

Episode 19

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SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Abe Jacob, Ethan DeLeon

A

Abe Jacob 00:00

A lot of what we do, depending on which client we have, which is roughly about 20 clients, we analyze what issues are hurdles for them and impeding their ability to do business, and we are the connector between them and our state leaders.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:19

Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff.

A

Abe Jacob 00:29

Joining us today, we have Senior Vice President at Counter and Associates, Abe Jacob.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:33

We want to welcome you to the Small Nation podcast, where we 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. All right. Thank you. Yeah. Hey, welcome to the podcast.

A

Abe Jacob 00:51

Thank you for having me.

J

Jason Duff 00:52

Well, it's great to see you. I was excited to see on our calendar because we share commonplace that we went to school together at Ohio Northern University in Ada, Ohio, the big city of Ada. Woo-hoo. And, uh, you know, a little about your background. You grew up in a small town, right? Yes. Tell us about that.

A

Abe Jacob 01:09

So I was born and raised in Defiance, Ohio, which is in the northwest corner of Ohio. Uh, how we always characterized it was it's an hour west of Toledo. Uh, you know, it's the county seat. And, you know, although I was raised in town, uh, the majority of my family was all in the rural parts and, You know, having been raised in a small town, you really see the roots. You see what the sense of community is. And when we finally crossed paths and understanding what the goal of Small Nation was, objectives, and how much outreach you had already done, I could connect to it. I mean, we saw something in Ohio Northern, and I see so much potential in my hometown. And to see the parallels, I was— it was so great that we, uh, started a friendship and really kind of see where Small Nation has gone to and see how small towns like to Defiance can truly benefit.

J

Jason Duff 02:00

Well, I appreciate that. Um, it's what I love about visiting towns like Defiance is they're known for something. And I— our team recently went there about a year and a half ago, and you walk the streets and beautiful brick-lined buildings. Um, there's some great coffee shops, there's some really nice outdoor park areas, and the community is working to revitalize that. Correct. You know, some things that were done 20 years ago that they're working to refresh and reboot. But one of the best things, we had a lunch in this beautiful second floor space that's a rentable venue, but they brought a very special local dessert to try. Tell us about that, Abe.

A

Abe Jacob 02:38

I mean, I'm going to guess it was Buds. It was. I see right there. You know, Buds is exactly what you'd see. I'm serious. In a TV show, in a movie with family roots where you could literally walk through and you're going to see the mayor, you're going to see your city council members, you see the head of the foundation and it's that one-on-one cup of coffee, and I don't care who you are, whether you're a governor all the way down to the principal of a school, you're going to go in and have that one-on-one conversation and say, did you see this was coming up? Did you see who was coming to town? Let's get down to business and try to figure this out, and frankly, over a cup of coffee, more importantly, their phenomenal pie.

J

Jason Duff 03:20

Homemade pie. Where do you go— I know. Now, I mean, you could be in some of the nicest restaurants in the big cities, and you look on their menu, there is not homemade pie. You've got to go to Defiance, Ohio to Bud's to order great— I think it's open breakfast through dinner, maybe like it's— they've got crazy hours, but they're known for their homemade pies. And the chamber and the leaders from Defiance were so gracious of curating a lunch for us. And I'll tell you, it was amazing.

A**Abe Jacob** 03:49

I'll be honest, it was even— I didn't even fully get the full appreciation for the pies until I was much older because my dad would take me Saturday mornings to Bud's for breakfast before we would start our workday is how we would do it where, you know, we'd take the trash out, clean the bathrooms at the office and stuff like that, but beforehand we would always go to Bud's for breakfast, and so I had the full experience of seeing neighbors, seeing community members already there. It wasn't until much later, oh, they have pies because that, you know, despite as much as I want to, I wasn't having pie for breakfast, you know, so no, it's an institution in Defiance. And they're proud of it.

J**Jason Duff** 04:25

That's awesome. I feel like it's become one of your favorite parts of your job. Well, every town you go to has to be known for something. Yeah. And I— that, that, that is something unique that is to Defiance, Ohio. Awesome. So Abe, uh, share with us, what is the work that you do?

A**Abe Jacob** 04:40

So as you mentioned, I, I belong to the Kellner Associates government relations firm. I've been there for 3 and a half years, and a lot of what we do is government relations. And another way to phrase that is we are lobbyists. We specifically lobby at the state level to our state leaders. Now, on the local level, you're gonna have city council, the mayor, county commissioners, trustees even. As you work your way up to state government, you're going to have your state representative, who is the, a member of the Ohio House. You're going to have your state senator, which is a member of the Ohio Senate, both of which are in Columbus, not DC. Those are US, uh, members. You also have your governor as well as a few statewide officials. And a lot of what we do, depending on which client we have, which is roughly about 20 clients, We analyze what issues are hurdles for them and impeding their ability to do business, and we are the connector between them and our state leaders. The way I would sometimes characterize it is that we are, in a way, you know, a therapist for the state government and our clients, because, you know, just like the pesky stepcousin, you know, they're going to be at They're going to be at every family reunion. They're going to be at every holiday. And what's important to understand is it's your decision to decide how you have a relationship with them. What that means is it going to— Boundaries.

J**Jason Duff** 06:03

Boundaries.

A**Abe Jacob** 06:03

That's the truth of the matter is.

J**Jason Duff** 06:05

The magic word.

A

Abe Jacob 06:06

Exactly. And our clients have decided, I'm going to have a relationship with our government. Now, they might decide it's a limited relationship and they want to make sure that the government stays out of the way as much as possible. But that's our responsibility to make sure that that relationship is established and that there's an open line of communication, uh, through and through.

J

Jason Duff 06:26

That's awesome. I appreciate you breaking it down for us because I know I can relate with that statement of the cousin and things like that.

A

Abe Jacob 06:34

Um, so how does, how does one get into that line of work?

J

Jason Duff 06:37

Like, what's your story? How did you get there?

