed and some agility that a lot of folks, I don't think, knew that they actually had, but it's been in there the whole time. That potential has been in there the whole time, so I'd love to see that continue.

James Robert Lay:

If I could frame that up, it would be don't fall back on getting comfortable. Don't get comfortable being... Or should I say, "Get comfortable being uncomfortable because if you get comfortable, then you get trapped in the cave of complacency." You can look around at all the different corpses there from brands that we know and love, Blockbuster and Borders and Kodak and the list goes on and on, that have come out of this retail apocalypse that I think 2020 caught a lot of people. We all knew it was coming. We just didn't know it was going to hit so hard and so fast. So talking with you today, I'm excited, encouraged, and inspired about the months and year to come because I see the future as still brightened. I do thank you for joining me for this conversation.

Matt Monge:

No, thank you.

James Robert Lay:

Absolutely. If anyone wants to continue this conversation with you, what's the best way for them to connect and say hello?

Matt Monge:

I'm on social media, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, or matt@markarnold.com.

James Robert Lay:

That's it, matt@markarnold.com. Connect with Matt. Say hello to Matt. Learn from Matt just as we all have today. Thank you, Matt. As always and until next time, be well, do good, and wash your hands.