

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

Episode 89

BEYOND HEALTH AND WELLNESS: MAKING A MEANINGFUL IMPACT

Host **Shawn Nason**
Guest **Sid Stolz**

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Shawn (00:01):

Welcome to the eighth 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 a maverick-minded, human-obsessed experience evangelist, I believe the only way to build a sustainable and thriving business is to put people first. Throughout this season, we'll be connecting you, the listener, with cutting edge leaders who are challenging old ways of thinking with bold, new ideas and a commitment to human-centric design. Experience matters, people matter and revenue matters. That's why it's time to ignite a people-first experience revolution.

My guest today, Sid Stolz, is the Chief Design and Experience Officer for Blue Zones. Based on its research into cultures where people live the longest, the organization creates programs that transform wellbeing everywhere and at every level. In this role, Sid is leading the creation of the Blue Zones Center in downtown Miami, the first wellbeing and medical facility built on Blue Zones principles. Before joining Blue Zones, Sid served with an array of companies dedicated to improving health and wellness, including United Health Group, CVS/Caremark and Chip Rewards. He serves on the board of Vesper Society, a nonprofit that focuses on both health and justice and under-resourced communities. Welcome to The Combustion Chronicles, Sid.

Sid (01:38):

Thank you Shawn. It's great to be here.

Shawn (01:40):

Well, brother, it's great to have you on here. Sid and I have known each other for several years and I love the impact that you have made in health and wellness across so many communities for so many people. And what's funny is that's without actually having a medical or like a public health degree. So now that you've been a Blue Zones for a couple years in this role, what's the best part of your job right now?

Sid (02:05):

Shawn, that's such a great, great question and I feel like I have won the lottery because having been in healthcare for so long and having great experiences with wonderful organizations like CVS/Caremark and United Health Care and Towers Perrin, it was

always focused on the business of health. It was never focused on health prevention and health wellness. Blue Zones allows me to take my personal passion of how to live better longer and use that in a professional sense. So that's really the goal of Blue Zones, is to help people live better longer. That's what I try to do on an individual basis and now I get to do it for a living, which is just a great honor for me.

Shawn (02:56):

Well, that's awesome man. And there's no one better to do what you were doing at this Sid. And you know, you and I, again, you and I have known each other for years, you know, my background and at MOFI here, we believe that experience is everything. And as we know, Sid, experience in healthcare can be pretty shitty at times, and that all aspects of what we call the Experience Ecosystem™ need to work in sync. And particularly what you're doing at Blue Zones, there's a huge ecosystem that's coming together there in Miami with the first Blue Zones Center. What's the secret sauce for making experiences better for people who maybe have given up on achieving wellness?

Sid (03:38):

Yeah, great question Shawn. And most of us are tired of hearing from our physicians that we need to do three or four things and you can guess what they are to be healthier and to have wellness. Eat less, walk more, drink less, don't smoke and sleep, right? That's what the physicians say and they say that to you. They tell that to me. They say that to our business partners and there's nothing to go behind it. The key to wellness is that everybody's on a different place on their journey of wellness. What you need today, Shawn, is different from what I need today here in Miami. So the key to having a good experience of wellness is to understand where you are on the journey and to have a provider or a service organization that understands where you are on the journey and then create a plan that is personalized to you.

When I think about all of the work that I've done in the last 30 odd years in healthcare, nothing was personalized to you. We developed programs at United or CVS that dealt with the masses. We worked with large employers, we worked with large municipalities. There was very little focus on what does Shawn Nason need? And that really is the key to success. So you have to be in a program, you have to understand where you are

today, and you have to have somebody help you personalize your experience. All of those issues that the doctors ask you to do, eat less, walk more, sleep better, et cetera. All super important. But, but they're almost impossible to do. I mean, I grew up as a morbidly obese child. I love to eat Cheetos and making me stop eating Cheetos is very, very difficult, right? I can't have them in the house. I was the one who said, I can't go down the aisle at the store because I will pick up that bag of Cheetos, so I just can't go down there. And so that's me doing that myself. What we try to do at Blue Zones is at a broader level, helping you understand where you are in that space and then helping you on that journey so that it's personal for you.

Shawn (06:09):

I love this whole perspective. And you know, Sid, we've talked about it for years around that. And you know, our friend Sean Slovenski used to say, I don't need to go in the doctor and be told I need to quit eating cheeseburgers and start eating carrots or that, that you're overweight. Like I'm standing in the front of the mirror every day, I know I'm overweight. And you know my personal journey this past year, you know, fighting stage three colon cancer. And I remember when my oncologist, the first thing I thought about was, oh my gosh, what type of diet are they going to put me on? Which is probably not the thing. And you went through this with your partner, David, which is not the thing I probably should have been thinking about. Right? And I remember when my oncologist walked into the room and we were going through this and after the nutritionist came in and gave me all the things, you know, he walked in and he said, listen Shawn, eat whatever the hell you want.

