

# Episode 72

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Ohio Caverns, West Liberty, tourism attractions, guided cave tours, small town tourism, economic development, visitors bureau, word of mouth marketing, family-owned business, gem mining, gift shop retail, day trip itineraries, Logan County, Champaign County, attraction collaboration

## SPEAKERS

Jason Duff, JD Harshfield, Ethan DeLeon

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**J JD Harshfield** 00:00  
We get so many people that come in from out of town, we like to know where these people can go after they're with us.

**J Jason Duff** 00:05  
Yeah.

**J JD Harshfield** 00:05  
So with being a part of these Chamber of Commerce and these visitors bureaus and things like that, that gives us a really good in, no matter how heavily we are involved in them. You know, there's always news, there's always new stuff going on, there's new events, there's new places opening up, you know, so it really, it gives us a good in.

**E Ethan DeLeon** 00:30  
Welcome to the Small Nation Podcast, brought to you by CoverLink Insurance, where people are more important than policies.

**J Jason Duff** 00:36  
On this show, we unpack lessons from entrepreneurs to break down development strategies and do deep dives on small town success. Our goal is to provide value to our listeners by hosting conversations that teach, inform, and inspire.

**E Ethan DeLeon** 00:48  
Hey everyone, my name is Ethan DeLeon, and I'm here in the studio with the founder and CEO of Small Nation, Jason Duff. Today we are excited to be host—

**J JD Harshfield** 00:55  
hosting a manager at the Ohio Caverns in West Liberty, Ohio, J.D. Harshfield. J.D., welcome. Hey, thank you. Thank you very much. Glad to be here.

J

**Jason Duff** 01:03

Yeah. JD, I love to highlight really cool businesses and destinations. And I have to say Ohio Caverns, when it comes to Ohio and unique places to visit, it is definitely in the top 3 best overall things to see in my list.

J

**JD Harshfield** 01:17

Sure. Well, thank you. Yeah. I like to think so.

J

**Jason Duff** 01:20

Well, I have to say like having your job, being able to be in a cave and be able to explore and work with guests and like being around rocks and crystals, that to me is super cool.

J

**JD Harshfield** 01:34

Yeah, it, it really is. I mean, it's something— it, it, it never gets old. No matter how many times you go through the cavern, no much— no matter how many times you, uh, go through the gift shop, it's always something new. It's always something exciting to see, and it, it, it creates a genuine love just for the atmosphere just by being there. It's really cool.

J

**Jason Duff** 01:51

So for someone that's never been to Ohio Caverns, can you tell us a little bit about where it's at, what is it, and what makes it so special?

J

**JD Harshfield** 01:59

Sure. Yeah. So Ohio Caverns was discovered in the 1897. We've been doing guided tours through the cavern since 1925. So, so yeah, quite a while doing that. Our tours, like I said, they are all guided. We do that from a protection standpoint just to really make sure that the cavern is safe and the people that go through are safe. Not that there's any potential harm to the people or anything. It's just, you know, just more or less a protection thing. But yeah, it's located right outside West Liberty, Ohio. Very, very scenic area. Very, a lot of the rolling hills down there in that part of the county. So people love coming to visit and they love the, you know, just the atmosphere of the small town feel of, you know, West Liberty and, you know, the charm of the area. Sure. Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 02:45

And if you think about it in the state, like where, can you tell like what county is it? Like what are some of the closest cities for people that have maybe never been there?

J

**JD Harshfield** 02:52

Yeah. So oddly enough, our park is actually in Logan and Champaign County. Both? Yeah, it's in Logan and Champaign County. Yep. The town of Bellefontaine is just about 10 or 15 minutes north. Urbana is just about 15 minutes south. And then our little town of West Liberty, about 4 miles.

J

**Jason Duff** 03:08

So if you drive around the state, there's a good chance you will see a billboard that says Ohio Caverns. Right. And the next thing that that billboard says is open all year round.

J

**JD Harshfield** 03:19

Absolutely. Yep.

J

**Jason Duff** 03:20

Brilliant marketing, by the way.

J

**JD Harshfield** 03:21

Yep. And I mean, that's what we keep it. We keep it simple. Ohio Caverns open all year. I mean, we really try to push that. Even our Google listing says Ohio Caverns open all year because we want people to know the only, I mean, the only literal days that we are ever closed is Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day. So 363 days a year. Being a natural thing in nature, how does that work? How are you able to stay open all year round? Yeah, so the cavern itself is 54 degrees every day, never changes.

J

**Jason Duff** 03:48

Consistently?

J

**JD Harshfield** 03:49

Consistently. Wow. So it could be 110 or -10 outside, it doesn't make any difference. It's, it's always the same. That's super cool. So yeah, so we benefit from that, obviously.

J

**Jason Duff** 03:58

Well, I mean, no, the thing of it is it's open all year. Uh, love your marketing. The other thing that I've noticed is, you know, I like to travel around the country to different places, and I've been to a few different caves before, but, um, I, I noticed like learning more about your caves and what's special about Ohio Caverns is it's kind of branded as America's Most Colorful Cave.

J

**JD Harshfield** 04:19

Yeah. Right.

J

**Jason Duff** 04:19

Yeah.

**J****JD Harshfield** 04:19

Why? Well, that was a nickname that was given to us decades ago just by visitors coming. They, you know, would often say that. And then one specific publication listed that. And so we rolled with it. Yeah. And I mean, it's true. It is extremely, extremely colorful. A lot of the caves you go to, you know, a lot of shades of brown and things like that. But the mineral concentration in the soil and the limestone and and the shale level above the cavern, it all just kind of washes down with the water and it leaves these beautiful color stains along the walls. I mean, anything from purples, blacks, blues, reds, oranges, and yellows. I mean, it's a menagerie of colors. It's beautiful down there.

