

Episode 42

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Transportation Research Center, automotive testing, autonomous vehicles, vehicle safety innovation, race car driving, NASCAR, iRacing simulation, smart mobility corridor, US Route 33, East Liberty Ohio, Honda partnership, electrification and EVs, connected vehicles, brand equity, economic development, career journey

SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, Brett Roubinek, Ethan DeLeon

B

Brett Roubinek 00:00

Things that we take for granted today, like seatbelts and ABS and backup cameras, some of that development work was done at TRC.

J

Jason Duff 00:08

Yeah.

B

Brett Roubinek 00:08

Wow. And now, of course, we're awash in talk of automated driver assist systems. And some of those systems are available on the showroom floor today. Tons of that work done at TRC.

J

Jason Duff 00:19

So like adaptive cruise control, things like that.

B

Brett Roubinek 00:21

And then all of the stuff that we hear about higher levels of autonomy, where there might not be steering wheel and there might not be pedals. That work's going on behind the berm on Route 33 as well. And that's the stuff we— that's the stuff we can't talk about.

E

Ethan DeLeon 00:37

Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon and I'm here with our founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. On today's episode, we're honored to have the president and CEO of the Transportation Research Center Incorporated, Brett Rubinick, joining us. 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 create a space to learn, talk about what's trending, and inspire others.

J

Jason Duff 01:08

Thank you, Ethan. Brett, welcome to the show today.

B**Brett Roubinek** 01:11

Glad to be here.

J**Jason Duff** 01:12

Thanks for having me. It's— I have been talking— we met, it's probably been about a year ago, and Brett was so kind to invite us to the Transportation Research Center. And, uh, you know what, what's kind of special about this business in our area is that Growing up, I was involved in a family business, and our family business sold ready-mix concrete. And one of the most significant jobs of our, our small, at the time, concrete plant was being able to pour the original concrete on the test track at the Transportation Research Center. So about a year ago, Brett invited our team at Small Nation to come out and see some of the changes and the enhancements and improvements and all the innovations that's happening out there. So it was special to me because of that, that history in the area and our family pouring that concrete. But we drove up and I was so excited because, you know, our company logo is this bright, kind of bright red. And we were greeted by very friendly staff and then off to the side, there is this beautiful Acura NSX. And if you know anything about the NSX, like it is Acura's top of the line sports car. And I'm thinking, 'cause he said, well, we're gonna take you out to the track to actually see it. And we're walking in and we're greeted and we're like, we are like, our eyes are wide open and we're thinking, we're gonna jump in this NSX. And then the community tour van, like their little bus pulls up.

B**Brett Roubinek** 02:47

And here's the bus I'll be driving.

J**Jason Duff** 02:48

Yes, exactly. No, no, no. I just had to share that because it was just, just being out there that day. I left energized and I said, you know, Brett, we want to get you and your team to show you the work that we're doing here in downtown Bellefontaine. But more particular, as I was spending time with him, I wanted to hear his story. And I love— what I love about our guests and the businesses and the people that we have here is they all have a unique story that I think there's nuggets that we can take from and lessons that we can learn. So, Brett, welcome to the show. Tell us, how did you, you know, all the various things to be president CEO of one of the largest and most innovative automotive research and testing labs in the world. How did that all begin?

B**Brett Roubinek** 03:36

That's one, a good question, and two, a long, long story. So going back to your original story, though, I love the pouring the concrete story because Originally, TRC was a place. It was a destination. There's a destination here in Bellefontaine, and the governor at the time was Governor Rhodes, and he envisioned this place as a way to draw people in. And that's what's going on here. And I like this story because this is a small hometown and it feels like home the minute you walk in. And what's going on here is kind of repatriating people, if you will. So I love that story.

J**Jason Duff** 04:16

Appreciate that.

B**Brett Roubinek** 04:16

Very, very cool that the family was involved. Over the years, TRC Incorporated has evolved from a place to a story about people. I say it's— next year is our 50th anniversary, so we're going to have a big—

J**Jason Duff** 04:27

Oh, great.

B**Brett Roubinek** 04:27

We're going to have a big damn party. Woo! Cheers to that. Exactly. Exactly. So it's the people that are continuing to grow the business and draw new clients in. And some of those are technology companies who are in transportation and mobility. Some of them are old line. Auto manufacturers. So that's, that's a little bit about the, the business and where we are, and I'll share more about that. How, how I got here is, um, is an interesting story. I, I was raised, I say, in Powell, Ohio.

J**Jason Duff** 05:00

Powell, yeah, all right, right up there.

B**Brett Roubinek** 05:02

Powell was a different place then than it is now, speaking of hometowns. It was a place that had a flashing red light and a lot of farmers. Wow. So a little bit different. But, um, you know, graduated from a Delaware County school, went to Denison University, never planned on leaving, um, had an offer to go work for an investment firm on Wall Street, took that job and said, oh, I'm going to be coming back. Well, guess what? It took me a long, long time, and it took me residing in probably 7 different states, from North Carolina and Florida to Connecticut and Massachusetts and New Hampshire. And, and, um, finally I got the opportunity to kind of come home to where all my family was. So kind of other steps in the process, getting back to your original question, Jason, was I started life as a race car driver.

J**Jason Duff** 05:50

And wait, I've not had many guests that come on the show and say— and I'm just trying to follow. So going from small town of Powell— and for those that are listening, you know, Powell, Ohio is today one of the fastest growing areas in the state of Ohio and also one of the wealthiest areas. I mean, in terms of people that are flocking to want to live there, and Delaware County is one of the fastest growing counties in the state and at times have been one of the fastest growing counties in the country. So just, just to kind of share, there's been lots of growth and transformation there. And then you mentioned you found Dennison or Dennison found you. Tell us about that. And then did you, did you graduate with finance or how did you, how did you end up to Wall Street? And then I want to know about this race car thing.