A

Abe Jacob 06:39

Uh, good question. And I, I think everybody kind of has their own story. Uh, mine goes back to my roots of Defiance. You know, I, I was very privileged to have a dad that, you know, made introductions, uh, when he would be around all his friends, his colleagues, and people he met. And I will never forget, it was a Defiance County, or at least Northwest Ohio Ducks Unlimited banquet, if they still have those.

J

Jason Duff 07:03

So I remember that growing up. Have you ever been to a Ducks Unlimited banquet, Ethan? No, you're missing out. So you, you go, and that's a lot of folks that focus on the preservation of, of ducks. Yes. And, and duck hunting. And so In the collection in our home, it was a very special prize if you won the raffle or you bid at the auction to get a framed Ducks Unlimited photo. So I remember in the basement of our house, we had like the 1996 Ducks Unlimited framed, framed like, like poster for that. Yeah. Did you guys have that growing up?

A

Abe Jacob 07:39

Not that number, but we have prints. Well, there's, there's, it's 50/50. You got several things you're going to win.

J

Jason Duff 07:45

It's such a quintessential small town thing. Yes. Is attending a Ducks Unlimited banquet.

A

Abe Jacob 07:49

And Pheasants Forever, we covered both.

J**Jason Duff** 07:51

Oh yeah, you fancy town.

A**Abe Jacob** 07:53

Yeah, I was gonna say, we, uh, I, I have been known to hunt a pheasant or two in my time, but, uh, just like, that's a community event, and like any good elected official, there's going to be a lot of folks that come that, you know, want to get to know their constituents, want to earn your vote, so to speak. And at that time, we had our state senator or state rep at the time, and, um, my dad made an introduction and me being known as the chatterbox in the family, which has still not stopped today.

J**Jason Duff** 08:21

Really?

A**Abe Jacob** 08:22

I— yeah, I know, right? Uh, I made sure that, uh, I met them. And just through the offer, I was offered a job shadowing opportunity when I was a senior in high school. Went down and shadowed my state representative, and we stayed in touch. Uh, he ran for the state senate, he won. And, uh, my junior year of college at Ohio Northern, I went down and interned for him, and I remember him saying that the 2010 election's coming up, and I think you should probably keep your ear to the ground to see if opportunities — he knew I had no desire to go to D.C. and do anything federal— and see what you can do and see where it goes from there. And frankly, that's exactly what I did. I got on to then-candidate Mike DeWine for Attorney General, and with his campaign, and they've been very good to me. He went on to win. I joined his team in the Attorney General's office. I missed my roots at the State House, and so I left his office about a year in and went to the Ohio House, where I was a legislative aide for almost 7 years. And that's, that's kind of rare. Usually it's about, you know, 2 to 3 years that someone's a staffer, but I was there for 7 because 4 of those were working for my home district. I was very proud of that. I could sense that when people would call and I would let them know, I'm from your area, I actually know specifically where you're talking because that's where my roots are. A lot of the time it would calm them down because sometimes their first phone call to their elected official, they're nervous.

J**Jason Duff** 09:52

They're angry.

A**Abe Jacob** 09:52

They're angry, they're frustrated with their government that they're doing something, and to have almost the feel of a neighbor on the other line to explain, okay, this is what's going on, maybe I can help with you. And kind of see where it goes from there. And, uh, after I was close to hitting my 7-year mark, uh, I had an opportunity, uh, through one of the— just a, uh, uh, then a colleague, I guess, would be in the lobbying realm, said, look, I have an opening in my firm. It's been great to work with you. Uh, would you even consider joining the firm and leaving the house? And the rest is history. I— it was just an offer I couldn't refuse.

J**Jason Duff** 10:27

Yeah. And I know when we were talking about this, just preparing for this podcast and things, you started to share with me that the narrative around lobbyists can sometimes be a negative one. And I was kind of oblivious to this fact. But I mean, I guess it makes sense the more you think about it. But can you share maybe what that narrative is and maybe why it exists?

A**Abe Jacob** 10:48

Oh, sure. You know, I think the narrative even still in the stigma is still attached just from the fact that, you know, TV and movies still depict lobbyists in a certain way. And I would even argue in the commercials we see come election time where us in the lobbying community call it nutty season because anything can be said.

J**Jason Duff** 11:08

You're typically like in the black suits, like hiding behind the candidate.

A**Abe Jacob** 11:11

Yes. With cash just fanning.

J**Jason Duff** 11:12

Whispering in their ears.

A**Abe Jacob** 11:13

Yes. Fanning cash with our face.

J**Jason Duff** 11:16

Do you have like a vault of cash somewhere?

A**Abe Jacob** 11:18

That would be lovely. Oh, darn. But, you know, so much has changed, at least in Ohio, when it regards to ethics. And, you know, back in— there's been times in many years past where there were no limits on the types of gifts, so to speak, and that could mean dinners, that could be drinks, that could be legitimately giving someone a watch or something along that realm, hosting parties, hosting dinners at these big lavish establishments. Now there is laws in Ohio to where if you hurt or hit a certain threshold, that has to be reported. On top of that, I as a lobbyist have to report to the Ethics Commission who am I lobbying on behalf of, and which bills am I lobbying on, and is that to the legislature, is that to the administration, which would be the governor's office. I have to report that. That is all public record. So while we can continue to, I guess, give gifts, it's going to be out there for everyone to see, and that has definitely—

J**Jason Duff** 12:24

And that's a good thing, don't you think?

A

Abe Jacob 12:25

Yes. Oh yeah, public transparency. If these people are going to be on the taxpayer's dime to pay their salaries, that thing, those things should definitely be said and shown. And we have no problem reporting because we understand we're there to do business. We're not there to rub elbows.

J

Jason Duff 12:42

And Abe, can you provide some perspective? How many lobbyists are there in the state of Ohio?

A

Abe Jacob 12:47

Oh, I wish I knew. I knew the answer to that.

