

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE SIXTY-TWO
CALLED FOR A BIT MORE**

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GUEST: CORY WARFIELD**

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Shawn: Welcome to the sixth season of *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast, where bold leaders combine with big ideas to make life better for all of us. I'm your host, Shawn Nason, CEO and founder of MOFI. As an experience evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is by putting people first.

This season is all about human-obsessed, maverick-minded influencers who are changing the business landscape by standing up for what's right, prioritizing relationships over transactions, and taking a few risks along the way.

Mavericks think differently. And, human-obsessed mavericks take all of that mavericky stuff up a notch. Filled with empathy, these special mavericks put their heads and hearts into action to think bigger and more boldly about changing the world each and every day.

Ready to blow up the status quo and ignite a people-first experience revolution? Yeah, me too. Let's do this.

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Shawn: On this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*, we have Cory Warfield. At the age of 16, Cory started bartending and waiting tables in an executive management school at a top 10 University. He had such an affinity with the work that he kept at it at a high level for nearly 20 years. Then in his late 30s, he pivoted and founded his first tech company to solve the problem of unpredictable work schedules in the restaurant industry. He has since helped launch and scale companies in blockchain and influencer marketing. A man of many talents, Cory is a LinkedIn influencer, the host of *Coryconnects* Podcast, the co-host of the *StrongerTogetherX* podcast with Hub's Lisa Ma, and a director at both the Koenig Childhood Cancer Foundation and the Sustained Care Foundation. Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles*, Cory.

Cory: Thanks so much, Shawn. I'm glad to be here.

Shawn: Well, you know, Cory, most people are lucky if they can do one thing really well in their life. But you've got a lift of five major gigs going. Let's get into some of those later. But could you talk about how you went from working in restaurants to being a tech founder, to being a LinkedIn influencer, and maybe the best networker I've ever met?

Cory: First of all, thank you so much for saying that. After years and years and decades of working in the restaurants, I started to just feel kind of that itch like I was called for a bit more, and I was starting to feel kind of like a servant in the castle. So I took about a year really just trying to find a problem that I could solve.

And initially, it was trying to help people find the right wines at different price points. And so I started a little wine website that got a little bit of traction, but it wasn't a business. And kind of learning how to get customers and get eyeballs on there and listening to people and trying to actually solve a problem, I realized that the scheduling in restaurants is so unpredictable, so unstable, you never know when you're working, so you can't forecast how much you're going to make, especially when you know a lot of your incomes come from tips. So that was the first thing that I really realized is there was a big problem, it needed to be solved. I'd already kind of decided that I wanted to do something entrepreneurial.

So I just took maybe a month or two and read a bunch of books, watched a bunch of videos on YouTube and just jumped all in. And so it really was a natural progression to kind of go from waiting tables and starting, you know, to foundationally, learn how to build a company and start to put some of those pieces together while I was still waiting tables at two different restaurants working probably 70 hours a week at the restaurants. So once I kind of had, you know, an engine, a minimum viable product that I could bring out to the world, you know, and I'd had a little bit of savings that I could put into no longer waiting tables, I started that first company and kind of simultaneously, I read a book called *Traction* by Gabriel Weinberg that was about how every company, especially in the earlier stages need to figure out their marketing channel. And there are only 12 different types of marketing channels. So it's easy to test all 12 of them, and then it's easy to try to dig into which one's going to work for you. It's all about timing and geography and unique selling propositions.

So that book had me testing everything. And finally, I realized, for me, it was social media. And I don't think I had a LinkedIn account at that point. Or I created one, you know, right around that same time, but this was like a resume placeholder. But Facebook wasn't hitting. Twitter wasn't hitting. Instagram, you know, that just wasn't ever going to be somewhere where I could get managers to look at a software solution. Once I realized that LinkedIn was the place I needed to be, it took me a couple months to crack that code. Once I did, it's kind of been, you know, all uphill from there for the last couple of years. And Shawn, you'll appreciate this. I've been putting together a repository of all my posts. So I've been scrolling back kind of like five years when I first was trying to figure it out. And all of my first posts have zero likes, still. I'm tempted to throw a like on there, but I'm like, that's going to mess up this beautiful round number. But it's really been funny to go back and watch my own journey. That's kind of, you know, in a nutshell how the evolution came about.

