

Episode 3

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

ComStore Outdoor, billboard advertising, Adam Rammel, Brew Fountain, craft beer bar, small town marketing, business partnership, downtown revitalization, historic building renovation, Bellefontaine Ohio, entrepreneurship, restaurant launch, community support, Small Nation, givers gain

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Adam Rammel, Ethan DeLeon

- A Adam Rammel** 00:00
Jeremy jumped on the table and was like, "Attention everyone, the toilets are screwed. We— no one can go to the bathroom." And then all of a sudden everyone cheered like, "Yeah, yeah!" So we kept serving beers, we kept selling beers. We had two porta-potties that were dropped off. That's right.
- E Ethan DeLeon** 00:31
Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO Jason Duff. With us today we have our vice president of marketing and restaurant owner Adam Rammel. Hey guys, we want to welcome you to the Small Talk Podcast where we try to share some of the valuable lessons with what we have learned about entrepreneurship, real estate, economic development, and more. The point of this podcast is to create value for you, the listener, and to create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.
- J Jason Duff** 00:52
Whoo, man, I gotta change that intro. I mean, but did you hear like Adam jumped in That was the quickest we've ever heard a guest jump in, like, ready to be on the show. Love your enthusiasm.
- A Adam Rammel** 01:04
I'm ready.
- J Jason Duff** 01:05
Oh, yeah.
- A Adam Rammel** 01:06
Okay. I timed it perfectly.
- J Jason Duff** 01:08
Like everything in life.

A**Adam Rammel** 01:10

No, not everything.

J**Jason Duff** 01:11

Does your wife agree about that? No. All right. Speaking of stories, let's, let's take it back to the beginning. How did, how did this whole partnership between Jason Duff and Adam Rammel happen? I don't know this story, so I'll be enjoying it with the listeners. Well, I'll kick it off on that front. So, um, you know, I— in starting my business, I, I really tried to find, um, you know, something that people would actually pay me money to do. So, and I think that's for a lot of entrepreneurs when they start out, it's like it starts out as a side gig and then you listen to your customers and then it can become something more significant. Uh, so, you know, I grew up, both my parents were small business owners and it just happened by default. I would work in our businesses on marketing initiatives, and at the time that was doing things with Yellow Pages and newspaper and radio, uh, and you know, the websites were just starting to come out, like, um, and so it would be helping them with graphic design, writing copy, you know, negotiating rates with vendors. And the thing that continually worked for us, whether we put signs in the, in you know, on the buildings or on the business itself or on the sidewalk. But one time we did a billboard sign and the calls or the interest or the people that would say, hey, I saw, you know, I saw your ad out on the highway, you know, that was something that kept coming up over and over and it worked. The problem is, is that people that were selling billboard signs were these very large companies and they were out of a city that was 60 miles away from us. It was hard for me to get them to number one, give me a quote and price on how to rent the sign, but then number 2, actually get the, the job of getting the sign installed. So I'm like, why is this so hard? Like, shouldn't someone create a billboard company that cares about small business owners, small towns? And that's when the light bulb went off. Like, enter Adam Rimmel. Yeah, I mean, well, you know, we—

A**Adam Rammel** 03:09

not quite.

J**Jason Duff** 03:10

Yeah, I mean, well, I, I— in the beginning when you start your business, you kind of do all the jobs. Yeah. And like, you are At the time, I was, you know, helping with the construction to actually build the structure. I was the guy that was designing the artwork that would go up on the, the billboard sign itself. I was sending out the billing statements. And in growing the company, at some point you realize like you need help. And I got involved in a group in Lima, Ohio called Lima Young Professionals. And I think that getting involved in groups, whether it's your Chamber of Commerce or whether it's um, other networking opportunities with Rotary or Kiwanis or other groups that exist in your area. You know, my mentor really pushed me out of my comfort zone and said, you, you need to go to this stuff and you need to meet people. And, um, you know, uh, Adam and I met and, uh, he was working in marketing at the time and, and, uh, we had a conversation. Tell us about that conversation.

A

Adam Rammel 04:03

Yeah, I was following— actually, I was prospecting in Logan County, you know, knocking on some doors, and I would always stop at the local chamber office to get some contacts. And they said, you got to talk to this Jason Duff dude. And I remember sending him an email and I think he ghosted me, you know, a couple times.

J

Jason Duff 04:18

You know, you get busy, like, sure. You know how many marketing emails I get? Like, hey, I had this solution that's going to make you more money or save you more money. And yeah, I— Adam was trying to make a sale, man.

A

Adam Rammel 04:30

I was trying to make a sale.

J

Jason Duff 04:31

But, um, wait a minute, did you leave a voicemail or call or send a letter?

A

Adam Rammel 04:34

Probably called.

J

Jason Duff 04:35

I don't remember. I see. I'm not sure.

A

Adam Rammel 04:37

I should have sent a letter.

J

Jason Duff 04:39

You know what is my love language?

A

Adam Rammel 04:41

It is emails.

J

Jason Duff 04:43

Emails.

A

Adam Rammel 04:45

There's 7 love languages and then Jason has email, so that's in there.

J

Jason Duff 04:49

I do appreciate that.

A**Adam Rammel** 04:52

So I think, uh, after a few touch points, he did finally like pawn me off to, to one of the other, uh, you know, people in the office. Um, but eventually I did get a meeting with him, and man, it's going back now a dozen years or so. There's a lot that's happened since then. I think he had an assistant. You had an assistant Jason, and I think she told me what your favorite cookie was from the Delta flights.

J**Jason Duff** 05:18

You liked the— the Biscoff cookies.

A**Adam Rammel** 05:20

Biscoff cookies.