J

Jason Duff 12:49

Would you say not tens, but probably hundreds, right?

A

Abe Jacob 12:53

Yeah, I think that's a good— ballpark, mainly because, uh, there's the definition of what we call in-house. So for example, if Jason were to hire an in-house lobbyist, they would have an office here at Small Nation and they specifically only work on Small Nation issues. However, I am a contract lobbyist and there's the other side of that, which is we would retain Small Nation as a client and they would be one of several others that we would work on their issues, but, um, we would not become subject matter experts because due to the fact we have several other clients that were covered, but we would still be able to do work for them.

J

Jason Duff 13:26

What are some of those main industries that might have an in-house lobbyist? Like, or I mean, I guess you get hired out by, uh, you know, a number of different clients, but like, are there any like common ones? Um, I know I'm saying this because when I worked with the, an electric company, um, utilities, I feel like is a common one. Oh yeah.

A

Abe Jacob 13:43

Have a lobbyist because it's important, right?

J

Jason Duff 13:45

You think about, you know, who's, how's electricity getting into your house? Who's overwatching that? Um, of course there's gonna be a government piece to that. So are there any like other like common industries, I guess, that you would say that's, you know, fair or common with lobbying?

A**Abe Jacob** 14:01

Yeah, I would go into the bucket of associations. Um, you're right on the utilities. I know I've worked for the House Vice Chair of Public Utilities back in the day, and I, I've met a lot of folks in that industry who represent folks like AEP, Columbia Gas. And, um, because utilities can get very complicated, there's so many acronyms and yeah understanding the rates, and it gets very technical. And they are there really to — they understand the issues, and they— and because they're subject matter experts working for in-house, they have all the information to share. Now, I would say the big associations, for example, the Ohio Chamber of Commerce, uh, National Federation of Independent Businesses, the Ohio Business Roundtable, they all have their own folks that they in-house that are lobbyists that speak on behalf of that. Restaurant Association is another big one.

J**Jason Duff** 14:49

And, you know, and this is how I found out about it, because truthfully, I didn't understand lobbyists or the importance of being at the table as laws are being voted on and changed until I learned about my local Chamber of Commerce. And we've had a lot of local chamber presidents and economic development professionals on the podcast. And you see how important that role is of them being the eyes and ears of what's happening in the community. Yeah, they also support and represent the small business interest. And I think that's where, you know, when you think about the things that you care about the most, it could be local food initiatives, it could be seeing that your community has local electric in terms of the co-ops. It really is getting involved in making sure that you have a voice at the table. And I think it's finding those groups on all sides of the political spectrum that you want to get involved with to help craft, design, and change policy, or see a policy not change. Because sometimes there— sometimes that's another thing that so many laws and rules are changing that may be not good for your interest as well too. And I think it's just opening up your eyes to the spectrum of understanding. Yes, we may be frustrated with our political system. I don't think there is anyone that doesn't agree it has its problems, but don't sit idle and not get involved and make sure your voice is heard. With your vote and also how you're connected to certain groups that are supporting the things that you care about the most. Anything you want to add to that?

A**Abe Jacob** 16:18

I— that's a perfect explanation. And one thing I'd like to add to folks, because not every state is like this — Ohio happens to be what we refer to as a term-limited state— is actually in the Ohio Constitution that the voters passed to where our state legislators as well as our state elected officials like governor can only serve a certain amount of years. Each one is 8 years for each one of their positions. So therefore, if they're only there for 8 years, that means a new batch comes in of legislators or elected officials. And, you know, a lot of the times that gives more powers to those, um, in the field of government relations because they, they're the ones that have been there the whole time.

J**Jason Duff** 16:58

Can we pick on them for a second?

A**Abe Jacob** 17:00

Go ahead.

J**Jason Duff** 17:00

So You know, the challenge with our system is that we have new and different types of elected officials that get voted in. Some of them have different backgrounds and skill sets. And a lot of these, you can't expect someone to know everything about every topic. And oftentimes they're busy out on the campaign trail raising money, getting votes, kissing babies, all the things that they have to do as a politician. How do we get them up to speed on all of the knowledge and the, the background and the various sides and opinions to be able to vote intelligently? And I think this is where I started to really under— really understand and feel how important people like Abe and other lobbyists can be is they're doing the heavy lifting, the research, the knowledge. Now, are they probably going to paint the picture for their interest? Yes. But those legislators need— they don't have the independent research teams to get that data. Tell me more about that.

A**Abe Jacob** 18:02

Like, well, they actually do to a certain extent in the state of Ohio. We call them the Legislative Service Commission. Right. So when amendments and bills are drafted, it goes to Legislative Service Commission to draft those. However, what we have also is a whole different section, which is referred to as the research department. Where legislators, and only legislators, by the way, can request this. No other entity can request this, where they ask what are the latest stats or what is the history of this certain tax? When was it put into law and how has it affected our tax code? I mean, they have that research, but to Jason's point, they might have the black and white points, but until that legislator comes out, that elected official comes out, or their staff come out and see the real day-to-day to see how these policies are really impact— you can't put that in a chart. You have to see it face-to-face to really understand the impact of that public policy, and it's why we always use the term also unintended consequences, trying to write public policy to avoid unintended consequences, and sometimes when you don't have legislators that have been there more than that 8 years, they don't have that memory of why that was put into law to begin with.

J**Jason Duff** 19:15

So how do you do that? Like, if client has something that you, you know, they want you to push, you know, how do you educate and, and paint that picture for them?

A**Abe Jacob** 19:25

You're asking to— how do we paint the picture to the client?

J**Jason Duff** 19:28

Well, no, for like the client perspective to the legislature.