[05:03]

Shawn: What I love about that Cory, and we talk about this a lot, we say we're a human-obsessed maverick-minded design firm. And you are every bit a maverick. You know, you and I spent a lot of time together this year, we've gotten to know each other. So you know, for me how important being that maverick is. So, you started to dive into this just a little bit after you left the restaurant business when you created ShedWool. Having been in the middle of the restaurant business, how were you able to then look at this scheduling process with fresh eyes? Because I think people need to understand as a maverick-minded entrepreneur, as a maverick-minded person, you have to think a little bit different. Can you dive into that just a little bit more, besides just reading the books and learning how to build the business, how did you look at scheduling different than what we still see today?

Cory: Yeah, well, it's interesting, one of our competitors had kind of been signing up different employees with our platform over the course of the last few years. And they just about a week or two ago raised \$220 million Series C round. So I think the actual like algorithm and stuff like that to help solve and make scheduling in the restaurant industry more predictable, you know, a couple years later is really starting to take center stage. But for me, it was really kind of building the plane on the way down because I was out there screaming at the top of my lungs that this is a huge problem. And people from the restaurant industry were kind of echoing that sentiment. But what amazed me was how few businesspeople, investors, anyone that hadn't kind of spent years of their life in the hospitality industry, they just didn't get it, right?

And I won a semi-final pitch contest. So I went down and pitched Daymond John from Shark Tank down in Houston, Texas. And I was really excited to pitch Daymond John because he had worked for years at Red Lobster while he was building his first company, FUBU. And so I figured if anybody would get it, he would get it. And so I went down there. I was one of five semi-finalists. And I went on stage and I pitched ShedWool, and you know, there were probably 500 people or so in the audience. And afterwards, Daymond John was like, "I just don't get it." I'm like, "What do you mean you don't get it?" And he just absolutely didn't understand. He didn't understand the problem, didn't understand how we were solving it, didn't understand why it was needed. And, you know, he gave me a couple opportunities to try to explain it. And it just didn't land. And it felt like...he had two other judges on stage with him. And they seemed to get it a little bit more.

And, you know, I had some friendlies in the audience. And so the energy was great. But afterwards, I had to just do some real assessment of like, how did he not get it? You know, first of all, it was many years ago, and maybe he's, you know, got some fond memories of it or remembers it a little bit differently. Maybe Red Lobster New York had such a tight ship where they just knew their schedules and that was that. But when I realized that he didn't understand that this was a problem being an entrepreneur that had lived this, what I was fairly sure was a pain point for everyone, made me realize that I needed to do more listening.

And so you know, I started to talk to executives in the restaurant industry that I hadn't ever worked on the floor, right, the CFOs, some of the more operational people that had like their MBA and came straight from college and worked their way up in the executive ranks, and started to hear from them kind of what they thought was the problem. And a lot of times, it was either the PnL, the labor was too high, or it wasn't from the lens of someone that didn't know when they were going to work or wasn't able to forecast their earnings to provide for their family. So I think for me, it really just ended up being that epiphany that not everyone understands that it's a problem. Talking to people to understand what they saw kind of as a tangential problem or phrasing it in a way that they understood that even if they hadn't lived that pain point that it really and truly was a problem. And so I think at the end of the day, I can still just say that by listening. I think once I stopped talking about the problem and started listening to other people, and you know, their problems and ways that maybe having a more predictable schedule for their workforce can help them, that was kind of my aha moment.