J**Jason Duff** 05:21

Ethan, have you had a Biscoff cookie? I can't say that I have. Okay, well, we're gonna make a point to share some. So it's like— next podcast, actually, that would be great. So I don't know how to describe it. It's like a cinnamon chocolatey, you know, goodness. And Delta gives them on their flights, or they did for a very long time because they, you know, flying in an airplane is a miserable thing, but like eating this cookie makes it a little bit better. It's just a little bit better.

A**Adam Rammel** 05:47

So yeah, yeah. So, uh, it was either her or it was Matt Brown. We had a mutual friend in Matt Brown who told me about this, and I was getting ready if he didn't reply to send him some of these damn cookies. Okay, nice touch. And that would have— that would have gotten his attention, I think. But we did end up doing lunch, um, over in Lima, and you know, the rest kind of is history. And that was in 2010.

J**Jason Duff** 06:08

Wow. And you, when you think about hiring someone, you know, it's a vulnerable thing too. Like, you want to get to know them, you want there to be the right fit. And I think part of us connecting at lunch, it was like realizing we love small towns, we love small businesses, and we actually share a love for marketing. You know, the show *Mad Men* was just kind of coming out, and, you know, we were laughing and joking like, we, we'd love to be like the Don Draper and like the advertising agency but do it in like cornfields. And I think that's where the, you know, the partnership or the idea of working together really began. Wow, that's awesome. So were you originally from the Lima area?

A**Adam Rammel** 06:47

Coldwater is where I graduated from, but wife and I— well, fiancée at the time— were living in Lima for about 3 years.

J**Jason Duff** 06:54

Okay, very cool. Where'd you guys go out for lunch? Do you remember?

A

Adam Rammel 06:58

Texas Roadhouse.

J

Jason Duff 06:59

Texas Roadhouse. I thought you were going to say—

A

Adam Rammel 07:00

it may have been dinner. But anyways, Texas Roadhouse. And I only remember that because I was kind of nervous. And you know, you know, you know the rolls at Texas Roadhouse. You can't go there without those rolls. And I think I like cut my finger and I had to get a Band-Aid. Um, so I don't know why I remember that.

J

Jason Duff 07:17

Blood brothers.

A

Adam Rammel 07:18

Yeah, we were blood brothers from the start.

J

Jason Duff 07:21

So how did that— you went from sales to, to hiring him and, and being coworkers. So how did, how did that transition happen?

A

Adam Rammel 07:30

Yeah, we, uh, we started building more billboard signs. And, um, as Jason said, I had that advertising agency experience. And so we had a lot of clients who would want additional help beyond just their billboard, and we would start doing some of that work. So we brought in some outside resources, we brought in some other team members and vendors. And, uh, you know, in a quick— you know, a short time, I should say, uh, we were, we were off to the races doing a lot of web work, a lot of video work, in addition to all the billboard portfolio, which is over 400 billboard faces.

J**Jason Duff** 08:01

Wow. Just how many people are on the team at that point? So I think like 3 of us. Um, and, and that's something to really remember, like going from one sign to 400 faces in Ohio and Indiana is quite a feat. Yeah. And, you know, good thing is Adam and I had some mentors. Um, you know, people like Dick Lehman and Cecil Smith and, you know, Dustin Wickersham, you know, people that were with us along the journey as we were, you know, selling, building, and growing that part portfolio. Um, but today, you know, it's still cornerstone of the work that we do here at Small Nation. Adam, you know, leads up with Vice President of Marketing, and that rolls up so that he has the, the leadership with that. But we, we now have a team, you know, underneath him— a sales manager, graphic designer, installer. All those folks are, you know, still creating those results for our clients today. Yeah, under the brand of ComStore. So what is, what is ComStore? Where does that name come from? It's a great question. So, you know, again, probably many of the entrepreneurs that are listening to this, it's like there are moments where you name your business things that make sense, and there's moments where it's like, I'm not sure why I named it that. Um, but no, we, we had a self-storage facility. You know, self-storage was again one of our first businesses, and it was called Community Storage. And the short version of that is just Com Store. So Community Storage, there you go, folks. Yeah. And then you know, that we like, okay, we're creating a billboard company, let's call it ComStore Outdoor. And so it just became kind of an extension of what we were doing. And, you know, today, uh, the word outdoor really is billboards. I mean, we, um, billboard signs are, are, you know, that, that they're, they're a very effective tool. And, um, they're in this kind of overall umbrella in the industry called outdoor advertising. Yeah. And as you mentioned, this is still pretty big part of Small Nation. So can you explain to us a little bit how that process works? Like, if someone's listening or interested in billboards and like, where are we? And if they're interested in that kind of thing, what do we provide?

A**Adam Rammel** 10:00

Yep. So we have a network of around 400 faces in Ohio and Indiana, and, um, we do everything from the initial, you know, consultation to coming up with a design, um, to printing that design. We have an installer who will install that sign, and, um, you know, we'll follow back up with a client and see what other additional marketing services we can provide them. But if you You drive by a sign on the highway, we have an idea for that sign that can help your business. And, and it really— how Small Nation was started is when we, we were, we were putting up these signs and helping small businesses grow and come off of the, the local route or the local highway and shop downtown in that town. So really at the core of what Small Nation still does today, that is kind of what CommStore Outdoor did 12, 15 years ago.

J**Jason Duff** 10:45

Kind of focusing on the small town. Here's why it matters is that we loved historic buildings. We wanted to invest in businesses and, and see, you know, the town thrive. But we needed a vehicle that banks and investors would lend us money to, because it takes massive amounts of capital to renovate a historic building. So when we got the track record that we had a business model and that we were creating results and success for our clients using effective advertising, that's when the bank said, we trust you, we believe in you, and we want to work with you. So not only did banks give us loans, But many times they would say, can we work with you from a marketing and advertising perspective? Like, we see the results of what you're doing, we want to be a part of that too. And, uh, you know, in our DNA and history, we have, we have leased buildings to banks, we have helped banks, you know, design effective marketing and advertising for their, their other products. And now we use and depend on the financing from them and returning business to them of building our, our businesses, our, our projects, our properties today.