**J****Jason Duff** 04:59

Can you imagine that when back in— you said it was discovered in 1920?

**J****JD Harshfield** 05:04

It was discovered in 1897.

**J****Jason Duff** 05:06

1897. What did that have to be like? Like they're in the field, they see a small hole, like kind of walk us through that.

**J****JD Harshfield** 05:13

Yeah. Yeah. So it was a 17-year-old farmhand. The land landowner and him had noticed a small sinkhole developing over time. They just— they used it as a hog wallow, places for hogs to stay cool because it was always damp. It was always cool. And eventually it kept getting bigger and bigger, and then it started getting lower and lower, and they wanted to know what was going on. So on August 17th, 1897, 17-year-old— his name was Robert Knopfsinger— he grabbed a shovel, dug in through the center of the sinkhole, and he struck limestone. There was a small crack in it. So he widened that limestone and then lowered himself down into the crack of the earth. And just like that, became the first living thing in the cavern. So, I mean, never Native Americans in the cavern. Wow. No animals, anything. So pretty miraculous right there in a hill in West Liberty. Yeah, that's pretty incredible. So now, is it, is it like privately owned or how do— like, what does that look like now? Yeah. Yeah, it is privately owned. So after about 25 years after the discovery of family came up from Dayton. They purchased the land, mapped out the cavern system, and they determined they wanted to dig it out to make it walkable for tours. Yeah. So they did these— they did 3 and a half years, buckets and shovels hauling mud out of the cavern, anywhere from 6 inches of mud all the way up to 6 or 7 feet in some areas. So a lot of mud. And then 1925, they opened as Ohio Caverns, started giving guided tours, and it's still owned today by the same family that bought it in the '20s.

**J****Jason Duff** 06:44

Wow, that's incredible. And that's the Smith family?

J

**JD Harshfield** 06:46

Yes. Yes.

J

**Jason Duff** 06:47

And that's now 3 generations?

J

**JD Harshfield** 06:49

It would be 1, 2, 3.

J

**Jason Duff** 06:51

Yeah. Wow. I mean, I just think stories like that of keeping, whether it's a family farm or a small business or family business, keeping it in the family. But what I've noticed from the outside, living in this community for 30-plus years, is that they've made major investments in improving the attractions. Can you speak to a little bit of some of those changes?

J

**JD Harshfield** 07:12

Yeah, yeah. Especially in the last 20 years, we've really added a lot and updated a lot and, you know, really brought things up to a more modern level. One of the biggest things we did was in 2012, we opened up a brand new part of the cavern with what's called the Natural Wonder Tour. This entrance is actually handicap accessible, so we can get wheelchairs into there, into that part of the cavern. It's really neat. It kind of takes you down a little nature walk to get down to the cavern, and then there's a bridge that overlooks a sinkhole. And then you dip right into the cavern, into the sinkhole, about 35 feet below the surface. So opened it for multiple reasons. One, the handicap accessibility, but two, to give it more of the natural cave vibe, you know, going in from outside into a sinkhole. And it's really neat. Yeah, that's super cool. I mean, obviously you're very knowledgeable about all this, so I'm a little curious. I know we talked a little bit about before, but for our listeners, What is your story?

J

**Jason Duff** 08:08

Did you grow up in the area always knowing about the Ohio Caverns? And then how did you, you know, start working there?

**J****JD Harshfield** 08:14

Sure, sure. Yeah. So I started there when I was a— gosh, a sophomore in high school. I just started. I wanted to work there because I grew up just down the road from it. Yeah. And we would always go there for family, you know, functions or, you know, just to visit the cavern. And so I got a job there. And started working as a tour guide, worked there for multiple years as a guide. Then I graduated high school, went to college, got a degree in college. When I was done with that, I was kind of, you know, looking for jobs in my degree field. And then a more full-time position opened up. And so I told him I'd be interested, worked out a deal, and here I am 14 years from the first day I started there. Here I am. So. Yeah, no, that's really cool. So what keeps you excited about it? Like what keeps you coming back 14 years later? I mean, you're obviously very passionate about this experience for people. So what is it for you that keeps you coming back? Yeah, so one of the cool thing, I always tell people this, especially like when we get new staff in, I always tell them the same thing. It's not like you're working in a store or at a fast food restaurant or anything like that. When people come to see you, they're excited to be there. They're happy to be there. They're, they're ready to be entertained. They're ready to see something really cool.

**J****Jason Duff** 09:39

Yeah.

**J****JD Harshfield** 09:39

And so you just have to take that and run with it. I mean, you just have to promote—

**J****Jason Duff** 09:44

not—

**J****JD Harshfield** 09:44

you don't have to promote yourself. They're already here. Yeah. You just have to really make sure that they get a great experience and that they walk away with, with the wow factor that we— that the cavern naturally presents. Yeah. So You just have to treat them right. Yeah, we're showing off Mother Nature. Yeah, yeah, exactly. Very cool. Well, kind of as, uh, Jason alluded to earlier, it's, uh, no secret around here that the caverns are a huge economic, uh, driver. All right, over there.

**J****Jason Duff** 10:10

No, I swallowed my water wrong.

**J****JD Harshfield** 10:12

Oh no, of course. All good. Um, and, uh, you know, so on episode 62 of the Small Nation podcast, we talked to Shannon Reese and Anna Loudon about tourism, and, uh, the Ohio Caverns came up quite a bit, you know, and it plays a pretty big role in tourism in this part of the state. So in your opinion, you know, this podcast is geared towards entrepreneurs and economic development professionals and people like that.