Shawn: You are speaking our love language, mine personally, and MOFI's, everything starts with empathy. And so really stopping to listen and see through those eyes. I love it. And I love the fact that you worked with executives. Because I think so many times we forget about using executives in much of our ethnographic research and they just need some aha moments themselves. So thank you for sharing that for sure. And Cory you know I'm all about helping organizations improve experiences for customers, employees, suppliers, everybody. You actually helped coin my #theexperienceevangelist on LinkedIn. So you spent a lot of time in these restaurants where customer service is almost as important, as those health department ratings, right? Like people that are going to pay high-end money. What did that experience teach you about delivering good service to customers that has really carried over for you in your other endeavors and businesses?

[10:23]

Cory: Yeah, and that's a great question that I don't know that I've been asked, although I try to sneak it into some of these interviews because I think it's so important. I was that guy where when I was first hired at the first, you know, real high-end steakhouse that I worked at, they asked me a question, and they said, "Cory, what would you do if a guest was sitting at a table here and you were their waiter and they asked for liver and onions?" And I said, "Well, I assume we don't have liver and onions on the menu. So I'd quickly go talk to the chef to see if we were able to make that but if not, I'd ask for permission to run to the store and get some liver and some onions, and I'd have the chef prepare them for them." And he said that was the right answer. That's what we like to hear and see here. And it turns out that was kind of like...that was a business school question. And I just happened to answer it correctly. But they didn't really live by that ethos 100%, which is fine, but I did. So I was the guy where probably every week I was running to the store either to get, you know, birthday candles that said 50 or getting chocolate syrup because that's what they liked on their vanilla ice cream. And so just really learning how to ask the right leading questions. And also a big one was anticipating the guest's needs so that I knew what they would want or need, even before they did.

And just really providing that memorable experience, because I took it so seriously, where if I could give a really stellar memorable experience to a high-end guest, they'd come back, they'd see me again, they'd tell their friends, they tip me well, but it also just made me feel like I was more than just a servant, right, more than just an order taker. And so I tried to do that for every guest that came into my section and sat at my tables or my private rooms. And it got to the point where I was waiting on all of my favorite athletes that I looked up to and had the posters on my wall, and my favorite movie stars, and comedians, and rock and roll stars, right? I mean, people that have sold hundreds of millions of copies that were on tour in Chicago, they would come and even if they didn't know me, they would know someone that told them, "You have to go see Cory at Mastro's." And so I'd have the Rolling Stones, you know, or whoever it might be. And it was just amazing that going that little bit above and beyond was truly so abnormal, right? Like I was at such a high level where people are paying hundreds of dollars a head.

And you would assume that just everybody at that level, you know, is going to do whatever it takes to really wow the guests, but it's just not the case. It was a differentiator. So going into business, I've kind of implemented that same mindset. How can I wow my clients, whether it's, you know, a coaching client, whether it's,

you know, a prospective donor for one of the foundations I'm involved with, or whatever line of work I'm pitching or discussing, but just how can I wow them? And even though I waited my last table probably five years ago, I think that's become so ingrained in me that I truly can't turn it off.

Shawn: I think that, you know, a lot of business leaders fail to understand that that process of creating experiences is really a two-way street, right? And that you've talked about earlier, you know, stop and listen. And so I've heard you say that the most valuable business skill by orders of magnitude is listening. You've talked about it some so far. So how can business leaders do a better job at this, especially right now, when employees are working remotely and a lot of customers are only online? What's your recommendation on how leaders can do that?

Cory: It almost becomes systemic on the one hand because a lot of these leaders love to hear themselves talk and really feel as though they have these 100 things that the world needs to hear. And I feel as though there is a changing of the guard and the innovative companies that I see starting to take market share, starting to disrupt their industries are the ones where the leaders actually go through some type of coaching or mindset transformation by which they can actually learn how to shut the heck up, right? Because you can't listen if you're talking. And it's so evident that a lot of people just ask questions or let the other person talk for a few minutes just so that they can prepare their next question or just so that they can get ready to say the next thing. And that's not listening. Just because you're letting somebody else talk for a minute does not mean that you're listening to them.