A**Abe Jacob** 19:31

Good question. So the question first starts is, is this a district-specific issue? So are you folks having issues here in your county, in Belfound specifically, or is this a statewide issue? That's the first question. Because they have two different answers. If it's district-specific, we go straight to your state senator, state rep, because they're the ones that have the relevance, and frankly, it's out of respect. You would never want to talk to a legislator outside of the district about a district issue in general. If it's a statewide impact, we try to narrow down who are the leaders in the legislature that tend to have interest, have expertise in that area, maybe a chair, maybe in leadership, and we try to connect with them because there will be not so much a need to bring them up to speed from the start because they likely will already know what we're talking about. So if it's a small business issue and it's affecting the entire state, we'll go to some of the legislators that are all smart business owners themselves. They already know what— probably what we're talking about, whether it's workers' comp, whether it's insurance, or whether it's just a workforce issue, which frankly is a very relevant issue today.

J**Jason Duff** 20:38

And you kind of know that because many of those public officials or politicians kind of self-promote. They, they care about this interest, whether that's politically or whether they maybe serve on different committees for the House or the Senate. You, you kind of have a deck of knowing who those people are, and it kind of goes back to how important relationships are, right?

A**Abe Jacob** 21:02

Bingo.

J**Jason Duff** 21:02

Bingo.

A**Abe Jacob** 21:02

And I would argue that, you know, it's— social media has while it might have some of its negative impacts, a lot of it is how I'm even learning, uh, how I'm going to work with a legislator I've never met before, is understanding what their passions are, understanding, you know, their family dynamic and where they come from. And social media helps us tell that picture. I'll give it to you guys, a podcast, you know, is giving them chance to give their view of who I am, where I come from, and it goes beyond commercials and, you know, lit pieces that they drop in your mailbox. That can only give us so much information, but I would argue that today's social media gives us a whole different avenue that we have not had before. And, you know, gives maybe folks like me a little bit leg up to understand, hey, this person is very proud of the orchards and the winery they have in their district. Let's make sure that we appreciate that and we compliment that when they come in to meet with them. Stuff like that, just that extra touch that says we took the time to figure out who you are and what makes you passionate about being a leader.

J**Jason Duff** 22:01

And, you know, I'll share that When COVID hit a few years ago, that was really where Abe and I started speaking a lot more frequently because we needed to really get the state behind understanding issues that were happening with small businesses. And particularly a lot of the work that we do at Small Nation is seeing how independent restaurants can be successful in small towns. And when the, the, the governor, you know, and the health director issued orders those orders had unintended consequences, or intended consequences depending on what side of the argument you sit on, to really damage business. And so where we were communicating with him is to make sure that they were aware of, and the Ohio Restaurant Association and others, there are ways that we can keep people safe, but there's also ways that we can keep these businesses strong and open. And I think as you think through your community your industry, your stakeholders. It's what are those hot button issues, who are the associations, the lobbyists, the legislators that you need to make sure they understand that issue and it's on their radar.

A**Abe Jacob** 23:13

Couldn't agree more, and that's where it starts. I would go one step further and, you know, kind of put a plug to civics, so to speak, of remembering that, you know, we do have elections, uh, you know, whether they're local, state, or federal, And to make sure we vote in not just the presidential years, because the truth of the matter is, you know, it's, it's our local officials, like our mayors and our city council and commissioners that are, have a direct line to those leaders. Those that, if you're not sure how to get in touch with that person locally, you would, they would probably have the same access or a little bit quicker. I would also say that I have seen this time and time again. That's usually where our state leaders come from, you know, is our local elected leaders, whether they're involved in the chamber, they're involved in the foundation, or they're already in public office at the local level, maybe in a council spot. Those folks tend to be the first ones to be asked to step up to consider running for the state house. So I would argue, get out now, get to know your leaders now, because who knows where they might end up. Especially again, term limits. When those 8 years are up, yeah, they're gonna be looking for a new batch of leaders. And is it someone that could be your neighbor and that you could really be helpful to them to make sure that you're that voice for that, your industry, to them as they're making decisions at the state house?

J**Jason Duff** 24:24

Question for you. How do you stay relevant? How do you keep up with everything that's happening without being overwhelmed by it?

A**Abe Jacob** 24:32

Or how do we not overwhelm them? I think there's also that balance too.

J**Jason Duff** 24:36

It's kind of— would you say your personality though is someone you consume a lot of information? You have to. And would you say extrovert or introvert, combination of both? How do you describe yourself?

A**Abe Jacob** 24:46

Oh, for me, I definitely extrovert. I'll give you a top 100 list of those who would probably check off on that. Uh, the truth of the matter is You have to understand and appreciate how important relationship building is, and I couldn't say this more direct, and it has to be authentic with me. I've, you know, and I— because if it's not authentic, you fall into the stigma of glad-handing and not being sincere when you're talking to the legislator. You know, are you going to be best friends the rest of your life? Absolutely not. But I will tell you this. There are folks that are no longer in office that I did not work for, but I still keep in contact with thanks to social media, thanks to just texting them of when I hear, you know, something happened, whether their child got engaged or they had a death in the family. I still keep in contact with them because it was an authentic relationship. And frankly, again, with term limits, they can come back, you know, after they're out for 4 years. So I have to work with them again.

J**Jason Duff** 25:46

I want to keep a relationship with them. But, you know, going back to his question, where, where do you get your information from? How do you stay relevant and in the know?

A**Abe Jacob** 25:54

Yeah, I think social media plays a significant role because that's— if we hear—

J**Jason Duff** 25:59

is that Twitter? Is that Facebook? Instagram? All of them? Like, all of them. How— what's your digest look like?

A**Abe Jacob** 26:04

Oh, for my digest specifically, it's Facebook.

J**Jason Duff** 26:06

Okay.