J

**Jason Duff** 10:38

But in your opinion, why is it important to collaborate with, you know, other people like that, like your visitors bureau, you know, your chamber, other business owners, things like that?

J

**JD Harshfield** 10:48

Sure. Well, item number one, we always like to know what else is going on in our area, not necessarily from a, hey, what are we going to do thing, Yeah, but we get so many people that come in from out of town. We like to know where these people can go after they're with us. Yeah. So with being a part of these Chamber of Commerce and these visitors bureaus and things like that, that gives us a really good in no matter how heavily we are involved in them. You know, there's always news, there's always new stuff going on, there's new events, there's new places opening up, you know. So it really, it gives us a good in. So we feel that's a a big role that we like to, or a big part of what we'd like to do is be involved in that kind of stuff. Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 11:28

Well, serving on a group like that, you mentioned that being in the know of what's happening and what's going on, but I also know financially committing as a member and then also serving your time as an advisor, those groups have to benefit from that.

J

**JD Harshfield** 11:44

Yeah, I would think they would, not necessarily from from me personally, but I think just having that role, it really puts us in a right spot so that not only we know what's going on with them, but they know what's going on with us and then they can reference people our way.

J

**Jason Duff** 12:03

Do you know how many visitors come to Ohio Caverns annually?

J

**JD Harshfield** 12:06

Yeah, we average anywhere between 60,000 and 70,000 people a year. And I guess I'll pivot here and ask Jason, you've been working in the Bellefontaine area, which is in Logan County, and the Ohio Caverns quite extensive.

J

**Jason Duff** 12:20

And before the show, you're telling us that it's actually in two different counties, Logan and Champaign. But, um, hearing or having, you know, an asset like this in, you know, the area, and you obviously have, uh, real estate in lots of the downtown here in Bellefontaine, how does that, you know, impact you? Well, I know it has a direct impact on the, you know, what JD was mentioning is that they're looking, when guests come to the area, they're looking for other things to do.. So if they're taking a family outing to Ohio Caverns, they're probably going to spend a few hours there. But the next thing is they're going to probably jump on the internet to Google to find out what are there other things to do in the area. And that could be first off in the community of West Liberty, you have other attractions like Piat Castles, which are incredible. And then you can make a stop at the train depot in West Liberty to enjoy Marie's Candy, which is family-owned, just you know, a really destination business. And then you're probably gonna be looking for a place to, where can I get a cup of coffee? And where can I get lunch or dinner? And so if your community can be a destination that complements the attraction, there is a huge economic upside because people, after they have a great experience and they're happy, they're willing to spend a lot of money. And what I have heard, and several of our businesses benefit, had benefited from, is that they will come and walk around and shop in places like downtown Urbana, West Liberty, and we here in Bellefontaine benefit big time.

J

**JD Harshfield** 13:59

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 14:00

And part of it is curating and making it easy to work with your attraction so that they know what there is to do. And this is something just even having you here today, like, You know, as you kind of think about the communities that you work with, are there like things or ideas that you're like, we, we really would like to integrate better with the other attractions in the area? Or, you know, whether it's signage or brochures, or, you know, what are the kind of things that you could maybe give advice if there's someone listening that's a small business owner, and they have a really great attraction in their area to better be known or found out to help that attraction?

J

**JD Harshfield** 14:42

Sure. So one of our big selling, selling points, one of our best advertising is word of mouth, you know, word of mouth advertising, just getting the word out there that people either had the good experience or that it was, you know, just something really cool to go see. And so getting, getting it going, making it go that way makes— really encourages people to come just Good Lord.

J

**Jason Duff** 15:07

Experience.

J

**JD Harshfield** 15:07

Trying to spit it out.



**Jason Duff** 15:07

You're good.



**JD Harshfield** 15:08

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I mean, it just— the word of mouth thing is so valuable. And no matter how many different brochures you put out or how many different signs you put out, word of mouth is going to get more people in the door.



**Jason Duff** 15:19

So to complement your tour— tourist or your tour guides, I should say, we have also heard feedback that they have actually mentioned some of the area businesses on the tour of places that you should want to see or stop or visit while you're in town. And that going to your word of mouth, like there's nothing more impressionable of someone in trust at your venue sharing, this is another great thing to do. I would also share, we are hosting in another few weeks on our podcast, the owner of Ohio Road Trips Facebook group, that's Brandy Gleason. And what I notice in that group, there's over a million people in that one Facebook group. But a lot of people will post in their pictures or say, hey, I just visited Ohio Caverns. What are other cool things to do in the area? Oh yeah. And then users will comment suggesting different places to see and experience and maybe even throw some photos in there that if you just get 50,000 people out of that million that's viewing that, do you know what that translates from an economic development standpoint? Big dollars, right? Big dollars. And so, you know, really integrating your attractions in your region. And I think the VB Bureau or the VB Visitors Bureau Council or Bureau is a really great group to do that. Yeah. But I also think we need to be intentional of helping people with their day trip itineraries on what to do.



**JD Harshfield** 16:56

Yeah, this is where I was going to kind of jump in here because I think it's easy, you know, as Small Nation, we hear a lot of complaints sometimes that the traffic is just not there. People are not coming into the businesses or things like that. And I know, you know, working with the marketing team here at Small Nation, we put a lot of effort in, you know, creating day trip experiences like you're saying and posting those online. So if anyone wants to come to, you know, check out the Ohio Caverns, we want to also, you know, associate the other businesses so that they, they have a done-for-you map, you know, that they can follow for the day. And, you know, for economic development folks, they know that that's a very, very valuable impact, kind of what you were saying.