So I think that the training that I see executives and leaders going through that's transformative is learning how to ask questions that aren't leading, but that actually give whoever you're speaking with space to let you know about their problems or their challenges or their opportunity. They might have something amazing that can transform that leader's life if the leader were just to listen for a few minutes. So ask them the right questions. And then literally, you know, it almost ties into meditation, clearing your mind, it's like actually not having thoughts and that active chatter of what you're going to say next so you can actually listen to them.

And it sounds really simple. But I find a lot of people truly need to go through exercises to train themselves to do that. I can give a number of examples of companies that have taken the billion-dollar valuations and such, or substantial market share. And most of them, we can find their leadership talking about the transformation of learning how to listen. And it's not just listening to the customers, it's also listening to your employees and your leadership team and listening to the

industry as a whole. And again, you know, if you use the same analogy where you can't just be thinking of what you're going to say next, through that lens, if you're trying to listen to an industry, you can't talk at the industry, you have to talk with the industry, you have to listen to what other people are saying, and you can do that on Twitter, you can do that on TV, you can do that with one on one conversations. But I really do think it's a mindset and there has to be some intentionality behind it.

[16:07]

Shawn: I love that. I think a good thing that I'm hearing from you today is listen, listen, right? And that's a powerful thing. And you know, Cory, you and I share a lot around this whole concept of humanizing, obviously business ecosystems. And you said something in a recent post of yours on LinkedIn that really caught my attention. It said, "In life, the more we put ourselves out there authentically with the desire to help others without too much concern for the judgment of others, and a belief in our own potential, there is nothing that isn't possible." So you certainly live by those words, we're hearing that here. But what would you say to someone who is nervous about putting themselves out there authentically in business relationships? Is it really possible to keep work-life and home-life in a separate silo? Or when you're living authentically like that, there's some commingling.

Cory: Yeah, I think there has to be commingling. And I'm starting to hear a repositioning of an old kind of thought around that. So people used to talk about work-life balance. And, you know, the implication was that they're two completely different things. And that in order for one to thrive and prosper the other had to thrive and prosper, and I think people often took that to mean like, completely tune out from work or leave your work at the office and what people are starting to talk about and think about instead of work-life balance, is work-life harmony, right? How do you make it so that even if you're thinking about your work 24/7, because that's the way many people make million-dollar deals and million-dollar companies, how can you still be present with your spouse? How can you still be there for your kids right?

How can you still enjoy your life a little bit? Because at the end of the day, who cares if you build \$100 million company if you can't enjoy it? I have a friend who's co-founder of a company that's got hundreds of millions of users, many billion-dollar valuation. He personally made a couple billion dollars when they sold the company. And I admire him, I respect him. I look up to him. I am doing some things with him like I really like this guy. But what's amazed me is every time I talk to him,

he's kind of complaining that he hasn't been able to spend enough time with his family and his kids or that... and it's like mind blowing like how are you a billionaire and you can't just call the shots right? How do you not say know what I'm taking a month off and going to Costa Rica or whatever it might be, right? Like how is work still such a preoccupation all these years later? I mean, he's been worth 10 figures for probably a decade, and he still hasn't, you know "figured it out." And it's just mind-blowing. I think so many people see, you know, dollar signs or successes from people and assume that they've got it all figured out. But I look at someone like Dan Price from Gravity Payments who they are, I think, a billion-dollar company as well out of Seattle. And he just takes a \$70,000 salary and very little draw on because every employee in his company makes a \$70,000 salary and he makes sure every employee, including himself, gets to enjoy their life and has savings and takes vacations. And that company is quickly becoming a market leader. Because of that culture and that experience.

Shawn: Oh, yeah.

Cory: So I think it's just a matter of like, the work-life harmony, how do you make sure that you are living a life that's worthy of putting in all the hours.