A**Adam Rammel** 11:49

Wasn't your first building actually a bank, your first real estate purchase?

J**Jason Duff** 11:52

Yeah, Lakeview, Ohio. So, um, about that in the first one a little bit. Yeah, I mean, that, that really was the, the beginning from a real estate acquisition standpoint. But, you know, that you kind of see the web of how things kind of unfold. And I think the key is we've always been people that have listened to solving problems. And, you know, that marketing equation, when you, you know, that we were building the billboard business, you and your wife, um, I kind of talked with you about relocating because most of our activities were moving to Bellefontaine, Ohio. And, uh, Bellefontaine at the time, do you remember driving in for the first time?

A**Adam Rammel** 12:29

Yeah, Renee said, um, we need to look at Urbana or somewhere else. We are not living in Bellefontaine. Hell no.

J**Jason Duff** 12:37

That, those were the words that she used to, and she Renee is a very kind, quiet person. So, you know, if she, like, uses those words, that means something. Yeah. So where do you live now, Adam?

A**Adam Rammel** 12:48

In beautiful Bellefontaine, Ohio.

J**Jason Duff** 12:51

And we are Ohio's most lovable downtown.

A

Adam Rammel 12:53

That's right. No, it has been, Ethan. It's been an amazing journey to just watch over the last dozen years things go from, you know, basically nothing to now a flourishing downtown with a lot of amenities and things. It's just been hell of a ride, and it's been a lot of fun to be part of that too.

J

Jason Duff 13:10

Did you guys ever envision it would be this, what it is today?

A

Adam Rammel 13:14

Jason probably did, um, but I didn't. But once we got rolling, I saw it.

J

Jason Duff 13:20

You know, I, I think that in every situation it takes someone that can paint the, the bigger vision or the plan, and, and that probably is something that I have a unique ability to do. But you need people that have other skill sets, and I, you know, we just did an assessment for our team a few months ago called The Working Genius. And one of the things that Adam has this working genius working competency with is tenacity, which it's the ability to listen to someone that paints out a vision and see all the different tasks and people and resources and systems to then go get it done. Yeah. And I think that's part of why he and I work together really well is like we're really inventive and creative. But we also recognize that this doesn't— this isn't easy. And so it takes building teams, it takes dialing into the details, into the task, and then, you know, putting your head down and getting it done. And I think that that's something— it's been 10 years of— I mean, Adam, easily 70-plus hour weeks, major sacrifices from our significant others, which he and I joke like we were like in a relationship with the same person. Lance and Renee are very similar. They're clones, pretty much. And we're very close. Hi, Renee and Lance. I know. First off, shout out if you're listening. They're probably not. They're not listening. They're never listening to this. Because the other thing that we joke about is like for our love language, like words of affirmation is important. So like we get real excited. We accomplish something like in our day job or like in our career and we go home and we're like, hey, did you see that Facebook post? We got this big award or whatever. And they're like, so totally not into that. It's like, why are we getting attention with this? Can you just not do any of those things? So Adam and I kind of serve that for each other sometimes too. Good job, bro. Congratulations. Yeah, you need that. Yeah, you need a little bit of both. You need something to pull you back to reality.

A

Adam Rammel 15:12

A little balance, right?

J**Jason Duff** 15:14

It's healthy. So talked a lot about, you know, billboards and how we got started and stuff, but what are, what are some of the things you got going for you right now? You transitioned from— I know this is something we had Brittany on here, uh, our last episode talking about 600, uh, great episode. If you haven't listened to that, go, go ahead and, uh, listen to that episode. But you kind of shifted a little bit. You are kind of doing your own thing off to the side as well as working with Small Nation here. So tell us, tell us about some of that.

A**Adam Rammel** 15:41

Yeah, we like to have a lot of irons in the fire, I think, all of us. So Jason had purchased the building where 600 Downtown is now.

J**Jason Duff** 15:50

Yeah.

A**Adam Rammel** 15:51

And we realized how important that food and beverage is to the revitalization, the overall project and revitalization of the community. And I, I was really enjoying craft beer at the time. It was really exploding, like in 2013-14. Breweries were popping up all over the state of Ohio. Yeah, we were driving to Columbus, we were— we would experience flights and growlers and the, the new hottest brewery, and we'd bring all that back to Bell Fountain. And, uh, but while we were there, we'd see a lot of Logan County people, and so we thought to ourselves, if 600 can get, you know, pretty, pretty decent, um, price on this pizza. You know, I bet we could get \$6 for a craft beer. And, you know, all the naysayers and even some friends and associates of ours said, no way anyone's paying that in Bellefontaine, Ohio, you know. Well, there was this building that was for sale, and, uh, I think Jason and I started talking. I'm like, man, that'd be perfect for a craft beer bar. Or you, you said that, or I said that. Didn't have a roof, didn't have a floor.

J**Jason Duff** 16:52

Um, I think it had a rickety ladder that went down to the basement. And I, I'm the kind of person and that I crawl through buildings even if I'm not allowed to do it. Like, even if it's a property that's just kidding, we don't have— I mean, I mean, someday if I do get arrested, it's because I've probably been trespassing.

A**Adam Rammel** 17:10

But hide your kids.