B**Brett Roubinek** 06:36

So I think it's a little bit of both. Okay. Dennison found me and I found Dennison. We had family friends who had their entire family had gone to Denison, and so it came down between Vanderbilt and Denison for me. And, and that family was like, oh no, you're going to Denison. And I went and visited.

J**Jason Duff** 06:52

Wasn't an alum of the university.

B**Brett Roubinek** 06:54

Oh yeah, yeah, their whole family. And so, um, so I went and visited Granville, Lake Belknap.

J**Jason Duff** 07:02

Great town, easy to fall in love with. Yeah, easy to fall in love. One of my favorite things about Granville today is the Whitmans that started Witt's Frozen Custard. You know, we, we love Witt's. Witt's is a product that's made fresh in the store every day. But when you go to Granville, that's where it all came about. So, and it's really a picturesque— you don't even feel like you're in Ohio. It's, it's just one of those special college towns.

B**Brett Roubinek** 07:26

For sure. For sure. And the experience was great. And, you know, getting back and forth between Columbus and Pollard and Granville at that point in time was a little bit different than it is now. But it was, I said, close enough to home and yet far enough away to go to college.

J**Jason Duff** 07:39

Yeah.

B**Brett Roubinek** 07:39

But And I went to a liberal arts college because I didn't know what I wanted to major in. Yep. So it was kind of like, well, I need to go to college to learn about your thinking.

J**Jason Duff** 07:53

What was it— what was it that changed you there of having that experience compared to most?

B**Brett Roubinek** 07:58

Uh, I would say that the diversity of people and thought. Yeah. And that comes from students freshmen entering to tenured professors who are about to retire. Yeah, that was the experience. And obviously they came from all geographies, right, and had all sorts of different life experiences coming up. One of my favorite professors was a religion professor who, I want to say he was German by birth, but had come to the United States and worked as a janitor at Loyola University and worked for his education. And wound up with a PhD and just, you know, a mind-blowing guy.

J

Jason Duff 08:41

Yeah, love that.

B

Brett Roubinek 08:42

So, so that was, uh, so that was Denison. And then, um, like most kids who get out of college, it's like, okay, well, what's next? And so had an opportunity to work for an investment firm, did that 2 years, uh, was a management trainee, so that equates to slave labor, and had started racing at that time and decided, you know what, I want to try this full-time because I can always come back to like banking or something.

J

Jason Duff 09:06

So racing kind of started as a hobby?

B

Brett Roubinek 09:08

Yeah, I grew up around it. My dad did it as a hobby.

J

Jason Duff 09:12

Was there a certain kind of— as you're growing up around it, was there a certain type of vehicle that you would drive, or all different types of racing?

B

Brett Roubinek 09:20

So my dad raced, uh, sports cars as an amateur in the SCCA.

J

Jason Duff 09:23

Wow.

B

Brett Roubinek 09:24

Places like Mid-Ohio and So that's where I started. Quickly learned if I wanted to do it professionally, the only thing that really sold sponsorship in the United States at that point in time was NASCAR. So moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, and we started a team and was able to accumulate sponsors and have a good time doing that off and on for like 10 years. I was like a minor league ballplayer. Like, I always had—

J

Jason Duff 09:48

That's a good analogy.

B

Brett Roubinek 09:49

Always had side gigs going during the season and after the season, and just hair started to turn gray.

J

Jason Duff 09:56

Did you like— was it about the rush, or was it about the refinement of the vehicle? Like, for you, what really was your thing as a racer?

B**Brett Roubinek** 10:06

So I wish I was a better engineer, and I wish I was a better mechanic, because that was all part of it as well. And then, you know, people will tell you what sort of driver I was, whether that's going to be a good comment or a bad comment. Like, you know, the PhDs at TRC say, oh, you're a race car driver, so you're qualified to be a crash test dummy. That's it. And, and I was good on the, on the, on the business side, um, but it's the continual improvement and the level of competition and how every detail needs to be run down to get to the result that you want. Because every week, if you don't win, you, you lose. Yeah, you're second or you're third or fourth, right? And then the cycle starts over again at the end of the race to get better for— guess what— next week. It's not like a development cycle that's a whole year. It's a development cycle, it's like 128 hours.

J**Jason Duff** 10:56

Wow. Where do you— to be a race car driver, where do you like, how do you learn to do that? And, and, you know, part of me is like, I, I know that there's this analogy that when people that are flying aircraft, when you land, the way that that, uh, pilot lands can tell like where they were schooled, whether they were in the military or, you know, whether they went to flight school. Um, and I don't know if that's true, it's just I know a lot of people talk about that. But like, if there are people listening, like, I want to become a race car driver Is it kind of like your background, like you mentioned, that you are learning on the job? And, or is there a training? Jason's thinking about changing careers. I can barely drive my car.

B**Brett Roubinek** 11:37

I actually can see the race car with Small Nation.

J**Jason Duff** 11:39

I like that.

B**Brett Roubinek** 11:40

There you go.

J**Jason Duff** 11:40

My Honda CR-V, I'm gonna kick that into gear and we're gonna fly.

