

Talk CNY S1X6

Andrew Fish 0:06

Welcome to a special Expert Mini Series for CenterState CEO's podcast, Talk CNY presented by NBT Bank. In this series, we'll feature experts from across Central New York and beyond to dig into our memberships most requested topics. You'll also hear stories of successful collaborations between a few of our long standing members and CenterState CEO that could inspire your next big move.

Kate Hammer 0:25

Take a moment right now to subscribe in your listening app for reminders every other Wednesday for our main podcast series. And be sure to catch the rest of the Expert Mini Series as well. Today we are joined by CenterState CEO member Damian Vallelonga, owner of SwitchStance Marketing. Damian is a brand and website strategist, builds websites and develops marketing language for small businesses that say things their customers want to hear.

Andrew Fish 0:52

I'm Andrew Fish, Senior Vice President of Member and Business Experience at CenterState CEO.

Kate Hammer 0:56

And I'm Kate Hammer, business coach and member at CenterState CEO. We are your hosts for Talk CNY.

Andrew Fish 1:02

Damian, thank you so much for joining us today. We're really excited to talk to you about SwitchStance Marketing. Welcome.

Damian Vallelonga 1:07

Thank you for having me. Excited to be here.

Kate Hammer 1:09

Yeah. So, let's start just by hearing a little bit about who you are, what is SwitchStance Marketing? What are you about? How do you serve?

Damian Vallelonga 1:17

Well, I am a brand strategist and web strategist, formerly currently still a web designer, graphic designer and I help clients, small businesses, established companies who have had a tough time communicating clearly to their audience, and also potentially have just

outdated website or marketing in general, really focus in on the types of things that their customers want to hear. And, and be able to position them in a way that people who are looking for the services that they have the products they have, you just sort of just like you're just greasing the gears. You're making it a lot easier for people to understand why they should be paying attention to a certain business.

Andrew Fish 2:01

So that's fantastic. So you know, obviously, it's really important for companies nowadays to set themselves apart, right? And so how do you go about doing that with companies? How do you help them identify what that story is going to be even before you think about how you tell it?

Damian Vallelonga 2:14

Sure. So I was just in a three hour workshop yesterday with a local business where, you know, we really had to look deep into their history, and their core like characteristics in terms of what they're offering, and who they're offering it to, and are their opportunities? So this is this is called positioning, it's how do you how do you try and carve out a space that's different than your competitors. Because the more unique you are the usually the easier it is for you to cut through and reach the people that you really want to work with. So finding, is there something unique about what you do? And then is there something unique about who you serve, and and when you have the right recipe, you can really streamline your communications, like throughout not just in the context of website, but you can streamline your communications, so that it's just a lot easier, a lot, a lot quicker, a lot more efficient, to reach the people who are looking for your help. So that's like, the first thing you want to do is figure out can we identify some opportunities here? And then once you understand like, Okay, what's the position the statement that we're going for. Then it's like, Okay, let's start digging into some of the details about this relationship between the customer and the service provider or the product maker.

Kate Hammer 3:31

Yeah. When it's your own business, it's really hard to see beyond what you are used to, you are so deep in your own weeds, it can be really difficult to make those judgment calls about what is the story you want to tell? How do you want people to feel or what do you want them to understand about what you're offering is when they visit your website. Can you give us some examples of some just major blunders, red flags, things that you see where you're like, No, no, no, no, no, this is totally an issue of you not understanding your customer's perspective?

Damian Vallelonga 4:05

Yeah, sadly that's pretty easy to find. So it's really that syndrome of not being able to read the label, because you're inside the bottle. That that's like, yeah, it's like it really is inherent to almost every entity, it's like, because you know, you have if you are the CEO or owner or manager, whatever, like you have to know so many details about your company, it becomes extremely difficult to be able to switch your stance. Which is why I named my business SwitchStance to your out to the same perspective as your audience, who really only needs to know a very small amount of all that stuff that's in your head. They just have to you have to be able to feed them just the pertinent information that really they really care care about in that moment. And so, just before I get to the some of the examples, what I try and explain to clients and what it's I think helpful to realize is that when we're out in the world looking for a product or a service to help with some issue we are like that's what usually why you're you're looking for to hire someone or to buy something is typically to solve a problem. And most companies who are offering a service or a product to solve a problem often forget that these people on the other end really just care about themselves. So like all of us in our lives as shoppers and consumers it's not it's not weird or anything it's just that we are always thinking about our needs

Andrew Fish 5:37

Sure.

Damian Vallelonga 5:38

Hence, like, Okay, I got it, I got an issue, I gotta figure out a way to fix it. Who is out there is is capable of helping me fix it?

Kate Hammer 5:45

Yeah.