Shawn: I love how you call it work-life harmony. I've never heard it put that way. I'd like to dive in here for a minute on a couple takeaways for our listeners that I think would be really valuable for them to hear. You've helped clients increase their number of LinkedIn followers by huge numbers, I have been one of those. But step back and talk about how people can figure out what kind of followers they should target. So, what should people do before they start posting?

[19:58]

Cory: Sure. Well, I think one thing that becomes an aha moment for most of the people that I talk to or work with is this concept of speaking with your audience, not at your audience. And so in order to speak with your audience, first of all, you need to know who your audience is. It shouldn't be a bunch of people that are like-minded because if you're only preaching to the choir, you're not going to get more followers, more customers, more revenue, more visibility, right? And so many people are just preaching to the choir. I've got a guy who's a financial advisor and he's been wanting to work with me for some time. And I've kind of been telling him, I don't know what I can really do for him until he stops only speaking to financial advisors. He's like, "What do you mean? But that's my customer?" And I said, "Well, yeah, sure." And so when you put out this content that's just for financial advisors,

that's 90 plus percent of the people on the platform, and probably, you know, frankly, a percentage of your audience that doesn't feel like they're part of the conversation, right?

If you're only talking to financial advisors, then that's why you're not going viral, right? That's this whole thing like, why can't my stuff go viral? Because you're talking to this super small subset. Meanwhile, if you just zoomed out a little bit, and just talked with a broader audience, the people whose husbands or wives might be financial advisors come to know you and tell their spouse at the dinner table, like, "Oh, you need to know this guy." Or what about the people that decided to change careers a year from now and they become a financial advisor. They were never going to know about you if you were only speaking to that profession they didn't even know they were going to step into.

So I think knowing your audience, but also knowing how to speak outside of that, so that more people care. Like, if people are already financial advisors, they probably know what you're talking about anyway. What about the 90% of people that don't know that that could still benefit from it. And that's the way that more and more people start to follow you and more and more people start to share and like your stuff and just be kind of aware of who you are and what you do. And I always tell people, if you're not known as the something person, right, like, I'm known as the LinkedIn growth guy. Shawn, you're known as the disrupter guy, right, the experience guy. Everyone needs to be known as the guy or the girl in their industry on LinkedIn if they want to stand out. And so I think just knowing your audience, but knowing also how to attract a wider audience ship, just so that you can really become known as whatever it is that you're trying to be known as in a wider spectrum.

Shawn: I'm going to ask you one more I guess business case value prop type question here that I would love for you to give some advice back and it's shifting back to the influencer space, and particularly, what was now called B2B influencers. So we're not talking about, you know, celebrity influencers, but people that are not necessarily household names that are big influencers on LinkedIn. What kinds of organizations can benefit from connecting with business influencers? And more importantly, how can they get started at doing that?

Cory: Awesome. I believe that any business can benefit from any business influencer at this point, it's just a matter of alignment. If you're a tech company, you know, don't go for a neophile which probably wouldn't exist as an online business influencer. But, you know, if you're all about diversity, equity, and inclusion, maybe

don't only engage with the old white guys. But beyond that, I think any business can leverage the people that are reaching millions of people on business platforms like LinkedIn. And so beyond alignment, I think, how can they access them? And for me, it's twofold. One is just engaging with them. And that brings visibility to their audience, and you never know who's actually watching. I've ended up becoming friends with some people that have sold 100 million copies of their books or have been the senior executives at household name companies just through engaging with them on LinkedIn.

And so that can be effective. But a lot of times those people have social media teams, or they have virtual assistants or something. So it can be a little hard to develop that actual personal rapport relationships, just by engaging with them. But the other two ways and the first is kind of a little best-kept secret is all of these people have other social medias where they're not as bombarded. So for me, when I wanted to access a couple of the big influencers on LinkedIn that would have never known I existed, I found that they had Twitter accounts, right, and they had Facebook accounts, and they weren't these big famous people there.