B**Brett Roubinek** 11:45

So it is first, nobody comes out of the womb being a driver. It's not something that's innate. It's not something that you're born with. People talk about natural skill. What, what's natural, if you will, is like the skill sets that we learn when we're 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 years old, like balance and our level of risk acceptance. Yeah, yeah. And, you know, hand-eye coordination, motor skills. So those, those all come at a very early age., and then shortly after that you can start to learn how to drive. But nobody comes out of the womb a driver, so there is no natural— the cool thing about it is it's a learned skill. And so like playing the piano, swinging a golf club, swinging a tennis racket, if you work at it and work with purpose, you can perfect your skills. And there's, there's, you know, tons of examples of people who have done that. They pick it up late in life, they have the time, they have the money to pursue it. And they get really freaking good at it.

J**Jason Duff** 12:46

Yeah. Do you still do that as a hobby today, or have you kind of retired from—

B**Brett Roubinek** 12:52

No, it's been about 20 years since I raced. I miss it every day. Yeah, it's awesome.

J**Jason Duff** 12:57

Was there a reason why you, you kind of put it on pause?

B**Brett Roubinek** 13:00

Just because my hair started to turn gray and the, the economy was changing and the, the business model in NASCAR was changing, and, um I, you know, I didn't have a resume until about 5 years ago. I had a million different jobs but never had a resume. And at that point in time, had the opportunity to join a startup outside of Boston, which was a software company focused on driver-in-the-loop simulation. And, um, so I was kind of the business person. I wore a collared shirt and everybody else was smart and they wore t-shirts and they were the ones who did the work. So did that for 5 years and was chief operating officer there. The product is wildly successful today. It's a company called iRacing.com. And so that, you know, going back to kind of how do you perfect your driving skills? iRacing.com, because you can go— digital experience, digital experience.

J**Jason Duff** 13:55

Exactly.

B**Brett Roubinek** 13:55

And it's essentially what for drivers, whether they're performance drivers, they want to have fun on a racetrack or they actually want to go racing. It's the same for that as flight sims are for pilots.

J**Jason Duff** 14:06

Isn't that incredible how not only for the leisure side, how simulation, whether it's golfing or, uh, pickleball or bowling, like, I mean, the gamification with VR and virtual reality today, there's the, the, the, the tourism kind of side or the, the hospitality or the, um, what I want to say, the, the fun side of it. Yeah, but then You're also speaking to the side of how it's saving cost, how it's being able to replicate those tests faster and with more people. So there's a lot of those things that when you look at different industries, they have multiple applications. And that's probably a really great example for race car drivers.

B**Brett Roubinek** 14:53

Yeah, and so this was— we launched our product in 2008. It was a soft launch. That was where I was like, you know what, it snows a lot in New Hampshire and it gets dark at like 3:30 in the afternoon. Oh, and I never intended to go into software development. And my family was all here outside of Columbus. So once the product got off the ground, I was like, this is, this is probably the segue in my life.

J**Jason Duff** 15:18

Interesting. So how did that opportunity arise then with TRC specifically?

B**Brett Roubinek** 15:23

So I had been back here. I worked— I didn't work. I actually took a couple of years off. After that. My daughters were young at the time. I got to spend a ton of time with them. One's graduating from high school in a couple weeks, the other one's a freshman, and then I've got two younger, uh, as well. So I've got both ends of the spectrum. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 15:40

And, uh, some family time.

B**Brett Roubinek** 15:41

So it was, it was great. And then, um, went to Mid-Ohio, knew people at Mid-Ohio, and started kind of going back and instructing, which was something I did while I was racing, and, and had a good time doing that. And then had an opportunity to run sales and marketing for Mid-Ohio, so became vice president of marketing for Ohio and did that for a couple of years. And then tracing back to the simulation days, you know, we were working on things, the engineers were working on things I wasn't. It's kind of similar to what's going on in autonomy today. Different world, kind of 3D versus virtual. So I had that level of interest from that time. And this opportunity kind of came up to be Vice President of the Proving Grounds and It was a cool fit. But what got me when I interviewed— there was an extensive interview process. I think it was like 300 people. Oh, that sounds easy. But what got me was like, here is this global asset on the world stage, behind the curtain, but on the world stage, playing amongst major, major stakeholders, everybody from like the state of Ohio to Ohio State, to companies like Honda, who is our landlord. They own the property. And then all of the companies that I can't name who are involved in mobility and transportation. But the, the probably 10 people that I interviewed were all good, kind of small-town folks who had tremendous pride in what they did and, and what— who TRC was. And I was like, I didn't know where it came from, but I was like, that's pretty freaking awesome. Because, you know, I kind of come off my world tour and there were a lot of places that weren't like that. And so, so it was easy for me to say yes. And then about 15 months later, I wound up in, in my current seat, which is president and CEO. And I'm thankful every day for the, for the people that are there because the company's continued to grow. Clients are taking us up on newer offerings that, you know, going back to what I said earlier about place to people, back when it was a place, it was a great business model and everybody was successful and stakeholders were happy. But the world is different now and our goals are different. They're taking us up on the offering of those people and their skill sets and helping them develop their products, you know, faster, more efficiently. Safer and, and cost— more cost effective.

J**Jason Duff** 18:18

I love that. And I think what is powerful about your story is that you lived in a lot of different places and you've also worked in a number of industries, but the thing of coming back to Ohio and looking for a career opportunity is that you sought out an organization and interviewed with them and it felt authentic, and it also was an organization that had a history of doing really cool things. But the problem, if I hear what you're saying, is they weren't really the best at the time of telling their story and marketing what they do to the larger stage.