A**Abe Jacob** 26:07

I will say that our state legislators tend to use Facebook the most. Some use Twitter, definitely Instagram as well. But I think Facebook provides more context of what's happening to them, what their goals are. Some of them announce they're running for the state senate on social media before the press picks it up, so— or the state rep, depending on what their position currently is, and it's a way to find those— kind of see the tea leaves. You know, I guess I'll give up one of my playbooks that I use, show my cards a little bit. I tend to use the Secretary of State office the most, and I tell folks that Hey, look, take a look at State Senator So-and-so. Take a look at State Rep. So-and-so. Notice how they tend to be introducing nonstop election bills. Notice how they're trying to do some streamlining in regards to voting in Ohio. Any chance they might be wanting to run for Secretary of State down the road? Who, for the record, for those who are not aware, the Ohio Secretary of State is in charge of all of our elections in Ohio. They're the chief elections officer for the state. So it's the tea leaves like that and watching their manners from their context and, you know, what their passions are to understand. What their goals are. You can also kind of get a sense, do they want to bump over the other chamber? Do they, or do they want to say, I'm done, I'm getting burned out, I might retire early? You know, that does happen as well. But I would say, uh, I, social media, specifically Facebook, is, um, where I get my information. And also, I'll be honest, it's not, see, it's not our public, I'm sorry, our cable news. It's not CNN, it's not Fox News or MSNBC. It is legitimately our local newspapers, it's our—

J**Jason Duff** 27:45

local reporters.

A**Abe Jacob** 27:46

Absolutely, because there we do have a statehouse press corps, just like you see in the White House where they do the press briefings with the White House press secretary. They don't necessarily have that for all the legislators, but they do have a press corps that is around the statehouse regularly. That, that's also how we find out our information as well.

J**Jason Duff** 28:02

Do you have a busy season?

A**Abe Jacob** 28:04

Oh, absolutely. When is that? I compare us to kind of a longer version for the CPAs, uh, schedule, so to speak. And what I mean by that is, uh, you know, the State House, uh, the state legislature, uh, operate in general assembly, and that means they, uh, their general assembly lasts for 2 years. The beginning of that general assembly is when the administration, the legislature determines what the operating budget is. And so once that operating budget is introduced, uh, it'll probably be this next cycle, probably be at the beginning of the year., and that has to be signed by July 1st in order to become effective at the right time for things to just fall into place. So honestly, from the minute that bill gets introduced to July 1st, which hopefully gets signed because sometimes it has gone past July 1st, but hopefully gets signed by July 1st, we have to keep our pulse on everything. And then there's sometimes breaks, there's times for holidays, stuff like that, where the legislature is back in their respective districts. However, I will say it's nonstop. I didn't even get married. God forbid I got married during that crazy season, or I would say any vacations, absolutely not. You'll get that panicked look in the face of why would you ever take that during that time? Because you never know you're gonna get that phone call that you heard an amendment's being drafted that can totally derail all the work you've been putting in for months. So it's, that's, and if you're away, you can't keep a pulse on things.

J**Jason Duff** 29:29

What are some of those common topics, uh, for small business? I, I mean, I guess just your clients in general.

A**Abe Jacob** 29:36

Good question. I, I think a lot of it comes down to, you know, is there issues that are going to impact unemployment compensation? Is there going to be certain regulations that are put in, um, impacting— maybe I'll use the restaurant industry for example, um, liquor laws, you know, are they gonna be switching up liquor laws that may make alcohol more expensive. That may determine how much access you can get to obtain it for your business, whether it's a bar or restaurant. Those decisions are sometimes made and put into the state budget or put into a bill.

J**Jason Duff** 30:10

I was just— a comment on that— I was out in Iowa. My— Nick, my team member here at Small Nation, we've been traveling to Iowa in the last 6 months. We've been there twice and helping towns and communities on renovation and innovation strategies.. And one of the things we said, well, tell us about how folks are able to enjoy adult beverages outside of liquor establishments. And they kind of look at us like, well, we've never heard of that. Well, in Ohio, we have something called DORA, which is the Designated Outdoor Refreshment area. That is unique to Ohio. Like looking around the country, they're only— It's crazy because it's everywhere. Well, and I want to say, you know, firms like where Abe works and interest of the Ohio Restaurant Association, that tool, and you maybe know more the history of how it actually got passed and happened, but that tool is really helping give a huge boost to independent Main Streets that are peppered throughout our state. And that's particularly benefiting the kind of small businesses that we work with at Small Nation. And that wouldn't have happened unless some people sat around the table and said, there's a smart, creative way that we can make this legislation possible, and let's work with, you know, smart firms and work with legislators to actually get this passed.

A**Abe Jacob** 31:28

And it's that type of creativity, you know, thinking outside the box of how does this work. And let's just say, you know, starting the beginning, and even though I was a staffer when, um, that was put into law, I wasn't part of, you know, the day-to-day of where it became to be. But if I were to be given that idea right now today by a client, uh, the first thing I would ask is, you know, are you sure that local governments are okay with this?

J**Jason Duff** 31:52

Who does it impact, right? Yep.

A**Abe Jacob** 31:54

Does this affect law enforcement? Uh, are the schools going to be impacted? Meaning, is this going to be — are there going to be boundaries that where you can't have alcohol in the school boundary? You know, you got to start the local part of where the social impact or the certain impact would be at the local level. And then that's when maybe you would ask maybe someone in my profession to say, is the climate right in the legislature to try to get something like this passed? Would you have enough votes to get it passed just simply by their philosophy and what they campaigned on? And that's kind of what my job is, to kind of give you a straight answer of that. I think that has legs. I think that that could— you're going to have to back it up some, but we can talk to the right people and see if there's an appetite to get introduced and hopefully passed through the legislature. That's ultimately where it came to be, is it got passed into law and Now we have more Doras throughout, and from what I understand, they're continuing to flourish in Ohio. It's, it's— I know we have one in my town that I live in now, New Albany. We started that recently, and, um, people are enjoying it, and for the right reasons, because they're not just in the restaurants and bars. They're getting out and walking around and really taking in the new sights. And if the city's doing something new, they get to see it because they're just walking around on a regular beautiful night like tonight.