J**Jason Duff** 17:12

Yeah. So, so there was this rickety ladder and I went down in the basement and the ladder broke. And while you're going down? Yeah. And the basement is like, like, like like 16, 18 feet. There's no way when you get down there to get out. Like, and I'm just thinking, I luckily sometimes don't take my cell phone with me, like, I'm doing this, I don't want to like damage my phone or whatever. I literally have my cell phone to call someone to like, you have to rescue me to get me out of this. But that, that was Brew Fountain's basement before it had a floor and had a roof.

A**Adam Rammel** 17:41

But yeah, and it was Johnson's Deli. What years would have been?

J**Jason Duff** 17:46

'70s? Well, I think if you have late '50s and into the '70s, it closed in the '70s, but Yeah, yeah.

A**Adam Rammel** 17:52

So, um, we actually— so, so that building then became what's known as Brew Fountain today. In 2015, we opened, and I'll never forget this story, and this was my first experience in working with these historic buildings. Um, it was Thanksgiving Eve, and we were out partying. You remember this? It's very, very vivid. And, uh, you know, I'm like, okay, we're ready to rock. We got all the bartenders ready. People are going to be coming in.

J**Jason Duff** 18:18

You're just opening. Brand new.

A**Adam Rammel** 18:21

The night we opened of like the biggest party night of the year, which, you know, we thought, let's just go for it. Let's go. So I'm, uh, I took off and went to a buddy's, I think, to have a beer. And I get a call. I think, I think we have a problem here. We can't flush the toilets and the sinks are backing up. And I'm like, oh my God, on opening night, call Jason Duff. Are you serious? Okay.

J

Jason Duff 18:44

And I meant, okay, there, you know, we're always on the grid and like typically always on, but like Thanksgiving Eve in my family's tradition with Lance, like we go down to his family and they do like a 4-day Thanksgiving and it is down in Germantown, Ohio. Um, there is this beautiful farmhouse that's kind of in the middle of nowhere, but cell service is like terrible. Okay. And there's like no rapid internet, anything. So, um, we're, we're down there and I'm getting like, I can hear bits and pieces of the call. It's like, hey, I think we got a problem. Water, toilets. Something. So yeah, basically the sewer, the pipes, you know what happens when you renovate a building, like construction debris and old pipes, like sometimes between the building and the city, they need to be scoped and checked out. And we thought we had done all of this, but there was a massive sewer backup that you can imagine Thanksgiving Eve, there's nothing good about it. And I do say, I said to you, we have to close it down. Like, this is a— it's a public health issue. Definitely close it down. And I think if I remember the story, basically your team went out and said, hey guys, we got to wrap things up and close up. There's no—

A

Adam Rammel 20:03

Jeremy jumped on the table. This is when we knew we had something special. Jeremy jumped on the table and was like, attention everyone, the, the toilets are screwed. We— no one can go to the bathroom. And then all of a sudden everyone cheered like, "Yeah!" So we kept serving beers, we kept selling beers, we had two porta-potties that we had, and hand sanitizer. That's right.

J

Jason Duff 20:31

But you know, the good thing is we knew that from that point it was only going to be gravy there on out.

A

Adam Rammel 20:37

And we knew that we had—

J

Jason Duff 20:40

it's funny now, you know, you look back and—

A

Adam Rammel 20:42

oh, and it is like, these are things that I haven't thought about in years, which is kind of cool to reminisce a little bit and kind because we're always just charting ahead. Um, but we knew we had something special with the community when they rallied behind us, even when we didn't have restrooms.

J**Jason Duff** 20:55

That's awesome. So we're talking about Brew Fountain. Now there's a part 2 to this story talking about the Syndicate eventually. I mean, I know this is probably— how many years apart? Well, before you go there, just, just highlighting a few things, you know, I remember conversations with Adam and his partners about we probably aren't going to serve significant food. You know, we have hot dogs. It's going to be focused on the beer, which I will tell you, food trucks were hot. A lot of small businesses that we work with, the complexity of running a kitchen or building a kitchen and doing kitchen, it is a major, uh, it's a major step. Um, and so I think what was awesome of as they were flushing that out, and part of it was to the coaching that people like Brittany Saxton and her mentor Michael Shepherd provided Brew Fountain was starting up. Basically, they opened up their legal documents, their employee handbooks, their systems and processes, and said, Brew Fountain, here's what we do. If you can benefit from this, you use that.

A**Adam Rammel** 21:53

Oh, we still use some of those templates to this day. So thank you, Michael Shepherd.

J**Jason Duff** 21:57

100%. And I think the thing about it is that we've been working to create in our ecosystem is, you know, people that understand that gives gain. And that when you share and that when you collaborate, there is many more greater opportunities than trying to view that or think that that's, that's competition.

A**Adam Rammel** 22:17

Sorry, I think I have the chair that sinks.

J**Jason Duff** 22:19

I was wondering, you're good over there.

A**Adam Rammel** 22:20

We have one chair here around the table, and I think, you know, whoever gets stuck with it just ends up—

J**Jason Duff** 22:27

Ethan's got a control. Yeah, that would be funny if what you say he doesn't agree with.

A**Adam Rammel** 22:32

He does have that one. He does have that one.

J**Jason Duff** 22:35

I need to preload some of these sounds. Yeah, I think right now I just got the intro, outro, and that. Okay, nice. Wrong answer.

A

Adam Rammel 22:42

No, but, um, we did start with just 4 sandwiches, 2 soups, 2 salads. And I'd like to tell that story because no one remembers that.

J

Jason Duff 22:50

Sure.

A

Adam Rammel 22:50

You can always grow.

J

Jason Duff 22:52

Yeah.

A

Adam Rammel 22:53

You don't want to come out with too much, and sometimes less is more.

J

Jason Duff 22:56

That's a golden nugget.

A

Adam Rammel 22:56

We say that on our billboards too. Less is more.

J

Jason Duff 23:00

Less is more.