B**Brett Roubinek** 18:53

So I don't think— I don't think there was a problem because, as I said, the business model at that point in time had all of the stakeholders happy. All of the metrics were being achieved. Interesting. All of the stakeholders were happy. So when I sat in this seat for the first time almost 6 years ago, there were a different set of metrics that the board wanted to apply. And so that's kind of driven and fortunately successfully driven the change in the way we've positioned the company. Going back to your comment, Jason, like TRC has incredible brand equity from the 49 and a half years of business. And when I first joined the company and I would walk into a technology company in Silicon Valley who has to remain nameless, And I said, well, this is what TRC is about. Inevitably, there would be an engineer who would say, oh yeah, you know what? I tested there. It's been probably, shoot, I don't know, 10 years. But there was this dude named Ron Burton who's from Bill Fountain. And he ran the crash lab. And it was fantastic. And he bent over backwards. And the whole team was great. And it was a very welcoming— and guess what? We got our stuff done. And we got out of there. And because I've moved in positions and moved between companies, I haven't had a chance to go back. So the brand equity that that was built over the first 40 years was probably the major pillar to driving the growth that we've seen over the last several years.

J**Jason Duff** 20:19

And I think that shift, it sounds like, you know, knowing that they had clients and everyone was happy and serving well, but as you were coming in and the board was saying, hey, there's new ways we can expand and grow the business, was that exciting to you to think about those new channels? But I imagine also that as you grow the business, there are new needs that pop up, whether it's investments or facilities or people. Can you speak a little bit, what you're able to, about that?

B**Brett Roubinek** 20:48

Oh, yes. Yes, yes. So we, through the first, let's call it 45 years of TRC's life, the assets in the ground were either put there by the state because the state was the original owner. It was built by the state, owned by the state. Then in 1988, Honda purchased the property from the state.

J**Jason Duff** 21:07

And this property is in East Liberty.

B**Brett Roubinek** 21:09

It's in East Liberty. It's 4,500 acres.

J**Jason Duff** 21:12

And that is— for people listening, that is like a small country. Like, and it's— that's special. That's significant.

B**Brett Roubinek** 21:18

Yeah, yeah, it's, it's, it's, it's— it is unique. It's one of a kind. So, um, up until about 5 years ago, what was in the ground, so to speak, in terms of asphalt, what had been built in terms of buildings, had been built by those two entities. And TRC was the property manager. And so we hopefully delivered great service to Honda and all of the clients who were there, but we couldn't build anything. So if a client said, "Hey, you know what? I've got an idea. I need this test fixture," TRC was really not at liberty to do that. So that changed in 2018. I see. And so we, in 2019, opened the Smart Center, which is our automated and connected vehicle campus. And that's, if you put a ring around it, about 540 acres. And just kind of furthered the uniqueness. I don't even know if that's a word, but the unique-itude. I know that's not a word.

J**Jason Duff** 22:10

Oh, I like both of those actually.

B**Brett Roubinek** 22:11

Unique-itude, that aspect of TRC.

J**Jason Duff** 22:15

Yeah, I love that. And that opened up new doors, obviously, to test new and innovative technology, I'm sure. Are you able to speak to any of those kinds of technologies that we see in our cars today that maybe were being tested you know, years ago.

B**Brett Roubinek** 22:30

So, I mean, if we go way back to kind of '70s, you know, even basic things, things that we take for granted today, like seatbelts and ABS and backup cameras, some of that development work was done at TRC.

J**Jason Duff** 22:42

Yeah.

B**Brett Roubinek** 22:43

Wow. And now, of course, we're awash in talk of automated driver assist systems. And some of those systems are available on the showroom floor today. Tons of that work done at TRC.

J**Jason Duff** 22:54

So like adaptive cruise control, things like that.

B**Brett Roubinek** 22:56

And then all of the stuff that we hear about higher levels of autonomy, where there might not be steering wheel and there might not be pedals. That work's going on behind the berm on Route 33 as well. And that's the stuff we can't talk about.

J**Jason Duff** 23:10

Right. Yeah. That's crazy.

B**Brett Roubinek** 23:12

So automation, like the kind of big ones are automation, connectivity, cars talking to each other and cars talking, and I should say trucks as well, talking to the roadway or the environment. And then also electrification. You know, what is that next— that next fuel source that's not an internal combustion engine?

J**Jason Duff** 23:31

Yeah. Well, and what's special about this region? So, you know, where East Liberty is to Columbus, Ohio, you know, you're probably less than 45 minutes from Columbus Metro, and then you go to Dublin to Marysville to East Liberty to Bellefontaine. That highway is US Route 33. And that what's significant about that highway, it is a smart mobility corridor. And I, for a long time, I didn't quite understand what that is.

B**Brett Roubinek** 24:02

Yeah, explain that for me.

J**Jason Duff** 24:02

I'm going to let my expert explain it. So tell us what's special about that.

B**Brett Roubinek** 24:06

That's where I would dial a friend and call one of the PhDs to get the real explanation.

J**Jason Duff** 24:10

Well, in layman's terms, what does that mean?

B**Brett Roubinek** 24:12

So basically the— and now this, I'm going to stretch my memory— like 2018, 2019, somewhere in there, there was a grant that was applied for and won by the state of Ohio, Ohio Department of Transportation, to start to start with, but in conjunction with towns like Marysville, Dublin, they went after this concept that they would take that 35-mile stretch of roadway and they would connect it so that vehicles could talk to it, it could talk to vehicles, and hopefully manage safety in a better fashion. So the first step— and then there was a federal grant involved. So the first step was running fiber optics from 270 in Dublin all the way out Route 33. And actually, the fiber optics terminate right at the front door of TRC. There's actually a building.