**Jason Duff** 17:38

And not only—

J

**JD Harshfield** 17:38

I mean, some of the resources in our community and other communities, they might be more seasonal thing. We have Mad River Mountain, which, you know, in our cold months here in Ohio, there's snowboarding and skiing and things like that. But what's really cool about the Ohio Caverns is it's year round, right? Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a benefit no matter who's coming to town for what. I mean, it could be a concert or it could be just going to the mountain in the wintertime. Yeah. We benefit off that. Yeah, for sure.

J

**Jason Duff** 18:07

So to our entrepreneurs or other developers or anyone who's trying to see the small businesses in their spaces succeed, I think, you know, that didn't just happen. It takes a lot of people.

J

**JD Harshfield** 18:19

Making an effort.

J

**Jason Duff** 18:20

I mean, the marketing team and the efforts that you guys are doing, you know, to draw those people, you know, that, like I said, it doesn't just happen, but it's worth the time to go up and create those materials. I think this exercise might be interesting is, you know, when the caverns first started out and there were tours, you would buy a ticket just for a tour. But, you know, with the family and the team out there, you found other entrepreneurial ways to enhance the guest experience. Yeah. And also make more money. Mm-hmm. Can you share a little bit, what are some of the other things that you sell and do? And instead of just having one tour, you've got multiple tours. Can you kind of speak to that a little bit?

J

**JD Harshfield** 18:58

Yeah, yeah. So we do have multiple tour options depending on the time of the year when you come. Anything from a 25-minute handicap-accessible tour up to, you can spend up to 2 hours in the cavern. So I mean, there's definitely multiple options and different levels of experiences people can do. But of course, you always want to stick around a little longer. You want to do, you know, we sit on a 35-acre facility, so we've got plenty of room to work with. So not only do we have, you know, multiple picnic pavilions, there's a large playground. But the other things that we have, we have a large gift shop and rock shop. We spend a lot of time picking out, you know, handpicking rocks, frankly. I mean, just the things that we think will sell the best. There's been a lot of trial and error, of course, but there's a lot of stuff that we bring in, anything from rocks and minerals to standard, you know, name-drop merchandise. And of course, you know, snacks and drinks and things like that. So that's—

J

**Jason Duff** 19:57

You can even mine for gemstones.

J

**JD Harshfield** 19:58

Well, that's what I was going to say. Exactly right. So that's a big part of our operation. But the biggest part, biggest outdoor offshoot of that starts in the gift shop. You can go in, you can purchase bags of sand. That have rocks inside of them, things like that. You take it out and you sift out the sand and dirt there on site. And so, you know, a big part of our focus is making sure, you know, you can go anywhere you can find a putt-putt course, you can go anywhere you can find a maze or, you know, just, you know, any kind of those cheesy tourist, you know, activities, family activities. There you go.

J

**Jason Duff** 20:28

Yeah.

J

**JD Harshfield** 20:28

Family activities.

J

**Jason Duff** 20:29

Yeah.

J

**JD Harshfield** 20:29

It's just we want to make sure everything's related to the core experience of the Ohio Caverns. And so anything that we can do like that, we're going to do. And so the gem mining was a perfect activity. You know, they range from \$6 all the way up to \$50 a bag. People don't think twice about spending \$50 for a bag because they're getting an additional experience with it. Yeah, it's just— it's fantastic. So while we're kind of talking about, you know, the business model of, of, you know, this kind of thing, You know, talk to me about, uh, you know, your, your marketing and, and where you're targeting. Um, is it mostly local traffic?

J

**Jason Duff** 21:09

Is it, you know, where are you pulling people from?

J

**JD Harshfield** 21:12

Man, I tell you, we could spend \$100,000 a year on local marketing, not going to make a difference. We can— you just can't pull people from your own backyard. It just doesn't happen. So, um, while we do, we are involved in some community events and we do some sponsoring and, you know, have a presence in a lot of these things. We try to spend most of our time and our focus as far as advertising goes outside of the tri-county area, frankly. Yeah, just outside, not necessarily the big cities. I mean, we do target the Columbus and the Dayton and even, you know, Cleveland, things like that. But just getting out away from our area because from an attraction standpoint, I mean, you, you can, you could probably attest to this too. If it's an attraction and it's close to your house, generally you don't do it because you know you could always do it and you don't appreciate it. You don't appreciate it because it's right there. And so you're going to travel far and wide and you're going to do all kinds of things, but you're just not going to do what's in your backyard. So yeah, which is, I, again, I think it speaks to the power of having an attraction like that in the, the area because it's not just getting your people who are shopping local, which we appreciate everyone who does, but moreover, you're one of the few, you know, that can actually bring people in consistently from all over. Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 22:30

Which is really cool. Tell us like in terms of the, you've probably interacted with thousands of guests, like any unique guest stories or situations that stand out to you?

J

**JD Harshfield** 22:40

Oh man, yeah. I mean, there's quite a few, you know, people travel from all over the world and so everyone's got new stories and new things that they're trying out. In anything from, you know, there's the crystal healers, you know, the people that come and they do like the crystal healing and stuff, not necessarily with our cave formations, but, you know, they, they spend a lot of time and they like to, they like to spread a lot of their wisdom.

J

**Jason Duff** 23:02

I bet you've learned a lot.