He's like, because there are gonna be days when you go through chemo that you will not want to eat food. So if you wake up one morning and you want to eat a cake, go eat a cake because I just need you to get calories in you. And some type of nutrients, whether it be, whatever it might be. I've worked in patient experience for 12 years. That was a moment when I realized even more how screwed up the industry is. And that's why I love what you're doing at Blue Zones. So with that and what your concept and what the concept that you're building with the Blue Zones Center there in Miami as the first one, what might other industries learn from Blue Zones and the work that you're doing?

Sid (07:45):

That is also a great question. The original Blue Zones, Shawn, were created naturally by the environment and by the cultures. So Okinawa, Japan, Nicoya, Costa Rica, islands in Italy and Greece and in Loma California. So people ended up in a blue zone because they were born there, they were raised there. That is their environment. What we, at Blue Zones LLC, what we try to do is to recreate those environments here in North America and now in downtown Miami. So we've taken that ancient methodology, I can't alter what the Blue Zone principles are. They are what they are. So I can't pick and choose and tell you, okay, Shawn, you don't need to follow the plant-based diet that we would suggest you be on. I can't really alter that that's what was actually in the original Blue Zones, but what I can do is to make it easier for you to eat plant-based diet.

I mean, I love eating plant-based food. I'm just not very good at cooking it. I have a plant-based restaurant right across from me. I can't really tell that it's plant-based food. So the healthcare industry historically never tried to create an environment that was easier for you to be successful on your health and wellness journey. Our goal at Blue Zones is to make the healthiest choice the easiest choice. Going back to my example of the Cheetos, and I like talking about it because there is zero or negative nutritional value in Cheetos. The way I manage and make it the easier choice, I just never see a Cheetos bag. I won't go down that aisle. It's not in my house. And guess what? I haven't had a Cheeto in a decade. I still talk about it because if you gave it to me as a gift, I would eat it.

So that's what we're really trying to, to help do. And the healthcare industry has really been not focused again on making the easiest choice the healthiest choice. And so that's what we're trying to do. I think other industries do that better. You know, unfortunately, and I've been in healthcare for 40 years, so my focus has always been how do I help people live a better life? Even if I was negotiating contracts at United Health Care, which is my job, I negotiated, I felt like I was helping people pay appropriate prices for the services they got. So I've always personally felt like I was helping individuals live healthier, but it was more on the business side, go to this doctor, pay this rate, et cetera. It didn't have as much to do with my health and wellness journey, which is now what I had the chance to do here at Blue Zones.

Shawn (10:56):

Awesome. Love it so much. So let's talk about your personal journey professionally. So people that are involved in experience come from all sorts of backgrounds as we know, and we've had them all on this season from, you know, I got my start in finance and international finance, and I know you have a degree in economics and international finance. So how did you make this drastic leap? Like, people ask me this all the time, so I'm asking you, into health and wellness and then into experience and design, when that's your background is economics and finance?

Sid (11:35):

Yeah, I wish I had a better answer to that question. Because I really, I really don't, Shawn. I happen to be very religious and spiritual and I say, but by the grace of God, I figured it out, right? It was really me having the desire to do more to impact people's lives on an individual basis, including my own life. I mean, I do understand economics and I do have finance and I love international finance. I felt like I was pushing numbers and not really having, it goes back to that purpose and impact. What do I get out of bed for every day? And am I gonna make my life better, your life better, or somebody else's life better? I love helping people. I love working. And my church where we have a member ministry and understanding what those needs are, I get great satisfaction out of that.

When I was in finance and economics, I was really unfulfilled and bored and I kept looking for ways of understanding what was that in me, what, how did I get that purpose? And it probably was all of the individual experiences I had in taking care of my aging parents or my dying partner or friends who all they know that I'm in healthcare and all of my friends have been so frustrated with the healthcare system, especially here in America. They would call me, hey, how do I get, how do I get this insulin pump paid for from Express Scripts or from Prime Therapeutics? Hey, they don't want me to, they don't wanna pay for my birth control pills. Can you deal with that? Hey, they won't pay for my, so I'm thinking, this is ridiculous. We have all this system and nobody's really happy with it.