J**Jason Duff** 24:59

Your internet must be super fast.

B**Brett Roubinek** 25:01

Super fast.

J**Jason Duff** 25:02

Okay.

B**Brett Roubinek** 25:04

And I test the download speeds.

J**Jason Duff** 25:06

Okay, we're watching Netflix over there.

B**Brett Roubinek** 25:09

So, so, so fiber optics were run, then a redundant loop was run, which then connected us and everyone else into like the Ohio Supercomputer and everything that goes on in Columbus. And then I don't remember the number of poles that were put up and equipped with short-range radio communication that could communicate with a vehicle in both directions as well as cameras.

J**Jason Duff** 25:34

Wow.

B**Brett Roubinek** 25:34

So now, you know, it's only been 5 years, but we're several generations beyond right now. And we're kind of talking about, well, what's the next technology that's going to get hung off that pole to advance the art? That's, that's being worked on today for tomorrow. And the ultimate outcome is to make all of us safer.

J**Jason Duff** 25:52

Yeah, well, that's just another piece of the assets that are right around your facility that are helping your clients, helping the end users of keeping us safe. But just another special attribute of this region. Yeah. And, and I imagine the headcount of your company has evolved and changed in the types of employees and different, uh, backgrounds. Can you kind of speak to that?

B**Brett Roubinek** 26:20

So, um, let's go back kind of 6 years. I think we were about 350. We're about 500-ish now. Wow, a lot of growth. I've got a— I've got a, like, shout out to our folks in HR because, you know, when everyone was screaming about not being able to fill jobs, we were going through the same thing. We had new— some new clients that had just moved on property. We've got about 20 clients that live on property with us, so they have operations there. We run— we run 24/7, 365 days a year. Those clients have operations on the property as well. Some of them have our people embedded in their operation, which— that's a setup that we, we like. Um, so we were probably 350 people. Right now we're about 500 people. As I said, I think I said, we were \$54 million in revenue last year from the work that we did. This year we're going to hit \$66, I think, you know, hold the economy at a constant, which— sure. And, and we'd probably be \$85. Next year. So, um, the technology changing has also driven change in the type of people who are coming through the door on a daily basis. Yeah. So we've got, you know, super smart PhDs in biomechanics and other types of bodily movement and function and cognitive, and then the human-machine interface, and then all the high-tech stuff that happens in the machine. Who, who are there on a daily basis.

J**Jason Duff** 27:52

Has it been, you know, in the recruitment standpoint, going from 300 to 500, a lot of people probably listening, it's like, that, that sounds like impossible in a labor market that we're at now. Can you speak to some of the things that you and your HR team and others are trying to onboard to be a company that people want to work at?

B**Brett Roubinek** 28:13

Well, that's, that's like a whole nother podcast.

J**Jason Duff** 28:16

Yeah, well, I look from the outside in and I recognize guys in the area, I happen to know a lot of TRC employees, and one thing that I just noticed, and I can kind of read it on their face, I can hear when they talk about when they go into their job every day, it's a place they like to work. And obviously there's something happening at the leadership level to make that happen.

B**Brett Roubinek** 28:37

I think it's the people. But yeah, but yeah, people, people do love working, and that goes back to what I talked about at the beginning of my TRC time, the interviews, and that sense of ownership. And the relationships. Like, every kind of survey tool that we've used over the last 6 years, one of the top-ranked parts of working at TRC is always people. And so, well, it's, it's not just people, it's actually all of this inner, interpersonal relationships that develop when you spend that amount of time someplace because you're not in your home, right? And so it's those interpersonal relationships and the fact that you can sit down in a meeting or sit down at lunch or sit down on a break and have conversations with people and know about their families and where they came from, their backgrounds. Like, that stuff works.

J**Jason Duff** 29:27

Yeah. And we on this podcast, we've talked about, you know, why the, the Midwest, you know, specifically we're biased to Ohio being a great place to, uh, run and operate a business. And, uh, you know, we also talk about how people are the most important asset. And by starting with that, I mean, you mentioned that's what made you want to come back and, and what led into this opportunity to begin with was the people of this part of the country. And, uh, I don't know, I just think it's really cool and how the impact— now you're talking 500 jobs in East Liberty, uh, area, you know, that's reaching here, we're in Bellefontaine, but I'm sure beyond, um, you know, pulling in those PhDs. And, um, I don't know, I, I just think that's really cool. It matters. And the other thing I'll say is that as we were walking around town today, you know, things were very different in Bellefontaine 15 years ago. You know, 80% of the first floors of our storefronts were vacant and empty. And it took some people to recognize there were really great bones here and there were, there's a lot of history, but we've got to innovate and we've got to think for what we're going to do in the future to be competitive, to be creative, and listening to the community of what, what they desired it to be. And I think that's part of the success is we needed restaurants, we needed places for people to shop, we needed, especially for young people, places for them to live. And, you know, we, we on the podcast today have these margaritas and part of how that came about is as Brett was walking and touring today, he recognized the Flying Pepper Cantina, and Lauren Humberto were excited to have him as future guests coming up in season 2 of the show. But they, the TRC, had Lauren Humberto's food truck years ago before that was even like a thing of bringing the food truck to the employer. And I think you mentioned to me it, it drew some, some, some questions of why we bring in a food truck to the TRC, right?

B**Brett Roubinek** 31:21

Yeah, and that's another thing. Like, you know, as we were growing up, TRC wasn't talked about. It was behind the berm and it was all the secret stuff that was going on.