So I just started engaging with them on Twitter and Facebook, shared their stuff, commented there, they started to know me. And then lo and behold, they went and saw that I was on LinkedIn, and they sent me connection requests and started engaging with me, and that was life-changing. The other thing and this is not necessarily a shameless plug, but a company that I'm involved with that I absolutely love is InfluencerActive and that's quite literally just a repository of the business influencers. And you can go there and find one that resonates with you and get in touch with them there, book them for a strategy call or for some promotion and just get to know them that way. So that's kind of the cheat code especially if someone has a marketing or sales budget or is looking to potentially invest in their perception and their reach. You can just go straight to marketplace.influencer-active.com, which is a mouthful, or just Google InfluencerActive. But other than that, I think that the strategies of finding them on other platforms, engaging with them has been a pretty rock-solid one for me.

[25:19]

Shawn: Yeah, I love it, obviously. And I was introduced to InfluencerActive and I'm on that platform as well because of you. Well, Cory, thanks so much. But it has come to that point in this episode where we do this thing called the Combustion Questions, which are three randomly selected questions that I will be asking you,

and just ask for you to answer them authentically and with the first thing that comes to mind. So Cory, are you ready for your Combustion Questions?

Cory: Born ready.

Shawn: Awesome. Well, Combustion Question number one, if you were reincarnated as an animal, based on your personality, what animal do you think you would come back as?

Cory: Off the top of my head, I'd say a whale. I've always kind of identified with that just floating and observing. And you know, they are very nurturing and protective. And that's been my answer to that question for decades. I don't know if it still lands as much now that I'm in my mid-40s and doing something different. But I think I'll stick with that final answer, a whale.

Shawn: I love it. That's awesome. All right, Combustion Question number two, what's your all-time favorite number?

Cory: Fifty-four.

Shawn: Why?

Cory: Well, so I'm a May the 4th be with you baby. So I'm born on May 4th, which is 5-4. Urlacher was one of my favorite players on the Bears and his jersey number was 54, but it's also just one of those numbers that every time I see it, it seems to be a good premonition or omen. And it seems to be that that way of kind of, the digital side of reality or whatever we want to call it that's kind of given me a little nod and a thumbs up.

Shawn: I love it. All right, Combustion Question number three, Cory, is what do you think about lemonade?

Cory: Well, I enjoy lemonade, although it can be tart. I think it can...it's been the first entrepreneurial endeavor of many people who've gone on to change the world. But I'd say I listen to a lot of hip-hop and I'm actually you know, a rap and hip-hop artist as well. And through that lens lately they're talking a lot. Lemonade has become kind of a slang for yellow diamonds, which I don't know that diamonds come out of the Earth yellow, but they also don't come out of the ground faceted and shiny. So we'll take that for what it is. But I think at the moment when I hear lemonade, I think of diamonds and kind of that jewelry that you hear about.

Shawn: I love it. Well, Cory, again, thank you for doing this interview and for being on the podcast. And thank you for what you are putting out in this world. I think it's pretty obvious, but I just want to put the question out there, Cory, how can our audience find you?

Cory: Frankly, it's probably Twitter. There's the least noise there. No one knows I exist there. I think last week was my biggest week on Twitter with five likes and two direct messages. So you know, if anybody wanted to be able to make sure I'd see a message or some engagement, although my Twitter account is not nearly as exciting to follow as my LinkedIn. I think that's probably the least noisy place. And you know, other than that, obviously, I appreciate all of my followers on LinkedIn, and I try to get to know as many of them as possible also.

Shawn: Yes, you do. Well, thank you again, so much, Cory, and we will talk again real soon.

Cory: Thanks for having me. And thanks, everyone, for listening to this episode.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few moments to subscribe, rate, and review.

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And be sure to check out my book, *Kiss Your Dragons: Radical Relationships, Bold Heartsets, and Changing the World*, available on Amazon. Then head right over to ShawnNason.com to engage resources, a discussion guide, and information about everything from self-paced learning to personal coaching.

As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing sh*t up!