Damian Vallelonga 5:45

Not like, oh, well, but who started their company before 1950? Like, that's really when I hear. It's not it's never in someone's within someone's routine. It's all about it, how easy and quick and affordable can I find a solution to this thing that I'm dealing with? And so the the more that, that we as service providers can get into that mindset of always realizing that people are just trying to find a solution to something, what is it about their experience and their aspirations and their issues? What can we talk about, that's going to make a connection? But yeah, it's so typically, to that point, what will you ask, what are some things you see, it's, it's if you land on that on a website, for a business that hasn't really thought some of these things through, you'll see very common mistakes happening where there are, they're speaking, either entirely or, or the majority of their language is just about their products or services, their expertise, their credentials, their history, which is important at some level, or it's at some point in the in the customer journey, but they're missing all of

the opportunities to talk about what their products or services can do. What can they what do they mean to somebody? What value do they bring? How do they impact those people's lives? Not merely what it is that you offer? And why should people be impressed by all these awards in the wall? Like it's not enough to make a connection with somebody to just talk about yourself. So we find on on websites and in marketing language everywhere, in all kinds of channels, you'll see just too much information about the the what, what are what do we do? What do we offer? Who are we as a as a local business. And just it's just the balance is off. Right? There's not enough of the other end of it, because it's a relationship. It's a provider and a purchaser. And so you have to take both of those parties into into the perspective, if you want to hope to really make a you know, have a good ROI on your marketing budget, and really hope to turn shoppers into buyers.

Andrew Fish 8:02

So it's almost like going on a first date. And if on the first date, where they come to the website, all they hear is the two hour rendition of the other person's life story. They might get a little bored and might not want to stick around for future dates. Right. I had maybe it's a bad analogy.

Kate Hammer 8:15

No, it's not. No, that's spot on Andrew. I think that's that's the thing. That's the thing. Little less you a little more. Me.

Andrew Fish 8:23

Yeah. So follow up question to that. I think what's really interesting to me is marketing has been around since we've been even bartering, right? So so so prior to even our current monetary system, but how you do it has changed drastically, particularly in the last 25 years, right? I mean, websites we wouldn't have even been talking about that long ago. But I also think there was a really massive accelerant within the last three years, companies are now competing in a way that they weren't even before just with the the web and stuff. And when COVID happened and you know, things became much more virtual, the opportunity to be a service provider to someone when you are not in their community has drastically changed even right, people are willing to hire someone to do their taxes or hire someone to you know, provide them a service that they might have gone down the street, but now they have those options. So I think it's even more important now to tell that story, right?

Damian Vallelonga 9:20

It is even more important and, and the the uniqueness is, I think a really big part of that. So spending time figuring out how you are unique and and like I said, this is just a church, it can be a challenge for a lot of companies, like I even need to find outside perspectives to help me talk about my business and how I can help. It's just like, it just sucks. It's hard to do.

So yeah. So figuring out how you're unique. And especially like I said earlier, if you can really dial into a specific target audience, like like if you just if you helped nonprofits with their taxes, like those are two very specific things. And a lot of people have a hard time realizing that there are more opportunities when you narrow, because most companies want to do as much as possible for as many people as possible. And that can just be really tough to communicate because you just have too many subjects to too many various types of audiences.

Andrew Fish 10:20

I can relate to the Chamber of Commerce, I can relate to that.

Damian Vallelonga 10:23

So doing those things can really help when you are now being sort of compared on a just a different scale or level.

Andrew Fish 10:31

Yeah, absolutely.

Damian Vallelonga 10:33

So what we what I literally just made a note on my desk this week, that just says, Listen, because I'm trying to get better at listening. And it's not just like on a personal relationship level, which is very important. But from a business perspective, how can we listen to our customers, and even our partners, but specifically, if you're trying to provide front of sell a service or practice somebody? How can you do a better job of listening to them, and actually really internalizing what they're thinking what they're saying what their needs are? If you are helping or not, how do you improve, to better serve those people really has to do a lot with getting information from them. Right?

Kate Hammer 11:17

So how do you go about that process? What do you recommend then in order to get that information back and have something to work with?

Damian Vallelonga 11:23

Ideally, you have actual conversations with people.

Kate Hammer 11:27

What?

Andrew Fish 11:28

That was really novel.

Damian Vallelonga 11:29

So one of the first steps that if a client hires us to develop a brand strategy and then even a content strategy for a website, redesign or build, one of the first things we do is like, so we'll have an intake session, we'll spend an hour an hour and a half, just listening to all the things they have to say about their company, about their services about their audience. And then before we start writing, or developing any information for them, we say, Okay, the next step for us to really get a full understanding of the value that you provide, is actually speaking to the people who you've helped. And so we'll we'll conduct interviews with their clients or customers, and try and build a really robust picture for what their lives look like before and during, and now after. Because if you can, not only is that just helpful for our research, but they can also turn into testimonials, which are super relatable if you're telling a little story. So using research from actual interviews, sometimes it's not easy to get them some some of our clients are like, Oh, no, that's I would never ask, you know, a former client to get like, they can be resistant to the idea, but it really, and we record these Zoom calls. And so you are able to hear like you'll see patterns start to or, you know, just the bubble to the surface, like, oh, people keep saying this one term that we never heard the client say, and we realize, well, it's because they don't, they're not that way. Yeah, they're I think, like they're in their own head.