J**Jason Duff** 31:28

Yeah, because even now it's not open to the public, right?

B**Brett Roubinek** 31:30

It's not open to the public, but we're talking about it more. We're doing things like this where we're talking about it. But like, I think all good initiatives, they're employee-led. And so we had one employee who raised his hand and said, said, it's 20 minutes to get to any place with food. It's 20-minute drive to here, to Bellefontaine, right? Why can't we have a food truck? And everybody's like, oh, well, because it's confidentiality, right?

J**Jason Duff** 31:57

There's rules for this and this and all that. All the nos, right? Just hear all the nos, all the negatives, all the nos.

B**Brett Roubinek** 32:03

And so the first food truck showed up, and 25 minutes later they were out of food. And the next one showed up, different 25 minutes later, they're out of food. And every time a food truck came out the first time, they ran out of food. Because it's, you know, on, on certain work days, there will be 1,200 people who enter the gates. Because it's more than just us. It's our clients. It's Honda's people who work there on a daily basis. Um, so yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 32:28

Well, in that connection of the TRC and other companies and consumers falling in love with food for the Flying Pepper gave them the confidence and the abilities to then invest in opening up their brick and mortar. And you see in our communities how we're all interconnected and related. And I think if you get leaders and folks talking with each other about what their challenges are and then what opportunities there are. And again, I think today having Brett and his team come around and visit downtown Belfountain, some ahas that, that maybe they weren't aware of is that we've got a whole network of great Airbnbs here in the downtown. So imagine they're bringing in engineers and visitors coming to work in short-term contracts, that they want nice quality housing. And yes, there are hotels up the road, but those hotels may not have kitchens. Those hotels may not be the authentic quality experience that we have to offer. And so You know, it's connecting what people don't know with the, the problems that they have, and that is entrepreneurship. That's how we in our small towns can, can have everyone win.

B**Brett Roubinek** 33:41

That's right. Yeah, that's right.

J**Jason Duff** 33:44

I love that.

B**Brett Roubinek** 33:44

And I'll be occupying an Airbnb soon. Katie, Katie and I will be back.

J**Jason Duff** 33:48

Oh, we'd love to have you. Undoubtedly. Love that. We'd love that. Awesome. Um, so, you know, for our audience, we have a lot of, you know, entrepreneurs, and we also talk a lot about, um, Oh, economic development. And so I know in previous, like, I don't know, this seems fitting for this conversation. In previous episodes, we've talked about the importance of having EV chargers, you know, in our small downtown in rural Ohio, believe it or not. So I don't know, do you have any words of wisdom as we think about, you know, the impact that thinking ahead in the area of transportation can have from an economic development standpoint?

B**Brett Roubinek** 34:30

I think, I think access and mobility are it. And so thinking about how do we move people, whether it's in mass or small groups, and people who couldn't move otherwise, is going to be the kind of holy grail. And so I couldn't write the algorithm, right, for the impact on on, uh, on economic development. Yeah. But I think the ones that figure that out— and like, the layout of Bellefontaine is fantastic— um, I think the ones that figure that out are the ones who win in the end. And I think the small towns are probably best suited. While the resources might not be there on first blush, um, small towns aren't overbuilt. And like, the quality of life is there. And so when it comes to new infrastructure It's probably easier in a small town, probably less expensive. You start moving freeways and interchanges, right?

J**Jason Duff** 35:28

I think there's a lot of wisdom in, in those comments of how we help people that currently are not mobile be more mobile, and then how can we be more efficient as people are traveling from point A to point B. Um, there is a lot of conversation, and we're seeing the shift happening here locally with moving from combustible engines to electronic vehicles. And that amongst Honda, who is a major employer in our area, requires a big shift of all their suppliers. In that shift, there's a lot of excitement right now, but there's also a lot of uneasiness. How do you think about those changes and help, you know, your leaders or your employees and your, you know, folks kind of think and, and, and be prepared, but also ask the right questions. Like, how do you think about that?

B**Brett Roubinek** 36:24

So I think about it as a path that we're walking down, and it doesn't have a destination. So, like, transportation started when? Probably when the wheel was created, right? Great. And then some dude had a unicycle that had a gyroscope on it, and that came later. So, so —so it's not a destination. You know, part of the path that we've been on for the, like, the last 100 years has been internal combustion. And now there's a shift to electrification. But is that the destination? I don't think so. I think that it's just part of the path. And so all of these companies have to evolve. And the successful ones will be the ones who recognize it soonest begin to work. They may not make the change first, but they begin to work and perfect it, and then they successfully, according to their balance sheets and everything else, their customer base, then they make the transition when the time is right. But I don't— yeah, I don't think, uh, I don't think electrification is going to be the end. It's just another step along the way.

J**Jason Duff** 37:35

Interesting. History is so fun to study. We— and make up. Well, people like to rewrite it too. You know, we take these leaps and jumps with all good intentions, and then there's usually a recoil and a few steps back. And it does seem to be the topic of debate right now is, you know, the massive amounts of investments that are heading these directions. But there's these unintended consequences with the infrastructure that we need to support it. But I imagine from the testing side of things, as people are looking— it used to be with luxury vehicles, the, the acoustics was like, for that, for that clientele and that buyer, is the most important thing. But now as they're making major shifts in the types of technology that they're building vehicles, fuel efficiency, you know, the, the design aesthetic, like How— I mean, that's kind of got to probably be neat for your business as there's so many different metrics to test and look at. So do you kind of break things into departments with, with that, or to recruit that business? Like, how does that work?