J

**JD Harshfield** 23:03

Yeah, I've learned quite a bit. Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, you know, people from other cultures and other countries, I mean, when they come and, you know, interacting with these people is unique, not only because they're there and they're, you know, they've never been in your area, but each culture has their own way of just working and you really don't notice it until you're working face to face with them. And so, yeah, learning those cultures, it's just really, really cool. Yeah, super cool. You said that some of the things in the gift shop are things that you guys find, but you've been giving tours for a long time and have walked probably a lot of those caves. What's the coolest thing that you found? Well, in the cavern itself, we don't take anything out of the cavern. Sure. But if you work there for so long, there's kind of a reward. We take these staff. It's actually 2,000 hours is what the cutoff is. Once you get up to 2,000 hours, we have a portion of cavern that we take you through as kind of a reward. It takes about 4.5, 5 hours or more to go through this area. And it's all crawling. I mean, there's no lights, there's no paths. It's just headlamps, crawling. Seeing what's back there. So yeah, so that's one of my favorite parts and one of the coolest things you ask. Yeah, found — I mean, just going back through there, you always see new, new angles and new things that very, very few people in the grand scheme of even the world have even come close to seeing. So that's pretty cool.

J

**Jason Duff** 24:27

So stalactites and stalagmites, what, what are the differences?

J

**JD Harshfield** 24:31

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Different names depending on where the formations are located in the cavern. Stalactites hold on tight to the ceiling. Stalagmites might get to the ceiling. Ah, yeah, yeah. So kind of cheesy, but it helps. Eventually they grow together. When they do, they're called columns. They just go ceiling to floor. But there's columns all over the place and formations all over the place. Variety of different names for different types of formations down there, and anything ranging from cave bacon all the way to, you know, there's little stalagmites on the ground look like little fried eggs. So I mean, just, just all kinds of things.

J

**Jason Duff** 25:09

Because you're in this business, when you travel to other places, do you seek out certain types of attractions or other places to grow your knowledge or to improve the operation?

J

**JD Harshfield** 25:21

Definitely. Yeah, my family does a lot of caves. Yeah, we do a lot of caves. Anywhere we go, if there's a cave, you know, Daddy's wanting to stop by and see what's in the store and see the visitor center. Most of the time we know the people too, so that helps when we go see people. But But yeah, we spend a lot of time with that. I'm really interested when we go in these places to see how they're laid out, because to me, traffic flow in these places is almost as important as anything else. You know, it's fine if you've got 10 people in there and, you know, things will flow fine. But really, when it's busy, that's when it's most impressive to me to see how the operation is actually flowing and how they're moving people through and where people are spending their time. And so when we go to these places, like you're asking, I really look for that stuff just because that interests me. I mean, just— right, yeah, to see that aspect.

J

**Jason Duff** 26:08

Are people planning and buying their tickets in advance before they arrive at the venue? Like, how, how has the business changed with technology? Like, are you able to schedule and plan better with people buying in advance?

J

**JD Harshfield** 26:22

Yeah, so I mean, we, we always schedule groups, and I mean, you know, school groups come in and everything. We do a lot of that, but we, we haven't got into the game of time ticketing or anything yet, which I think is going to be soon. It's coming down the pipe. It's a big, you know, anywhere you go, you can buy a time ticket for a 10:15 tour or anything like that. Right. But yeah, we do, do, we do sell online tickets and that does help. We've got kind of a formula. It's kind of a rough formula, but we— most people, between the time they buy their ticket and the time they're walking through the door, it's normally 24 to 48 hours. And so you can judge it pretty easily. You know, we've been doing it so long, we have a, we have kind of an ongoing list. We, I'll just tell you, we have a list that we keep track of. We know exactly how many people came every day going back multiple, multiple years. Wow. And so oddly enough, no matter how that day falls, you know, Saturday or wherever the weekend falls, similar patterns, it's very similar. And so we just kind of roll with that. And that's how we schedule our staff. We base it off that. And it's so close.

J

**Jason Duff** 27:26

Is there a busy season?

J

**JD Harshfield** 27:27

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 27:28

Oh yeah. The summer or what would that be?

J

**JD Harshfield** 27:29

Yeah, summer.

J

**Jason Duff** 27:30

So kids are out or families are out and they're looking for things to do. Yep.

J

**JD Harshfield** 27:33

Yep. Memorial Day to Labor Day. That's— we're rolling. Okay. Do you know how many employees? Does that fluctuate throughout the year or what does that look like? Yeah. Yeah. So when we're doing our two tours, we obviously need a little more staff. Yeah. So it's not uncommon to have 20, 25 guides on staff in one day. Yeah. And then moving, you know, moving people through the cavern that way, plus our gift shop staff, plus management. And we have a bus driver as well. So Jeez. So yeah, you know, you can see 30 people in one day as far as a staffing standpoint goes. But, you know, on payroll, 40 probably is probably our peak number. 40, right around 40 employees. Yeah. Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 28:12

We have hosted the CEO of Harvest Host.

J

**JD Harshfield** 28:16

Oh, yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 28:16

And I think— are you guys a Harvest Host site?

J

**JD Harshfield** 28:19

Oh, we love Harvest Host.

J

**Jason Duff** 28:20

Yeah, I thought that was the case. So, you know, the RVing industry is just been blowing up. And Joel, who we had as a previous guest on the podcast, was highlighting some statistics around that. But do you have RVers that come to the caverns and just using Harvest Hosts, just hang out and check out the experience?