J

Jason Duff 33:06

Yeah, that's awesome. My question is, I guess, where does, you know, the local decision-making stop and it go into like a state level for something like that? And, you know, I don't know if that's a hard question.

A

Abe Jacob 33:21

I will try. Yeah. And first off, uh, you know, Ohio is a home rule state, meaning that, you know, a lot is depicted— dependent on the local government to make certain decisions. You know, I think we could definitely have some lawyers out there specifically even at the Ohio Supreme Court level that will start to argue that that is a local decision, not a state decision, that, you know, that's for them to decide at the end of the day which one, you know, is decided.

J

Jason Duff 33:46

But just to comment on it, it seems like one of the hot-button issues right now is wind and solar. And, you know, that, that's where something like this really does matter. Where, where can we have local control and where does this issue of terms of green energy impact state issues? When you say that's a collision point right now with a a lot of the laws.

A

Abe Jacob 34:05

I, I know it very, very well. I, I, uh, definitely with, you know, where I come from and the district I work for, you know, wind was definitely a— I hate to use the words controversial, but it was definitely a sensitive issue, um, that depending on who you talk to, uh, I would argue don't ever walk to anybody in that area assuming you know where they're at because it changed with whomever you talk to. And depends again, is it in their backyard? Or are they coming at it from a philosophy of they're seeing the bigger picture? And which one is more important?

J

Jason Duff 34:35

Because I think— They're both right. Yeah, that's the thing. It's one of those issues. Both of those points are right. Right.

A

Abe Jacob 34:40

Yeah, it is.

J**Jason Duff** 34:41

But how do we reconcile? And I want to talk to you— you mentioned New Albany, and New Albany has been in the news. Like, I'm a little jealous, like almost every day. You know, it's really great. We actually have had on Nate Strom, which is the previous economic development director Great episode if you haven't listened to it. Yeah, I highly recommend it. He's a fun guy, served there for a long time, and now he's over in Kahana. But, um, you know, Team Licking County just has done some phenomenal work. Um, but, uh, yeah, I mean, understanding if you're going to get the next Google or Facebook or Intel at a national level, they care where they're getting their energy from, and they probably want an alternate alternative type of energy, um, that's going to be green. And so these are tough issues.

A**Abe Jacob** 35:28

They're tough. They're tough. And I— it goes back to, you know, understand the importance of what, what direction are you going to go and what's your approach and what is your goal. And that comes down to your relation— your decision of what your relationship with government is. And it's been my experience, uh, through my involvement in the city of New Albany that that, you know, a lot of the attraction to New Albany— yes, I'll be honest— is the fact that it's in the Columbus area. We have the airport, we have Rickenbacker close by. But I also go one step further because I've seen it firsthand, and it's the true camaraderie and the fantastic relationship the city of New Albany has with economic development overall, whether that's JobsOhio, One Columbus, or just economic development engines in general, saying Okay, let's try to be creative. Let's think outside the box. And that's been a treasure right there that I, you know, I can work in a profession at the statehouse, but then have the opportunity when I go home in my personal time to say, I can't get enough. Maybe I'm glutton for punishment, but I want to kind of see how the magic happens and see exactly, you know, how can we maybe see how we can bottle it up? Is there another community that can also benefit? And I would argue Small Nation's one of those examples that continues to share that throughout Ohio.

J**Jason Duff** 36:44

Thank you, Abe. And we had Bob Smith, who is the current chairman for JobsOhio, on the podcast. Another great episode that I highly recommend our, our listeners listen to. JobsOhio was one of those examples, and he talked about it on the podcast about out of the liquor legislation and the liquor sales. Yes. The, the percentage of that money actually goes to fund a public-private partnership of of what is JobsOhio. And, you know, it is those relationships and those tools and those resources that are helping Ohio win and helping our communities in Ohio win. So just appreciate you mentioning that. New Albany, how long have you lived there?

A**Abe Jacob** 37:25

We were coming in, in 2020 is when we moved to New Albany. But I would argue we were just on the outskirts of the white fence, the famous white fence of New Albany. We were just on the outskirts of it.

J**Jason Duff** 37:36

I know exactly who you're talking about. It really does have a white fence too.

A**Abe Jacob** 37:38

We were just on the outskirts of there for a handful of years before that, so I mean, we were already in the community.

J**Jason Duff** 37:44

The gates opened up and the sun started shining, huh?

A**Abe Jacob** 37:47

Yes, and we officially got that zip code on our address, that type of thing.

J**Jason Duff** 37:52

All right, boom!

A**Abe Jacob** 37:52

Yes, and it goes back to when we first kicked off this conversation of where I came from. I came from a family that really took community service seriously. Were raised that you're not going to be sitting around the house. You better figure out what you want to do because you're not going to be sitting here doing it. And I saw how involved both my parents were, uh, which whether it's foundation or just organizations they were part of. So it's already kind of in my DNA to that as soon as we settled in to New Albany. All right, what am I familiar with? What will I be, uh, more of a good nexus between what what my strengths are, and to kind of get involved in the community because A, that's how I'm going to meet my neighbors, that's how I'm going to meet our community leaders, but more importantly, be part of the future of New Albany so that way when we put the roots in, we can say, you know what, I remember when we did that, it was a great experience. And that's what I've been looking for since day one.

J**Jason Duff** 38:48

In your serving, can you share the council and committee that you're on in New Albany and the work that you're doing there?