A

Adam Rammel 23:00

Yeah. And so We quickly did add some additional sandwiches and offerings, but man, you get someone with a sandwich and they want to sit for a couple more beers, it makes all the difference. So we are glad. And really, from no— from— we didn't have any experience in restaurants. I knew what I liked. I knew I had a good— I have, I have a good gut for, I think, what people will want and like. And I read a lot about, you know, the trends and, and things and what's coming, coming, and we can kind of test that. The beautiful thing about being in a small town is, is you don't have as much competition. Whereas in Columbus, there's a— I don't want to say there's a brew fountain, but there's a concept with craft beers and rustic food on, on every corner, right? And so it does allow us to kind of be that big fish in a small pond here in Bellefontaine. But we're your local Cheers bar. Um, 16 beers on tap, fresh sandwiches, soups, salads, wraps. Uh, we actually— our first 4 years in business never even had fryers in there, and we did, we did, we we did because customers asked. We added those in and added some additional apps and things because they wanted that.

J

Jason Duff 24:05

But you became known for food, and I think that that's the springboard with where you're at today.

A

Adam Rammel 24:13

Yep, agreed. Wow. And culinary. Yeah, so we, we started sponsoring the local farmers market where we do food demos, really, and really bought as much local product as we could. Our pretzels are made from Rice Bakehouse, great local entrepreneur and wholesale bakery. And then, um, Saucy South Mustard, I mean, we buy a ton of that, made local in Jackson Center, Ohio. So this was also kind of right where, you know, local beer, local food, local product just started catching on fire.

J

Jason Duff 24:44

Yeah. Wow. Yeah, this is all part of the story. I mean, I just wasn't— I wasn't here for that part, so I'm glad to hear it now.

A

Adam Rammel 24:50

We're glad you're here now.

J

Jason Duff 24:52

Hopefully I can help you tell the story now, right?

A

Adam Rammel 24:54

That's right.

J

Jason Duff 24:55

Cool. So from there, what's next?

A

Adam Rammel 24:58

Well, people, people started asking us, can you cater at my graduation party, bridal shower? Do you have space? And if you've ever been to Brew Fountain, it's cozy, it's small. Yeah, but that again, more is not always more. Um, on Thursday nights when we would have our tap takeover events, um, and feature local breweries and give away, you know, pint glasses, I mean, that place was packed, standing room only. Now that's just pre-COVID, right?

J

Jason Duff 25:24

Yeah.

A

Adam Rammel 25:25

So those days aren't back yet, but I hope someday they, they return.

J

Jason Duff 25:29

But, um, but I feel like those kind of— like, that kind of setting almost makes a place like that a little bit more magical.

A

Adam Rammel 25:35

And that's my point. So, you know, you got Don's Diner across the street too, always looks busy. You got to get in there at 11 or you got to get in there at 1, 1:30 if you want a seat. So, um, no one wants to go to the place that looks— my kids are even trained to this. We go to a— drive by a Mexican restaurant and there's 2 cars there, it's like, Daddy, I don't want to go here. You know, they're even learning. It's like, I want to go where the people are, because that means it's good. Yeah. And, uh, so that— there is, again, more is not more. I've learned that a lot. You know, you'll keep wanting more in life, right? You want more, you want this, you want bigger this, you want this. And at the end of the day, when you add up all your time and energy and everything else, is it really worth it? Maybe not. And I, you know, that's, that's something that you can only learn by experience. Wow.

J

Jason Duff 26:17

So, uh, tell us about The Syndicate. What do you guys do there?

A

Adam Rammel 26:19

Yeah, just to kind of, you know, close that loop, um, we wanted it to be an event center. And this, again, the graduation party, the bridal shower, the— can I, can I, can you guys cater? Can you guys host big parties? The Syndicate was our answer to that. It is right next door to Brew Fountain. So, Jason, correct me if I'm wrong, I don't think there was any new construction that happened in the downtown.

J

Jason Duff 26:43

This is the first new construction in probably 20 years.

A

Adam Rammel 26:46

Yeah.

J

Jason Duff 26:47

Wow.

A

Adam Rammel 26:48

So it was an empty lot.

J

Jason Duff 26:49

So this is not a historical building.

A

Adam Rammel 26:50

This is a brand new—

J**Jason Duff** 26:51

this one is— it's on a lot where there was a historical business, but that, that was taken down. And if you've never been to Bellefontaine, all of this is on Main Street, like right down the main stretch, you know, going down, you pass 600 on the right, keep going past other historic buildings, the historic Opera Block, which is about to be something big. And then up here on the left is Brew Fountain, and then right next to it is The Syndicate.

A**Adam Rammel** 27:12

Yeah, the, uh, the positive thing about the location too was that it was— it's in our opportunity zone, which Jason, if you guys haven't went down on that in some of your podcasts, that could be a whole session in itself.

J**Jason Duff** 27:23

Yeah, we talked a little bit about that with Brittany. Yeah, talking about Bellevue.

A**Adam Rammel** 27:27

So some great advantages, uh, to being able to utilize an OZ. But, uh, Syndicate, we had to pivot because of COVID No one was having events. No one was asking us at that point to cater their graduation party or wedding because everything was postponed. August of 2020 is when we opened.

J**Jason Duff** 27:43

August of 2020.

A**Adam Rammel** 27:45

It was the heart, the peak of the pandemic. And then our first summer out, we thought we were good. And then was it Omicron or whatever? I don't even want to think about that anymore, but one of those waves hit. So now, as of this podcast, we're going into the summer of 2022 and we couldn't be more excited. We think we learned a lot the last couple of years. We've got live music, great dinner Thursday, Friday, Saturday, brunch. It's probably what we're most known for. Believe it or not, there was not a brunch spot in Logan County.