J

**JD Harshfield** 28:39

Yeah, Harvest Hosts, that's such a great— I would love to talk to that guy and literally shake his hand because it's such a great organization. It doesn't cost you hardly anything to be a part of. You're a member. These people come out and they Everybody that's a part of the program is very respectful because they have very strict guidelines, which is a good thing. It really is. They ask that wherever these people stay, they come in and they spend a little bit of money. They don't have to go on tour or anything with us. They can just come in and buy some drinks in the gift shop. But yeah, Harvesters asks that they come in, they spend some time, spend a little bit of money and just give thanks to the business for letting them stay because they stay for free. Right. But yeah, the Harvest Host program is really cool. Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 29:26

Good.

J

**JD Harshfield** 29:26

Okay. That's cool. Do you have like dedicated camp spots or is it just like parking lot? Yeah. Yeah. We've got a couple of different areas. I mean, we don't do any other camping other than that. Yeah. So, I mean, that kind of speaks to how we like— how well we like Harvest Host. We don't do any other camping other than that. But yeah, just a couple areas we put them and whenever they come check it out, they're pretty happy with the spots. So yeah, it's nice.

J

**Jason Duff** 29:49

All right, at this time we're going to take a quick break to hear a word from our sponsors. Tired of gyms not being open when you want to work out? Then check out the region's best 24-hour fitness center, Anytime Fitness, in downtown Bellefontaine. They have all the equipment you need and the best trainers and coaches to help you get in the best shape of your life.

J

**JD Harshfield** 30:04

It's truly your one-stop shop for fitness. Anytime Fitness is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Brew Fountain's voted best beer bar in Ohio.

J

**Jason Duff** 30:14

Come visit their award-winning team in downtown Bellefontaine for fresh local craft beer Soups, salads, sandwiches, wine on tap, and handcrafted cocktails. And they're always available to cater your next event with their box lunches and platters.

J

**JD Harshfield** 30:27

Cheers to Small Nation.

J

**Jason Duff** 30:29

As you think about things that are on the wish list and kind of future goals and plans for the Caverns, is anything that you're currently like looking to develop or, or implement that you've seen in other places, or maybe you're working on bringing to the operation?

J

**JD Harshfield** 30:45

Sure. Yeah. The time ticketing is a big one. Okay. Yeah, we do anticipate adding that. I don't— I mean, there's no guidelines on years or how far out we are, but we would definitely want to implement that because it's so common and, you know, people are almost expecting it at this point, you know, a timed entry. So we got to figure out some logistics on our end, how we need to work that. But that's probably the next big, big thing that we're, you know, not necessarily to improve guest experience specifically, but just that's the biggest change that we probably have coming down. Yeah. Yeah, very cool. Yeah, super cool. And for listeners who may be hearing about Ohio Caverns for the first time somehow, how long are the, you know, tours and what are some of the different options? Yeah. Yeah. So each tour ranging— the smallest one is that handicap accessible tour. It's 20-25 minutes. It's just a little in and back out. But normally our tours, 45 minutes to an hour, no matter what option you have. So, yeah. So yeah, it goes quite a ways into the cavern. It's— each one's a little under a mile in length. So quite a bit, quite a bit that is seen down there.

J

**Jason Duff** 31:52

Sure. The power of storytelling. And, you know, as you're hiring tour guides and teaching them, you mentioned that your guests are looking for an experience. They want a show. They want to be entertained. How do you help and teach someone on how to be a good storyteller and tour guide?

J

**JD Harshfield** 32:11

Yeah, sure. It's almost one of those things you don't want to say you have it or you don't, but, but a lot of it just becomes— it's a natural thing for some people, some people it's not. We do quite a bit of training to get people up to, you know, the level that, you know, the minimum that we need them to be at. And that, I mean, it's quite a bit of training. There's tests and, I mean, one-on-ones with other experienced staff and things like that. But yeah, I mean, as far as being a storyteller and really projecting the Cavern in the way that we want it to be projected, it takes quite a bit of time and effort.

J

**Jason Duff** 32:48

One of the things that we work on with a lot of our retailers is when instead of just waiting for someone to come in the front door, if the store is slow, prop open your door and wave at people and welcome them in. And then when someone does walk in, one of the first questions that a lot of our merchants are saying is, what brings you to town today? Yeah, because it allows someone to drop their guard and have a conversation, maybe sharing where they are from, or maybe they say, we're new to the town. And if that happens, then that, that, that store clerk or, or that individual can then start to share. Well, let me tell you about my store, right? Let me tell you about the products that we sell. Let me walk you around and give you a tour of all the things that, that we have. That concept can be foreign to a lot of people in retail because some people haven't been taught how to sell or how to communicate and connect with someone. And I think Ohio Caverns, or maybe that's one thing that we can glean from attractions of what, why they're effective in creating an experience. And so a lot of reasons that Downtown Bellefontaine has got recognized is that we're kind of teaching these philosophies around the history of the town. We're also training the servers to navigate someone through a menu. I mean, instead of just throwing the menus down on the table, that happens a lot of restaurants and say, what you like? Yeah, right.

J

**JD Harshfield** 34:30

It's like, you'll get the same thing. Well, that's the thing.

J

**Jason Duff** 34:33

Someone can say, you know, hey, is this your first time dining with us? And if someone says yes, that really opens up to, um, let me tell you about our restaurant. Here's about the founder of the restaurant, or here's about the menu, and you walk through some of our most popular items, or, uh, there might be certain local ingredients that are used in this menu. It gives the control to, to be able to, to be the storyteller. And, uh, I also think that helps generate a better guest experience, and I also think that helps a restaurant make more money. Yeah. And I think you can tell when you work, you know, in a community or in a business where people are intentional about that. And you don't have to be like a slimy salesperson, right?

J

**JD Harshfield** 35:15

Like, oh no.