I mean, look, I'm not reporting anything new to your, to you or to your, to your listeners Shawn. But the healthcare system really didn't care about your experiences. Just yesterday, and I, the provider will go unnamed, I take care of an elderly patient and she

needs a dermatology appointment. And after 48 minutes, I finally reached a person, she said, oh, you have the wrong number. You need to dial this number, which is the number I dialed. And then I said, oh, that's the number I dialed. And it somehow it got to you. And she said, well, that didn't work. Good luck. Click. And I'm thinking, okay, and you know, I helped this woman because she, she's an American, but Portuguese is her native language. And so she gave up decades ago about trying to get an experience because people look down at her because she's, because she didn't speak the language, she's relatively poor and they just dismiss her and quite frankly, disrespect her.

And I help her. She, we're great friends. And that's the experience I had yesterday with the provider in our nation's capital. And when they hung up on me, I thought, well, what I do about that? Well, I don't, I don't have time to fight that system for this. I went a different route. I now have appointment. But I feel like there's no accountability for that. And I know that hospital system doesn't wanna treat people like that. They don't want employees to act like that, but the system is so broken, in the healthcare system. And even myself, I say, well, I'm just gonna move on and I let this go. I'm not gonna file a complaint with, you know, complaint. Who, who do I file a complaint with and who wants to listen? And so all I can do is to shield my friend from that experience and make her experience, you know, she deserves it. She's elderly, she is doing a great job, and she needs to see a dermatologist, and we're now gonna make that happen.

Shawn (15:47):

Well, I love your heart and I love what you're doing for people and I, and it makes, makes perfect sense in the role that you're in. So we use this terminology a lot, Sid, around being maverick-minded and human-obsessed. And I've worked for and with enough healthcare companies to know that, as you said, we can only move the needle on health and wellness if we think like mavericks a little bit. And you and I have done this together and always put people first from that story you just shared, put people first. So in a world of billing codes, HIPAA regulations, organization, inertia, as we have both worked in, how can people in healthcare become more maverick-minded and more rebels and push against the norm?

Sid (16:36):

Yeah, I love that idea. And I, I love the concept of maverick-minded. You brought that to me and, and I've used that with you. I, I don't necessarily think that way, but it brings back to my mind that there is science about how to change behaviors. Because really what we're talking about here is behavior change. So either on your basis or the physician's basis, how do we change the people really want to all move in the same direction. And I worked in healthcare 30 years before I even knew a behavioral scientist. I didn't know they existed, right? They were over there in the academic world, they were doing great things in their world, but that hadn't bled over into our healthcare world. And quite frankly, I was fortunate enough to help build the company based in Birmingham, Alabama. That was all based on behavior change.

And that really did change the way I thought and the way our clients thought about being a maverick. We weren't trying to have one size fits all. Everybody had a, an open playbook, and we would think outside the box about what would make a difference. And we had the ability to do it because we were a small startup. We didn't have lots of policies, procedures, and systems. And so that made us more nimble and flexible and easier to work with. That's why many of these large healthcare companies do their product development, do their innovation on the outside, right? They work with people like you, they work with other firms because they are so that in their ways, they have so many levels of vice presidents, right? I mean, I remember the joke about how many vice presidents does a health plan have, hundreds of vice presidents, right?

And so to be a maverick and to be human-obsessed, you really have to have in a completely different environment. And I know that many of the health plans, especially several of the Blues plans have really put innovation. They wanna be more innovative, they just can't do it within their certain environment. And this isn't just healthcare, it's all industries. Look at GE, look at, you know, everybody wants to pilot things on the outside, they wanna have a different set of rules, et cetera. And I think that you've gotta create an environment so that you do encourage to have maverick minds and that you're not penalized if you fail. You know.

Shawn (19:18):

That's the big thing, right? That's the big thing in healthcare.

Sid (19:21):

One of my driving factors, because I was a consultant, is to fail fast, right? When I was a consultant, 90% of our proposals were rejected. Okay, that seems like, wow, that's not very good. Just meant I had to get a lot of proposals out there because 10%, we're gonna be selected. So I've never been afraid of failing fast because it, you learn from each one of those failures and then you can build and you can move forward and become a maverick. And I think you have to create that environment to move forward.

Shawn (19:54):

So let's talk then about, you're building the very first Blue Zones Center in downtown Miami. As we're talking about maverick-minded and human-obsessed. How does that play into this new Blue Zones Center and this new concept in Miami that you're bringing to life?

Sid (20:16):

Yeah, and that's really what I do on a, on a day-to-day basis. Blue Zones are the methodology and research of what creates a Blue Zones. We don't have any Blue Zones Centers in the world. We didn't know what goes into a Blue Zones Centers. We know that the principles are Blue Zones, lifestyle medicine, moving naturally, eating plant-based food, having faith, belonging, purpose, family, all those great things are at the center of that. But what would you, what would you wrap around that to create a center? And so what we are doing is we are out there looking at everything in the world, the marketplace. I just got back from the Global Wellness Summit in Tel Aviv. It isn't about the best service that we have here in Miami. It's what will help people live longer better, using the principles, but knowing that if you don't live in a a blue zone environment, you're gonna need help and assistance from medical providers, diagnostic tests, lab tests, and there's a lot of noise out there, Shawn, in the marketplace.