A**Abe Jacob** 38:52

Yes, I'm very, very privileged to be a member of the Board of Zoning Appeals for the City of New Albany. I'm also on the executive committee for the New Albany Area Chamber of Commerce. And that all started simply by someone introducing me to the community events board. And that's where we do Spring Fest, where literally, and it's, and it's the stereotype of New Albany, a helicopter drops the eggs onto the football field of the high school. And, uh, but then we also have Oktoberfest, we have the Fourth of July parade and festival. And that led me to other conversations, uh, within the chamber where I participate in Leadership New Albany. And it's literally— and I can't say this more with small towns— you just show up and you're going to be asked to participate and be involved. And that's literally what happened to me. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 39:35

And you're going to learn. I mean, being on the board of zoning appeals, for some folks that are listening, they're probably like, that sounds like torture. But like, here's why that's important is you're going to get to see the projects that actually come through. You're going to be able to look at bylaws and rules and codes. And you're going to be able to help to say, does this make sense based on this? And, and, and if it doesn't, how, how can we amend and work with our partners to decide what kind of development we want or don't want? And, and I think that's where if you're standing on the sidelines and thinking, well, someone else is going to do that, or they're going to do that, yeah, that's not how this works. You have to get involved. And if you're frustrated with something, maybe it's a law or a rule or a friction point, get involved and get other professionals and other, you know, lawmakers involved in the topics that you care about. That tees up my next question perfectly. How does someone, if they wanted to get in contact with someone like you and they want to be a part of this conversation, first question is, how do they do that?

A**Abe Jacob** 40:41

Well, I will say there's not, uh, you know, a statewide necessary directory for all of us in the lobbying community. However, we do have the Ohio Lobbying Association, which I am a member of, as well as many, many, many of my colleagues and people who I tremendously respect in my industry that come from a place of good, you know, that honestly are going to be honest with you of their opinions and do have strong ethics about how they approach every issue. And it's very easy to find out, you know, depending on what your issue is, they can guide you to probably who the best subject matter expert is, uh, in that field. And seek their advice.

J**Jason Duff** 41:17

And, you know, just to share what I see on the local level, um, the Ohio Farm Bureau, you know, if you're in a rural community and you care about farms and, and local crops, really well-respected organization doing some meaningful work. Um, the Chamber of Commerce, we've had other chamber presidents that are on, you know, Abe mentioned on the national level, and they do a lot of work at the state level too, but National Federation for Independent Business, the Ohio Business Roundtable, Um, the other thing, and I'm curious your opinion, this is just what I'm learning, like when it comes to candidates, should you write checks?

A**Abe Jacob** 41:53

Should you? It's more of what level of, uh, support do you want to give them? Because it goes beyond checks. Yes, checks play a role because they contribute to, uh, mailings, uh, billboards, radio ads, TV ads, even, uh, social media ads. However, there is still the grassroots effort that could connect to parade volunteering where you're passing out candy during the parade.

J**Jason Duff** 42:19

It doesn't have to be money. There's other ways to get involved. Exactly. But, but I also say if you're running for office and it's a contested, challenging race, money certainly helps.

A

Abe Jacob 42:30

It does. And it, again, it goes back to your level of how much do you really want to be involved because maybe the better effort is to make sure you meet with both candidates. And see if they both agree with you. And frankly, if you meet with both of them, that might actually push you in one direction or another depending on how they go in the end. So I would start with an open mind of who are these candidates, because a lot of the time when it gets down to the local level specifically, there's no partisan attachment to their name. It just depends which local town you live in. They might be completely nonpartisan. So therefore—

J

Jason Duff 43:05

and what does that mean for those listening? What does nonpartisan mean?

A

Abe Jacob 43:07

That means they do— when they, uh, are a candidate for office after they file their paperwork, they do not have party affiliation, meaning they're not Republican, they're not labeled as a Democrat, Libertarian, Green Party. They are simply running as their individual selves. There are some folks, and as a poli sci major, that maybe we should do away with them altogether. Then it goes back to the philosophy of, well, political parties happen naturally. It just happens that people congregate as one. That's a whole other conversation for another different podcast.

J

Jason Duff 43:37

Lot of different things to unpack there.

A

Abe Jacob 43:39

But I would say to Jason's point about, you know, starting at the level, the small level. I, I was in 4-H for 11 years. Very proud of it. Very proud to this day of the 4-H program, which was started in Ohio, for the record.

J

Jason Duff 43:53

Absolutely. I didn't know that. Yes, started in Ohio. That's right. Oh, okay. Very good. FFA, I believe, too. Like, it's amazing, all of the farm, you know.

A

Abe Jacob 44:01

Well, 4-H is not just— we could start doing that. 4-H is not just for Abe.

J

Jason Duff 44:04

Tell us.

A

Abe Jacob 44:05

Uh, is not just for, uh, was it stand for Abe?

J

Jason Duff 44:08

Let's Do the quiz.

A

Abe Jacob 44:09

Head, heart, hands. Oh, dang, you beat me by just a little bit. Well, as a former 4-H King of Defiance County, it's head, heart, hands, health.

J

Jason Duff 44:18

There you go. I don't know if I could have got them all.

A

Abe Jacob 44:20

Boom. Yes. But yeah, as a, you know, uh, I was very proud when I was 4-H King of Defiance County. And, you know, it was that opportunity, uh, to— we participate actually in Lobby Day, uh, at the State House where you could go down. And I was a teenager. And I went down with our county agent to meet with our state legislators to— because 4-H has to be funded somehow, you know, and, you know, sometimes some of those are public funds because it actually is an education program at the end of the day. So to talk to our leaders who fund that, yes, they probably are— they like 4-H, but do they— I think it's more important to understand how is it changing your life? How is it going to make you a productive member of society? And I argue You know, it kept me from getting in trouble because it gave me purpose. It gave me responsibility and taught me how to lose well, to be a good loser because it's always competition. But at the same time, it gives you that responsibility to step up and determine, you know, how well am I going to do in this? Am I going to try my hardest and see where it goes from there? Yeah. So, okay.

J

Jason Duff 45:21

Sorry. Finally, finally getting around to my second question. Yeah. When a prospective client comes up to you, Can you walk me through what that conversation will look like, or the conversation into the next steps, you know?

A

Abe Jacob 45:33

Yeah, typically the way it goes is either it's phone call or email that starts out with, this happened, you know. That's, that's a lot of it where it starts.

J

Jason Duff 45:41

Is it there, are they frustrated with something, or is it a positive and they want to see more of it? Could be both of those.