J

**Jason Duff** 35:15

Yeah. And you mentioned about being authentic, right? And I think that's something too. It's like, we can brag about, you know, how great a certain business is, but if it's not real, people pick up on that. And so just being authentic about If it's a world-famous pizzeria, which, you know, Brittany that owns 600 Downtown Brick Oven Pizzeria is now a 6-time world pizza champion.

J

**JD Harshfield** 35:38

Right.

J

**Jason Duff** 35:39

So there is clear evidence to say this is why she makes world-famous pizzas. Yeah. And I would say that has been a big connection, particularly with Ohio Caverns, because they're a very friendly, family-friendly establishment.

J

**JD Harshfield** 35:51

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 35:52

And we've had Brittany as a previous guest on the podcast and she shared one of her secret tools to helping families because she's been a busy mom, is the servers will give the kids dough balls at the table. Yeah. To play with. So mom and dad, if they're there, can actually enjoy a really great dinner and kids can have a great experience playing with natural Play-Doh.

J

**JD Harshfield** 36:14

Right.

J

**Jason Duff** 36:15

But I think that's where we have a responsibility to all work together to show off our community in a really positive way. Yeah. And if that person that travels here is wowed by Ohio Caverns, has a great experience in West Liberty, maybe hits up Urbana, comes to Bellefontaine, then they're like, I want to come back because I learned there were so — I could spend an entire day there. In fact, I could spend an entire weekend in that community. That didn't used to be the case here. I mean, you grew up here and, and understand that's been very intentional. Right. And now what I think is kind of on us is how do we even make it cooler?

J

**JD Harshfield** 36:59

Yeah. I mean, speaking to your point that you were just speaking of a minute ago, what we always tell people is specifically staff, I am always hard on about speak or talk to the people. Don't talk at them. You know, talk to them, you know, converse with them, welcome them, you know, get, get a feel on what they've got going on. You know, no matter how their day is going, it can always be better. And so, yeah, so we're here to help make that better. And so, like I said, speaking to your point, just, just building those personal relationships and building those connections, I mean, that helps all of that. It really does. And just raises the bar for everybody. Great. Yeah, I love that. Whether it's showing off caves or retail or restaurants or selling a town or selling a town to, you know, visitors, I mean, Yeah, it's all kind of the same stuff.

J

**Jason Duff** 37:50

Take people on a tour.

J

**JD Harshfield** 37:50

Yeah, there you go.

J

**Jason Duff** 37:52

Take them on a tour.

J

**JD Harshfield** 37:53

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 37:53

I'll just share a brief story. Last night, I was working out at the Loco Depot, which is our local kind of CrossFit gym. And I met Randall. Randall is from Alabama. And he is currently in flight school right outside at Midwest Corporate Air. He's learning to become a pilot. He was completely blown away of how cool our town is. And after I finished working out, like he just did a pop-in class with our group, and I said, can I, can I walk you around? Because he's like, I've eaten at Flying Pepper twice, this was amazing. But I'm walking around and just showing all this stuff, and he reminded me, he's like, what you have here is really, really special. Because like, we— those of us that live here and around here, it goes into your point you made earlier, if it's right in your backyard, you may not recognize how cool it is, right? But to Randall, he's like, I am going to fly when, when my wife and kids— like, I, I Bellefontaine, I looked up on the map, it was the middle of nowhere. And he was like being a little hard about the, the, the website being a little unsophisticated for the community. But then he said, I got here. This flight school instructors are some of the best people I've ever met. I'm eating the best food that I've ever had, and I'm working out in a gym that I'm having a lot of fun with random people I don't know that make me feel like a family.

J

**JD Harshfield** 39:05

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 39:06

And he's like, this place is special.

J

**JD Harshfield** 39:08

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 39:08

And I think that goes to say, like, we are building something here, but we have to market and promote it. And then we got to take people on the tour and show them how awesome.

J

**JD Harshfield** 39:17

Yeah.



**Jason Duff** 39:17

Awesome experiences. And the last piece of it is ask for feedback.



**JD Harshfield** 39:22

Yes.



**Jason Duff** 39:23

How can we be better?



**JD Harshfield** 39:25

Yeah. Yeah.



**Jason Duff** 39:26

How can we be better? What are we missing that we can do or dial in to make a better guest experience?



**JD Harshfield** 39:32

Yeah.



**Jason Duff** 39:33

Yeah.



**JD Harshfield** 39:33

I love that. And then over time you continue to refine it and you really have something special. Super cool. Well, I want to move us into a show segment I like to call Rapid Fire Q&A. So let's do a couple, couple of fun questions here for you. You've been in the area a long time and we're in Logan County now. So what is your favorite restaurant in Logan County?



**Jason Duff** 39:56

Flying Pepper.



**JD Harshfield** 39:57

Flying Pepper. That was hard to beat.



**Jason Duff** 39:59

Yeah. A favorite dish that you like there?



**JD Harshfield** 40:01

Oh, man. I just tried the torta for the first time. That's good.



**Jason Duff** 40:04

Rice Bakehouse bread.

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:06

Yeah, yeah, that's good. But normally I get the poblano dinner. Yeah. I mean, that's always—

J

**Jason Duff** 40:10

and then so people think that like a poblano pepper, like they're like, oh, is that spicy? It's like perfect. It's more of a sweet pepper.

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:16

Yeah.

J

**Jason Duff** 40:17

But I'm, I'm with you with that.

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:19

Really good.

J

**Jason Duff** 40:19

Those are actually my two top two orders there. Is that right?

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:22

Yeah, that's a good one.