Andrew Fish 13:04

They're inside the bottle.

Damian Vallelonga 13:05

They're inside the bottle.

Andrew Fish 13:06

Yeah.

Kate Hammer 13:07

Yes. I do love that.

Damian Vallelonga 13:09

So your head- So these are the people on the other side who are helping you write that label?

Andrew Fish 13:13

Yeah.

Damian Vallelonga 13:14

Using the language that you need.

Andrew Fish 13:15

You're the people on the other side.

Kate Hammer 13:18

You are the people on- you are people. You're good people, Damian.

Damian Vallelonga 13:22

Thanks.

Kate Hammer 13:23

Oh, my goodness.

Andrew Fish 13:24

So you know, as you think about not just your clients, but businesses in the region here that are trying to, you know, find that next gear trying to differentiate themselves trying to help them make unique, I hear that listening is a huge priority. Right? Once they understand you, right, there was two pieces that you talked about, right? Where's the what sets you apart? What's unique, and you have a unique audience? Talk to us a little bit about that audience piece? And is that does that help then drive? I assume the answer is yes. But does that help drive decisions as to how you start sending that message out? Right? Because then what's the message? And then how are you putting it out there?

Damian Vallelonga 14:00

Absolutely. If if you are able to focus in on a clear- a strong, clear target audience, that's not everyone in the world there that you just start to uncover these opportunities because those- take the nonprofit example, for instance, like you are you suddenly have access or opportunities to access them in maybe it's just different channels, you know, different networks. Like you know, there's if you're in an if you're just focused on one industry, you know, it's likely that you can go to an industry conference, or you know, an advertising industry conference sponsor or something like and then and then word can spread through that industry. Because once people understand you are there specifically for them and not just for everyone, I think you're able to build trust a lot more quickly because they they believe if you are presenting a compelling story about the services that can help them they will they'll be able to come to a quicker realization like, these are the people who are meant for us. They're not just here to serve every everyone. So it just becomes it becomes more targeted. It's which is, which means better ROI. Because you're just you're not trying to just blanket the whole region or so there's just lots of opportunities that surface when when you spend the time to figure out who are we here for?

Kate Hammer 15:23

Yeah, who are we here for?

Damian Vallelonga 15:26

And then and then are there because you know, you can be for an industry, but you then have to follow that up with what's the specific thing that I'm helping you with, obviously, but when you get those two things, right, you've just really like laid some a really strong foundation for the audience to understand the value that you bring.

Kate Hammer 15:45

Yeah, they can say, "I'm a match, or that's not for me". And both of those are really useful.

Damian Vallelonga 15:50

Equally useful.

Andrew Fish 15:50

If you have one piece of advice to offer businesses in the community as they start thinking about how they switch their stance, what would that be?

Damian Vallelonga 16:01

It could be a two part thing. Let's just zero in on the impact of the header, also known as the hero section of your website.

Andrew Fish 16:10

Okay.

Damian Vallelonga 16:10

If you're if you're serving small businesses with let's just say like office cleaning, then the image if you're using an image in your in the header of your site, let's not have it be your the building that you work in. Let's have it be an ideal, clean, well functioning office. If that's if that's what the eventual goal is to have a really beautiful, well maintained office, let's showcase that. And then let's couple it with a headline and sub headline that speak to that experience that goal, not just "office maintenance, killin' it in CNY for 30 years".

Andrew Fish 16:54

Right, right.

Kate Hammer 16:55

Yeah.

Damian Vallelonga 16:55

It's not compelling. If you can marry these visuals with really strong language that speaks to the goals, needs, aspirations of the the audience, then you've got to you've got a winning combination there. So that's an it's an easy place to start. But you really have to be listening to be thinking about what the other person needs.

Kate Hammer 17:16

So who are you cleaning for?

Damian Vallelonga 17:18

Yeah, who are you cleaning for?

Kate Hammer 17:19

Yeah.

Damian Vallelonga 17:19

And what's their ultimate hope?

Andrew Fish 17:22

What do they want from the experience?

Damian Vallelonga 17:23

What do they want?

Kate Hammer 17:23

Clean offices for people who own nonprofits?

Damian Vallelonga 17:28

Sure, yes.

Andrew Fish 17:30

If they if that is their target audience.

Kate Hammer 17:32

And if that's the best you can do, you should call Damian.

Andrew Fish 17:36

That is also a strong piece of advice from Kate Hammer.

Kate Hammer 17:39

You got it.

Andrew Fish 17:40

Damian, thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate it. Lots of great information and hopefully something that some of our members can take away and, and start thinking differently about what do they offer that's unique and who is their audience and and therefore how do they tell that story.

Damian Vallelonga 17:55

Thanks for having me.

Kate Hammer 17:56

Yeah. Thank you.

Andrew Fish 17:57

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Kate Hammer 18:19

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