B**Brett Roubinek** 38:44

So we will break it into departments by type of testing. Now, one thing that has changed, or we've seen the change, is we've got clients who are wanting to work with us across all of the types of testing that we do. So whereas they may have come for one type of testing in the past, they're, they're, uh, they're more — they're using more kind of across-the-board services from TRC. Um, the, the other cool thing is like we're technology agnostic. You kind of have to be, right? From that, from that standpoint, yeah, we're, we're kind of a, a supporting mechanism and an observer And if you're dry, if you're developing something new, yeah, we're going to figure out how to develop the tests that go along with it to serve your purposes so that when you put the product out there, you know it's going to be successful. Yeah. So, um, yeah, it's a, it's an interesting kind of intersection to sit at amongst all of this other kind of movement because, you know, we're not the ones developing it. Interesting. It's a cool perspective.

J**Jason Duff** 39:52

Cool. Um, anything else you want? What's next? Like, as you're thinking about, um, goals that you have as the leader there, um, opportunities for the future, what, what are you excited about right now?

B**Brett Roubinek** 40:07

I don't think any of us have trouble getting out of bed in the morning because the rate of change is so fast and, and the, the, um, the depth that we have to go in all the current technologies and what's coming tomorrow. Is there. So the kind of guts of the work are interesting. What's next? I want to continue to just refine, one, the business model, and two, continue to hopefully improve the employment experience. And, you know, as I said, every survey we've done over the last 6 years, people are at the top of that list. So we want to continue to deliver that as part of the kind of total comp package. I mean, we've got— and this is my— this is my HR people paid me for this, it's like \$20. So we do have jobs open. So if you go to trcpg.com, you'll be able to find the positions we have available, kind of a probably about 20 right now, but interesting stuff, some research scientist stuff, test driver stuff, technician stuff. So please go to trcpg.com. And is there part-time stuff there too? There is part-time stuff.

J**Jason Duff** 41:13

You know, that's just the thing I just want to mention. We have a lot of people that in this economy, you know, are looking for to make some extra money. And so I thank you because I, I know of people that have done part-time gigs, and that's probably also another lead gen where someone is working for somewhere else. They're, they're working for you part-time, but then they see greater opportunities.

B**Brett Roubinek** 41:32

Yeah. Yeah. And, and that's— there's a hook that goes in there, you know, part-time to full-time. But we — the, the total comp package between salary and the benefits, the benefits are fantastic. But PTO is great. Um, yeah, that's, that's awesome. What about continue to, continue to refine all of it and work with new clients? And that actually had a Silicon Valley company in with us today. They've been a client, they started about 5 years ago, they've become one of our top 3 clients. Wow. Um, over the last kind of 12 to 18 months, and, you know, had a conversation about the types of services they're going to want from us tomorrow, which are different. So it's going to kind of expand the pool of people that we're looking to employ. And it's going to just deepen our relationship with that company over the long term, which is— that in itself is a great vote. Yeah. Because they're a leader and they're a West Coast company and they're here, like, here in small town Ohio. Yep. Doing their thing. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 42:31

That's really cool. And I assume, you know, more growth. I mean, you've already grown, you know, by several hundred employees and built the infrastructure. I assume there's probably more space to continue growing and new types of tests as technology evolves, right?

B**Brett Roubinek** 42:46

Absolutely. Absolutely. Very cool.

J**Jason Duff** 42:48

Can you speak— what are ways that the TRC is having that community impact beyond the employment? Is there anything else related to the ways that your team is serving or giving back or things that you're doing in the industry that you're pretty proud of?

B**Brett Roubinek** 43:02

So I think that as I've discovered, as I became kind of ensconced in TRC, that was, that was one thing that always happened in the past, you know, supported local United Way and all of those types of activities. And we continue to do those, those types of things. Now we're at a point where we're kind of looking around, and I think we talked about this in our first meeting, we're looking around and saying, how can we be additive to the community? Is it going out and meeting with high school kids and talking to them about careers in engineering? And regardless of, you know, gender, just like, okay, here's the deal, here's going to be the demand in the future, this is an opportunity for every single one of you, right?

J**Jason Duff** 43:49

Which in the past it hasn't been. And, and you— another thing that I do think there are some really great initiatives on local, um, local community to find ways to get more women involved in those engineering, science, math programs, um, which is exciting to see. We're pretty proud here in downtown Bellefontaine that in the last 15 years, the new businesses that have started here, 75% of them are women. And so there's like a rockstar group of leading ladies that are shaping this town. And, and I do think we're working as a community. One of the criticisms that has been in the past, and I think it's gotten a lot better, and you mentioned it as the strength of how you ended up finding Denison, is being exposed to people that are different, diverse backgrounds. How can we embrace and be a company, a community, a culture that is open to new people and new ideas? And being an international company, that, that's probably— again, I look from the outside in— that's kind of what one thing I think you guys are doing well and you're also working on too.

B**Brett Roubinek** 44:50

Yeah, and on a daily basis we're talking with Israeli companies. We're talking with companies in England and the rest of Europe. Yesterday we actually had visitors from Taiwan. Yeah. So, you know, whole sets of different customs and perspectives, which is, which is all what makes the world go round. That's right.

J**Jason Duff** 45:10

So you need some Airbnbs, right?

B**Brett Roubinek** 45:11

Yeah, that's right. I'm gonna solve that problem. I'm gonna talk to Katie as soon as this is over, and we're going to be, we're going to be booking one.