J

**Jason Duff** 40:23

Yeah. So yeah, if you check out Ojai Caverns, go also check out Flying Pepper.

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:27

Well, fun fact, not to interrupt your rapid fire here. Yeah. They also have a drink.

J

**Jason Duff** 40:32

Okay.

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:33

It's called La La Cueva, and that means the cave. Oh, that's what I get. I love that. Yeah, yeah, I probably pronounced that wrong and Humberto will be angry, but that's fine. No, I love it. Great.

J

**Jason Duff** 40:48

Next question here is, do you have a favorite part of the caverns?

J

**JD Harshfield** 40:52

Oh yeah, yeah, definitely. There's a room right at the end. It's called the Jewel Room. There's not many formations. But it's got so much— we don't have to go into all the details on, but there's so much like little stories and little history bits to it. It's really cool. And I'm a history geek. And so that is my— that's one of my favorite spots. There's a whole section called the historic section. Yeah. I mean, I could spend days back there too, but, but yeah, definitely there.

J

**Jason Duff** 41:21

Yeah.

J

**JD Harshfield** 41:21

Super cool.

J

**Jason Duff** 41:22

Last one here is why should our listeners come and visit the Ohio Caverns?

J

**JD Harshfield** 41:26

Conference? Sure. Yeah. Not only for the things we mentioned, you know, it's very beautiful, it's very scenic. But I mean, we're going to give them a good experience. It's a great place to go, not only to see the cool things, but to really enjoy yourself. Yeah. And we— my mindset always goes bigger than just the county. I'm like, you know, we need to provide a world-class destination. Yeah. Right here in Logan-Champaign County. And really try to hit on that hard as much as possible. So yeah, so basically in summary, they should come just because they know that we're going to try our hardest to give them a great experience. Yeah. While they're seeing something beautiful. I think that's very evident from some of the things where you're talking about how you train, you know, other tour guides, things like that. But I appreciate your attention to those things and providing that good experience because as we talked about, it's helping everyone. But Jason, when are we going as a company to the Howe Caverns.

J

**Jason Duff** 42:23

Well, yeah, I want to tell you, um, we did a fun video— this has been, I don't know, 10 years ago— where we got the hats on. Yeah, to go in the caves. And that video got like over a million views. Like, it was like crazy on YouTube. But, um, I, I'm— my ears perked up when he said there's a secret off the beaten path. You know, I don't know if you watch the reality television, but like there's like these cave people that are crawling through. So I can imagine we have a few people that are a little claustrophobic on our team, but I'm all in. I will climb into the deepest, darkest hole.

J

**JD Harshfield** 42:57

Yeah. Well, you wouldn't really be able to do that with us. We're going to keep you on the path. But there is a place just about 4 miles south of us. They just called Cave Adventures, and that's all they do. It's all just crawling tours. You go back, you do some wading through water, you're doing a little bit of rappelling, you're you know, climbing up different areas. Yeah, it's, it's an adventure.

J

**Jason Duff** 43:18

You get your life insurance increase before you go do this experience.

J

**JD Harshfield** 43:21

No, it's really cool. That's cool.

J

**Jason Duff** 43:23

I feel like people wouldn't maybe expect that in this part of the state.

J

**JD Harshfield** 43:26

So that's really cool to have those things.

J

**Jason Duff** 43:28

Cool. Well, I'm going to kind of close this out here, but what is one professional development resource that was impactful for you along your professional journey?

J

**JD Harshfield** 43:35

Mainly the people that I worked with. I mean, you could take classes all day. You can, you can read stuff. You just have to work with people. And I mean, the, the two people that stand out in my mind, Eric Evans and Tim Grissom, I mean, two people that have really, really just instilled in all of us, frankly, yeah, you know, what the business is about, how we need to treat people, and where we need to take the business. I mean, it's just, uh, there's no class that I could have taken that would have been any better or done any better for me than being under these two gentlemen. It's been Really fantastic. Yeah, that's really cool. Thanks for sharing that.

J

**Jason Duff** 44:10

And then finally, where can people follow the Ohio Caverns and keep up with all the activities there?

J

**JD Harshfield** 44:16

Yeah, yeah. So of course, all the social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram, TikTok. We've got a TikTok, YouTube as well. Yeah, yeah. So we're on, on all that stuff. But then of course, our website's [ohiocaverns.com](http://ohiocaverns.com). Any, any updates or questions or, you know, anything like that can all just be found mainly right there. Sure, absolutely. And for our listeners, I will link some of those in the description of the video or the show notes if you're listening to the audio.

J**Jason Duff** 44:42

JD, thanks for sharing today. And I think the best thing that listeners can understand is get to know your attractions, build those pipelines and those partnerships with them, and use them as tools to bring more visitors, more tourism, more economic development to your towns and your communities. And even if you think today that your business or your experience isn't that national level or state level experience, work to make it better. Like, you've got to start somewhere. Like, hearing the story of the, the Smith family and how they have continued to invest to make Ohio Caverns a better experience, hiring more team members, creating new levels of revenue streams, all of that is, is rippling impacts to the entire region and to our entire state.

J**JD Harshfield** 45:35

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thanks, JB. Appreciate it, man. Thanks. Yeah, thanks for having me. Appreciate it.

E**Ethan DeLeon** 45:41

Thanks for tuning in on this episode of the Small Nation podcast.

E**Ethan DeLeon** 45:43

We hope that conversation proved valuable to you.

J**Jason Duff** 45:45

And if you enjoyed it, be sure to share the episode and follow the show on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or your favorite podcasting platform.

J**JD Harshfield** 45:51

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