J**Jason Duff** 28:16

Um, not just Bellefontaine, Logan County. Yeah.

A**Adam Rammel** 28:18

Maybe even Hardin County.

J**Jason Duff** 28:20

Uh, I think the kind of brunch, when you think about this, we're talking about chicken and waffles, um, sweet potato waffles. We're talking about, um, eggs Benedict, mimosa flights. Like we have McDonald's. Yeah. We have, you know, Waffle House, Bob Evans, Bob Evans. But like, I think the kind of brunch that a lot of people are exposed to in the bigger cities and, and is a major appeal. It didn't exist.

A**Adam Rammel** 28:46

Yeah, yeah. So we're excited that— and, and really, we've made some key hires. You're only as good as your people. Your people take care of your customers. We've got a great team. And actually, it's funny, we're reminiscing now because just, you know, just this week we had a full team meeting kind of kicking off to solve that. And I wanted to— you know, you don't take the time a lot of times, or I don't, and I'm seeing how important it is to tell that origin story or where you came from because your team members want to, want to be part of that journey and culture and, and want to let them know that there's lots of opportunity here. You don't have to just be a server if that's what you're hired to do or, or whatever. There is, there's a lot of paths. And I think that's the other thing that's cool about Small Nation, the ecosystem. I've connected some of my servers and, or bartenders with other opportunities within our network, even if they're not directly working for me, and that's pretty darn cool.

J**Jason Duff** 29:37

And powerful. And then the same thing is how many other towns that we're connected with throughout Ohio. And even as we're doing more national events, like building these really deep, meaningful friendships and relationships with people that are just like us in other parts of the state or other, other places around the country. And it, it is kind of the economy. If you can do something that benefits them, how can you, you know, make their life better? How can you introduce them to a new tool, a new resource, a relationship. Like, I think in business, if even we go back to the days of us, you know, being a part of the Lima Young Professionals, it was about how we can help other people in the group. And I think those same, those same principles, um, are, you know, tried, tested, and true in business and in life. Wow. Yeah, you kind of brushed over it, but you, you launched in COVID. I know, like, no one wants to think about— can we pause on that real quick? So just to share when that happened, this was the kind of innovation and, you know, uh, leadership and, and tough decisions that were being made. We, we immediately moved into our, our office here in the basement, and that's when Zoom was kind of first just introduced. And we started—

A**Adam Rammel** 30:50

wish I would have bought the stock.

J**Jason Duff** 30:52

Oh boy, we all do. But like, you know, we started, uh, trying to communicate with our tenants, with our businesses, with our employees as new government mandates were, were coming down. How we can survive and respond. And I think we're all still processing those days, but, you know, here's some of the positives and things that came out of that is, you know, we were being interviewed on CNBC and having live segments out of Bellefontaine, Ohio, where we were sharing when the president and the administration were announcing that the EIDL money was to show up. In your account 5 days later. And, you know, that those 5 days went by, 2 weeks went by. You know, it was almost—

A**Adam Rammel** 31:39

remember when we broke the news to them about the, uh, data breach?

J**Jason Duff** 31:43

So it literally— no, we—

A**Adam Rammel** 31:46

with the Wall Street Journal.

J**Jason Duff** 31:47

So that was the other thing. I mean, the story— we had the AP, we had, uh, the AP, we had— we're doing live segments with CNBC, and then we had a really interested reporter with the Wall Street Journal that was just kind of keeping tabs as we're going through PPP loans, as we were trying to figure out the EIDL, and then just the nature of Ohio was somewhat the first state to really start to shut down. And, you know, at the time, the governor was really focused on as he was getting, you know, health mandates and getting orders, he was being very proactive compared to the rest of the country. So the media was very much focused, well, how is that impacting your business? And at the time, it was devastating., and we kept getting all these promises and none of the promises were coming through. So the only thing that Adam and I and the rest of the team knew is like, we need to be sharing what's happening here on the ground.

A**Adam Rammel** 32:39

This was the war room.

J**Jason Duff** 32:41

I mean, the room that we're in now, and just so you know, we shoot our podcast from our small nation bunker. So when and if there is a crisis, we know that if the nuclear bomb were ever to hit, We and the cockroaches are going to survive. The cockroaches.

A**Adam Rammel** 32:57

This is going to start looking better soon, right, Ethan?

J**Jason Duff** 32:59

Yeah, I was going to touch on that. I mean, if, if you're watching on YouTube at all, you'll notice that we removed this. This was a, a hidden whiteboard, right? And we moved it over to this wall now. But we're going to be kind of giving this space a facelift. And if you haven't checked it out on, on YouTube, we're going to be posting these podcasts there as well. You can get, you know, more familiar with our guest and, uh, see, uh, Adam adjusting his chair and all that.

A**Adam Rammel** 33:24

There you go. The other thing on COVID real quick though, uh, that I'd like to share with you, Ethan, is we were tapped to be on DeWine's restart committee for restaurants. I think that's important too. Um, wow. So those calls consisted of how do we social distance, how is this a percentage, the— I mean, so I was part of committees that created those rules and regulations for restaurants across the entire state.

J**Jason Duff** 33:51

Who made up these committees? Was it all just local people?

A**Adam Rammel** 33:54

Like, it was at the state level that they did. Then they would kind of handpick different people from different size businesses, because obviously if you own a huge Buffalo Wild Wings, that's different than you with your small footprint at Brew Fountain. And the big victory from the state at the time was it wasn't based on occupancy, because most states were, you know, 50%, 75%. This was just based on 6-foot. So if you have— and all of our spaces are unique and different, So your 6-foot distancing is different than ours. So that was a big victory for that committee to get that done. And DeWine actually stopped by. Governor stopped by last week to actually congratulate or thank us for being on that committee.