How do you know what's real? How do you know what's fake? How do you know what's helpful to your body and to your wellness journey? What's hurtful? And we have clinicians behind us who help us make that decision. And we're in the process of doing this now. So we're, we're still working with a clinical advisory group. They help us figure out what should be included in that, and we'll be ready to open at the end of 2025. So it is, it is a chance to evaluate everything out in that marketplace and curate what we think

is the best way for you to live a longer, better life. And we get to do it here in Miami. And as you know, I love living in Miami and having great weather, especially this time of year.

Shawn (22:24):

All right. So this is an advice now for our listeners, and thank you so much for sharing all the stories about Blue Zones. I'm so excited to see them come to life. But what advice do you have for someone who is just getting started in this experience space?

Sid (22:43):

I would say keep it simple. The entire experience simple. You know, one, everybody wants to make everything so difficult. And I think about my experiences. So think about it from a grade school level. People can only accept so much in a certain timeframe. And so simplifying it that people don't get scared of what the journey might be. You don't start hiking by going up Kilimanjaro, right? You start by walking a hundred yards today and getting a reward for that. So simplifying the experience and getting people comfortable that there's going to be a journey here, right? It, you don't have to hit a homerun, a grand slam to be a successful baseball player. You need to be able to get on base. So walk and a single is okay. And I think it's making it simple and manageable so that people continue on the experience, right?

I mean, you need to make the experience positive. And I think the best way to make the experience positive is to simplify it and to make people understand it, right? And, and, you know, I've spent lots of years reading healthcare documents and I'm in the industry and I say, I'm not really sure what we just said in that. And especially when I think, um, exclusions, medical management requirements, et cetera, I have no idea what they said. And so then imagine why people don't understand or wanna participate on that journey is we just have made it so complicated and it just makes no sense. So simplify would be the, the one key.

Shawn (24:43):

Love it. Love it. Well, so many great piece of advice and nuggets here, and so excited to see the Blue Zones Centers come to life. But it has come to that time in the podcast

where we ask these things known as The Combustion Questions, and they are three randomly selected questions that I don't even know. They are just given to me. And are you ready for your combustion questions?

Sid (25:06):

Do I have a choice?

Shawn (25:07):

Uh, no. No.

Sid (25:09):

Okay. I'm ready. I'm ready.

Shawn (25:11):

Alright. Combustion question number one. And this one is funny because I know you, if your dog, or dogs, as I know Sid has, could speak English, what would they say about you?

Sid (25:25):

That I spend too much time on the computer and I don't understand that they needed to be petted every minute.

Shawn (25:35):

And tell our listeners what type of dogs you have.

Sid (25:38):

I have, uh, two Bernese mountain dogs who are big, lazy teddy bears, but incredibly needy. And they sit here as I'm looking now, and they look at me and they just don't understand why this computer or this voice, Shawn, keeps getting more attention than they do. So that's for sure what they would say.

Shawn (26:03):

And now this next question, question number two, I would love to actually ask your partner, David, but I'm gonna ask you, what's your best dance move?

Sid (26:13):

I have been outlawed from dancing because I am so bad and I, I'm musical and I have no sense of rhythm dancing. I have two left feet. So I would say my best dance move is to not dance.

Shawn (26:36):

All right. Well, question number three. What do you think about oatmeal?

Sid (26:41):

I love oatmeal. I think cooking oatmeal takes too long. So I'm happy with doing my instant oatmeal. I do one pack a day, not two, and I love it. It starts the day right, I put a little pecans in it and a little blueberries, and I'm set. So I'm a big fan of oatmeal. I do eggs on the weekend.

Shawn (27:04):

Well there we go. Well, again, buddy, thank you so much. Thank you for all these nuggets and until we see each other in person, stay safe and be well, my friend.

Sid (27:14):

Thank you so much, Shawn. This was a pleasure and fun. Thank you.

Shawn (27:19):

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of The Combustion Chronicles. If you've enjoyed this episode, please take a few minutes to subscribe, rate and review. Remember that I'm always looking to meet more big thinking mavericks, so let's keep the conversation going by connecting on LinkedIn. If you want to discover more about human-obsessed, maverick-minded Experience Ecosystems™, go to mofi.co where you'll find ideas and resources to help you ignite your own experience revolution, or go to experienceevangelists.com to learn more about my mission to challenge leaders to blow up outdated, siloed systems and rebuild them with an aligned human-first approach. As always, stay safe, be well, and keep blowing shit up.