J**Jason Duff** 45:18

Awesome. We I appreciate that. Awesome. Uh, what were some of the professional— if you can try to call out one specific one, uh, that was professional development resource that was helpful for you along your career? And just thinking back, was there a training, a mentor, uh, you know, I, I know in the manufacturing industry there, there are certain kind of shifts that have happened, but is there anything like mind shift-wise? You— I learned this concept or read this book that really has kind of helped me along the way.

B**Brett Roubinek** 45:48

So I'm— I was a poor student. That, that was, that was not my gig.

J**Jason Duff** 45:54

And, um, we have a lot— you know, it's interesting, the number of like solid C students that have had in the podcast. I don't know what that is. It seems to be the average.

B**Brett Roubinek** 46:03

That's a, that's a pretty high— yeah, yeah. I mean, the good news is my daughters— and we've had this conversation, so they know that I was a poor student. Um, but the, the people that I've worked with across the board over like the last 20-whatever years, um, I've, I've made it a focus to learn every day something from the people, pretty much everybody I work with. And I've worked with some brilliant people and some people who were disguised but brilliant people, and so, um, have just kind of paid attention And I don't think there's a job experience that I could think back to that I didn't come away with, like, some way to improve my game, whatever it was. So, you know, like, going back to racing, I worked for the Baker family, Buck Baker and Buddy Baker. Buddy, you know, they were NASCAR champions. And, you know, that was a pretty cool phase of life because I watched Buddy in particular when I was a little kid.

J**Jason Duff** 47:04

Yeah, so just gleaning those lessons from the people around you, surrounding yourself with people that, uh, you number one said were different than you, um, and learning from them, like listening, observing, uh, that, that's a, you know, why it's maybe not an academic and, and reading a book and regurgitating what you read, but that observation intelligence of what can I learn from them or hear from them I, I have also found those opportunities some of the most valuable. And sometimes you're in a room, a lot of people that are smarter than you, you may not have the confidence. Like, I, I've struggled with that imposter syndrome at times where it's like, I don't belong at this table, but I'm grateful and thankful that I am around this table and I want to learn everything that I can. Exactly.

B**Brett Roubinek** 47:52

And that, I mean, the core of that is curiosity. So you got to have that. Whether it's like a new mic technology. Yeah. Or a new investing technology, or looking at new vehicles and what they're going to be tomorrow and how to solve those math problems. But like, the curiosity has to be there.

J**Jason Duff** 48:12

Yeah. Be comfortable with asking the right questions, or asking any questions, right?

B**Brett Roubinek** 48:16

Any questions. So that, that's, uh, yeah, I got to speak at Bellefontaine High School this morning. Oh, and hopefully one thing that those, those kids heard was what I started with my, my two older daughters at a very young age, which is what I call the power of the question. An unasked question gets the answer no. Hmm. So yeah. What, what were you afraid of? Yeah. What are you afraid of? You know, like Michael Jordan talked about the number of shots that he took and the number that he missed, right? Like, what are you afraid of? If you don't ask the question, it's going to be no.

J**Jason Duff** 48:49

That's already a failure.

B**Brett Roubinek** 48:50

Ask that question. Because it could be a yes. And guess what? You're going to learn along the way. Yeah. Well, that's a good one.

J**Jason Duff** 48:57

That's it. That's— I think that we, we wrap this up. No. Yeah. Thank you for being on the show today. I, I have never had a race car driver.

B**Brett Roubinek** 49:05

Um, and maybe, maybe still haven't. Yeah, I know.

J**Jason Duff** 49:09

Well, there's always that opportunity. We get the CR-V and let's do a few loops in the parking lot. Yeah, right. Well, you know, I think— thank you, Brett. But the— you can see how your, your background, and, and sometimes we don't know why we end up in certain situations or, or states or meeting certain people, but it's all part of that story and that, you know, how we ended up where we're at today. And I think where you're at, you're uniquely skilled and prepared to help this company, you know, better identify new clients, attract new people and new talent. And that came up a number of times today is How do I support my people and listen to my people? Because they are our greatest strength at the company. But then also doubling down on your region and your community. Yeah. To tell other people, this is why you're not going to want to do this training virtually. You're going to want to come and experience what's special about this region. Yeah. Not only for being able to take a job here, but bringing new clients to show off why your facilities are so special and unique. And why this community and the people that work here have built a world-class institution that continues to grow.

B**Brett Roubinek** 50:16

So yeah, and as I said, I mentioned at the beginning, you know, we're the small little company that we play on this global stage, mostly behind the curtain. And, and so we're a gem in that regard. And it's like Bellefontaine is the same. Bellefontaine is a gem, you know. Some people haven't heard about it, a lot of people will. A lot of people are finding out now. Yeah. And Ohio has others.

J**Jason Duff** 50:37

Right. Yeah. Well, let's keep telling that story. Thank you for being a guest on the show today.

B**Brett Roubinek** 50:41

Thanks for having me. I appreciate it. Yeah.

J**Jason Duff** 50:42

Last question for you is where can people keep up with TRC? Where are you at?

B**Brett Roubinek** 50:47

So trcpg.com on the web. You can go check us out on LinkedIn under the same name. You can check us out on Facebook. And I don't do a lot of social media, so I'm not going to be able to tell you where on Facebook. Yeah, but if you put Transportation Research Center, I'm sure, I'm sure you'll find it. Sure. We'll add those to the notes.

J**Jason Duff** 51:08

Great. Cool. Anything else? Let's do this. Thank you. All right. Well,

E**Ethan DeLeon** 51:11

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