J**Jason Duff** 34:35

Is that what it was for? Yeah.

A**Adam Rammel** 34:36

I mean, one of the reasons.

J**Jason Duff** 34:37

One of the reasons. We were really thankful. You know, we hosted the Lieutenant Governor for a visit probably about 6 months ago. Uh, he threw out the first ceremonial axe at Axe Ventura, which is a new axe throwing lounge here in town. And no, I, the, the Governor DeWine's administration, whether it's, uh, Director Mihalik, uh, that's at the Ohio Department of Development, I mean, I could name so many others that have taken a deep interest in wanting to see how, you know, the model that we've deployed here, how it can help other towns around the country. But it was a big deal when the governor said, hey, I want to do lunch with you guys, and, and he took time to drive up and He, you know, met with the staff, and I think that's the thing that I was so impressed with is that he really took time to get to know them and studied the menu and, you know, ordered the going—

A**Adam Rammel** 35:27

going cold turkey.

J**Jason Duff** 35:29

Cold turkey. And he was kind enough to send us a follow-up letter just saying he's excited to come back to try the fried bologna.

A**Adam Rammel** 35:36

So yeah, very cool. But just to kind of put a bow on that, Ethan. I will be serving also then on the, on the Ohio Restaurant Association Board of Directors starting in June. So super excited to connect with— wow — a lot of my mentors and leaders in the industry.

J**Jason Duff** 35:52

Did that come from that opportunity because you sat on that?

A**Adam Rammel** 35:55

Well, so during COVID again, in the war room, I mean, I, I can't thank our, our accountants, our advisors, the Ohio Restaurant Association. Just, I was in communication with them daily. I wanted to know what was going on.

J**Jason Duff** 36:09

And then, and then in turn, Small Business Entrepreneurship Council, you know, that's another group in DC.

A**Adam Rammel** 36:13

And then, and then in turn, we would have, um, Zoom meetings with our other restauranteers where we could share that information with people, you know, inside of our network.

J**Jason Duff** 36:24

Every day it really was just, we have to do our best. And, and the information was changing daily. And so we really depended on— and, and now I think that was the other thing about people look to us.

A**Adam Rammel** 36:36

Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 36:36

Um, which any leader, like, you appreciate the big shoulders that they have because sometimes we didn't have the answers. We, we had to make the best decisions with the information we had at the time. Yep. Well, and to share that with everybody else, uh, real quick before we move on, tell me about Captain Krakens.

A**Adam Rammel** 36:54

Oh yeah, I was— I had that thought as you guys were talking about COVID and I thought we were going there. But yeah, so, uh, The Syndicate, as we were pivoting— which I hate using that word too because it got way overused the last couple of years— but we had the facility, of course, we had the staff um, but we did not think that the restaurant would stand on its own on a Monday or Tuesday or Wednesday at, you know, upscale casual, whatever you want to call it, a little higher price point. Um, and so seafood was lacking in town. We hear that everyone wants, uh, Long John Silver's or a Captain D's, and so we thought, why not?

J**Jason Duff** 37:29

Is that seafood?

A**Adam Rammel** 37:31

Something like that. We had real seafood, and I think we were a little ahead of our time. But we tried it. So we came up with a brand called Captain Krakens, which— love it.

J**Jason Duff** 37:42

Brian launching in the Syndicate. Yes, as a pivot.

A**Adam Rammel** 37:45

You stay with me, stay with me. Yeah, so this is, you know, as everyone's like, wait, the Syndicate is an event center? Is it open? Wait, now Captain Krakens? So there was a little of that, but yeah, we tried. Brian Wall, my partner Brian, uh, came up with the name. Love the name. Got that, snagged the domain, came up with the logo. And, uh, did some testing. So we would turn on online ordering. So this was available via DoorDash or online ordering only, which is a big deal in a small town, by the way. DoorDash is here, Uber Eats is next. We're getting there. Now the bad thing is they, they want 15%, so yeah, but people pay for it. People will pay for convenience. And so we saw quite a bit of orders. We had some good days there, but I think that the confusion and just still the term ghost kitchen and people just not knowing where it's at or can physically see it was kind of a hurdle or a barrier for people to get over here in this small town. There are facilities like cloud kitchens and others in some of these larger markets where, say, Ethan, you're traveling to Chicago and you're staying at a hotel and you order Wendy's on DoorDash. It's probably not coming from a physical Wendy's store. It's probably coming from a warehouse where Uh, whoever is the, the mother brand, um, of Wendy's is probably putting out 5 menus. So if you would have ordered Baskin-Robbins or whatever, that's probably coming out of that same kitchen, and it's just to-go all day long. No front-of-house workers, you know.

J**Jason Duff** 39:12

Wow.

A**Adam Rammel** 39:12

You've got no storefront.

J**Jason Duff** 39:13

Completely different than traditional model.

A**Adam Rammel** 39:15

Exactly. Yeah. So there are some bright spots that came out of COVID We got online ordering up and running ASAP, was on my board for a while. We had no choice but to get it up and going, partnering with DoorDash. Um, takeout, curbside, text messaging, all of that technology was a big, you know, a big deal during COVID for sure.

J**Jason Duff** 39:35

And I assume coming out of COVID you're just seeing that like stay consistent, people are still using those tools. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. Wow, that's very cool. So you, you mentioned some of the things briefly, but what are some of the cool things coming up for Brew Fountain, The Syndicate? You touched on the concert series in the summer.