A**Abe Jacob** 45:47

Depends the time. If it's budget season, then they will tell us where's the money going. Yeah, they will tell us, hey, we saw requests for this one fund off the chain. It might be a good idea if they increase it because they could probably help a lot more people if they increase that fund. Uh, and I, I think would even go towards those who, um, are, are victims of crime in Ohio. You know, there— I don't think there's never enough money that you can give to certain victims in Ohio, but if there are certain spikes in different crimes, maybe some extra resources should go to those specifically to help get those back on track to where they are lower numbers. But, um, Those are usually the positives, you know, the ones, the meaning for increases is when we see good returns on investment and ask for those. But usually I will say they usually start as problems is a lot of the issue. And that's when we, we first start out with, please tell us in detail where did it start and what is the macro and micro impact of this state law or state rule that's impacting you right now? And then we take it from and then we meet as a firm and start to put together a narrative as well as, okay, who are our contacts, who is, and what is the likelihood of us getting this passed as soon as possible?

J**Jason Duff** 47:02

Well, yeah, thanks for sharing that. I feel like that's really insightful for a lot of people, myself included. Here's what I learned, and you know, this is probably the golden nugget for today, is if you're frustrated with something, get involved and, and make a change. And I think It's not just with your vote, it's who you are lobbying. And I think one thing I've learned from Abe today, lobbying is not a dirty word. It's understanding the advocacy. Advocacy. Say that 5 times fast. Yeah, I struggle. I've always struggled with that word, but it's like actually knowing the issues that you care about, the legislators and the lawmakers that are championing your issues and finding ways to double down and support them. But you have to educate yourself. And I think that's what I learned from Abe today. It's like, Understand those processes, those organizations, those people, and have the confidence to get in front of them or invite them to come to your office. Absolutely. To your town, to your business, to understand what the issues are. And there's — if you're frustrated, and that's what I hear a lot of people are, I'm frustrated with this. Well, what are you doing about it? Like, make the effort to reach out, open up your pocketbook, write the check to support the things that matter to you. Yes, we can all be frustrated with the system. We could take a whole nother hour podcast and vent about the politicians, the broken system, the big money that's going to, to things that, that are not good. Yeah, but on the local level, this, this is very important. Get involved, um, and get activated. Yeah, that's good. Professional, uh, development resources for that were important for you outside of Facebook and 4-H?

A**Abe Jacob** 48:47

Oh, I honestly, it's, it's Facebook. I will say, you know, I started Facebook, it was the original only for college students, so I was at the, you know, way back. Yeah, I was an OG of Facebook, so to speak. And, um, I would say it's honestly keeping up with the time. It's just staying, um, on top of the most current issues while respecting and understanding the past. Sometimes we get so caught up in the present that we forget how this came to be.

J

Jason Duff 49:20

And do you read biographies?

A

Abe Jacob 49:22

I don't read them. I am a huge MasterClass biography watcher because history repeats itself. It does. It does, especially in government. And I really appreciate watching biographies of— and this is the difference between reading and watching. Because I like to see maybe the emotion or the passion behind of why they had that impact on their life.

J

Jason Duff 49:43

Where do you go to find those?

A

Abe Jacob 49:45

I would say YouTube, Amazon Prime.

J

Jason Duff 49:48

That's how you like to get content, right? You know, I've talked to you, you're not the big reader of books, but you like to watch and listen to content.

A

Abe Jacob 49:55

And I'll go one step further to really nerd myself out. I actually go on to watch interviews from our state leaders, from our federal leaders to understand again, how did they say that? Did they skirt the issue, or this is— this is going to be a leader that actually is more direct? Because I, I love a direct leader, even though they're going to disagree with me to front and back. At least I'm going to know where they stand. Yeah. So it all files back to me understanding the dynamics of our leaders, of how do they speak, whether hot button issues. And it just, in the, in, in the end, it makes me a better lobbyist because I can see the curves.

J

Jason Duff 50:30

Yeah.

A

Abe Jacob 50:31

The, the swerves that might occur throughout the process.

J

Jason Duff 50:33

Yeah, that's cool. Where can people follow you, your firm, or the work that you guys are doing?

A**Abe Jacob** 50:37

Yeah, we are on LinkedIn at Counter and Associates. I myself am also on LinkedIn along with my colleagues, and that's where we go. And, you know, we like to celebrate and applaud all our clients that we follow on LinkedIn as well. You know, we have— we're very proud of our client list. I, you know, one thing I— when I started with the firm, you know, because I, I never was seeking in this world to be a contract lobbyist. You know, if I go back to high school days, I thought I was going to run for office myself. To— so to be a contract lobbyist was definitely not what I thought. It goes back to the saying, you know, keep making plans because God really will laugh at you, for sure. And there's not a single client that I have today that I'm not proud to tell my mom about. And I think that's what's important, um, that we are proud of our clients, we are proud to represent them, and proud of the work that we do for them.

J**Jason Duff** 51:26

Awesome, thank you. Thanks, Abe. And for listeners, you can check out the show notes. I spend some time putting in links for each of our guests, so be sure be sure to check it out. And hey, leave a comment if you're watching this on YouTube. Uh, we love our YouTube audience as well. Leave a comment, and if there's anything you want to see and other guests that you want to have on, we'd love to see that as well. Um, but that's, that's it for we— for all we have. Wow, I cannot close this up. All right, well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 51:49

thank you everyone for tuning in and checking out the Small Nation podcast. And you can find us anywhere that you listen to your podcast, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even the Small Nation YouTube channel. I hope you were able to pull some value from that conversation, and we to see you in the next one. If you enjoyed it, be sure to leave a like, comment, or a 5-star review, uh, to help more people to discover this podcast. Stay tuned to Small Nation on social media to keep up, up with all the cool projects that are happening here. And until next time, this is Ethan with the Small Nation Podcast signing off. Thanks, everyone.