A**Adam Rammel** 39:51

Yep. So last year we ran We ran April to September, which we learned was a little— because it's Ohio, so you've got, yeah, crappy weather and early on the front of that and at the end of that. So we're gonna just go Memorial Day to Labor Day, uh, like, like a lot of things go at Indian Lake or other summer events. Change the time to 7 to 10, uh, we were 9 to 12, so adjusting that, making it more approachable during dinner. But, um, you know, excited for, for that, uh, live music series is what we're calling it, kicking off here Memorial Day. Brew Fountain just opened a satellite location at at the golf course. So Liberty Hills Golf Club, uh, just outside of Bellefontaine, uh, great local family. They also own Mill Creek outside of Ostrander. And, um, they, uh, they, they just didn't love the restaurant business, they love the golf business. And so I've had my eye on it for a couple of years, and then the syndicate came and COVID came. And so I revisited it, you know, just this past winter and told my team, hey, let's do this thing. And in 8 weeks we had this thing really opening. And I had that— I think the The golfers, the community are excited. Liberty Hills is really excited. It's adding energy out there that they haven't had in a while. Got some of our staple menu items from Brew Fountain, like the Reuben and other things there. They had 3 beautiful pizza ovens that we're utilizing out there. So, you know, a pitcher of beer and a pizza after a round, it don't get much better than that. Yeah. So we're excited. And team member Rachelle stepped up and said, hey, I'm looking for more. You know, I'm just bartending, sir. I, I'd like to do more. And so, you know, everything happens for a reason, they say, but it timed out perfectly where she could kind of take the lead on that project, and she's hit it out of the park. I've been so impressed by her. So we're going to continue to, you know, to, to grow and just keep our head down and figure out what's next.

J**Jason Duff** 41:40

That's super exciting. Wow. You know, one thing that Adam mentioned is that we were hoping to, to double down on events at The Syndicate. And when you build a project and you see how, you know, people interact with it, and you also see what business really grows, um, it's not that we don't want to continue to do events at the Syndicate, but we found that there are larger events and there are more unique kinds of things that guests need that we really needed to find a different space to expand and grow into with that. Um, and so I had driven by, just like Adam identified, you know, thinking about ideas in his head about the, the Liberty Hills and, and helping grow the food and beverage out there, I would always drive by our Elks Club on Main Street in Bellefontaine, and it has been vacant since 2013. Unfortunately, what's happening in a lot of towns around the country is their fraternal clubs and organizations are consolidating and getting smaller, which means that sometimes financially it doesn't make sense for those clubs to continue. That doesn't mean there still isn't strong demand for people to convene and the, the need for meeting space and places to celebrate weddings, parties, events. And so, um, Adam and I kind of talked about it and said, why don't we partner up on this? You've got this incredible team working at The Syndicate offering great food and beverage. Um, we could purchase a liquor license and then I'll work using the gifts and things that I have with design and understanding the real estate, understanding how to, you know, bring this property online. And so we chartered out together to create a new venue in downtown Bellefontaine called the Vivian. What's great about the property is this mid-century modern building that has a lot of history. If you speak to folks in the community, there probably isn't anyone that hasn't been to the Elks or that venue space for something. It could be that they were involved in Key Club in high school and would attend kwana meetings there, or it could be that their parents or grandparents celebrated their wedding or anniversary. And so we have worked and chartered out with our architects and, you know, found the story of the founder of the Elks. His name was Charles Vivian, and, you know, he was part of a group of 3 other men that immigrated from England to New York City being involved in the theater scene. And one out of the four members of the group passed away, and the other three stepped up and created this nonprofit group that became the Elks. And we're paying homage to the founder by calling the, the project the Vivian. And it is going to be a destination for weddings. Of course, we'll have other parties, meetings, and events too, but really the kind of things that, that brides and grooms are really looking for for having that great bridal suite, that great groom's area, having an awesome U-shaped bar, state-of-the-art catering kitchen, and they're just really comfortable, inviting amenities. You know, a patio in front, really nice large dining room and lounge area, and then, you know, really being right in the heart of downtown Bellefontaine, so in walking distance to all the other places that we mentioned. So we, we are in that design phase. We're in the process of bidding that out, but the plan is to see that property come online in the next year. And I think it's going to be an awesome collaboration and something that we're really excited about.

A**Adam Rammel** 45:10

We've been getting some leads, so that's positive.

J**Jason Duff** 45:12

That's great. And you guys are already in that space and hearing the need for it. So like, I, I don't know, I'm excited for what it could be, and I, I do see the need here in the downtown. But something I want to just, you know, think is— I think is really cool as we're going through these stories, and I appreciate you guys sharing today and just giving me, the context, and the listeners, you know, you're, you're taking this revitalization process one project at a time, you know. And that's what it has been for you guys. And open a pizzeria, open a brewery, expand that into the Syndicate, you know. And now we're talking wedding event center. And just time, time after time, we're just seeing like, you know, the feedback from that and what it's doing to the downtown. So I'm super excited. And, and really, for the listeners or anyone following, I encourage you to stick with it and just like hear these stories out and, and understand that like it is just one project at a time, you know, bites, you know, little pieces at a time that make the big change. So, but yeah, thank you again for you guys' time today and, uh, super, super excited to hear more stories as we continue on. I know we got some cool things coming up, so that's not part of just the outro, but it's true. But speaking of the outro, here we go. Ready? All right, well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 46:16

thank you everyone for tuning in and checking out the Friday Small Talk podcast with Jason Duff. And you can find us anywhere that you listen to your podcasts. Including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even YouTube. I hope you were able to pull some value from that conversation. We hope to see you in the next one. And if you haven't subscribed already and are looking for more of this kind of content, be sure to check out Friday Small Talk newsletter that goes out every week. Stay tuned to Small Nation on social media and keep up with everything that is happening here. As I said before, there are lots of exciting projects in the works. And until next time, this is Small Talk with Jason Duff signing off. Thanks, guys.

A**Adam Rammel** 46:48

Good job.