**DMC’s Urban Evolution Podcast – Chris Lukenbill, Shrpa: A New Online Source for Travel and Exploration**

Bill Von Bank:

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Chris Lukenbill:

We all know that it's starting to come back with local travel. And so how do we help improve that local travel? And maybe it's not somebody that's staying in your hotel that's coming from two states over, but maybe it's somebody that's from the other side of the state, this staying in your hotel. And so how do we help improve that local travel, get people to start exploring a little bit more? That's just going to help expand upon that as it starts to grow.

Andy Vig:

Long-term we see ourselves as being the platform for local travel and exploration. And we're thinking about how to scale to that point. It's always trying to find the next logical stepping stone to get to that. So we've made a bunch of great steps up in the last year, and we're actively looking for those next steps to move us to the national level, to a broader scope.

Bill Von Bank:

Welcome to Urban Evolution, a podcast about harnessing creativity and innovation to transform communities. I'm your host Bill Von Bank. A Rochester, Minnesota startup is helping to fill a void in community exploration, shrpa.com connects travelers with self-guided adventures created by locals. It's a unique online resource that is gaining traction and subscribers. Today, I'm joined by the co-founders of shrpa.com. Chris Lukenbill and Andy Vig, both software developers who met at a co-working space. They both struggled to find a source for new experiences. Not finding a usable platform, they created their own with a long-term vision for shrpa.com to be the platform for local travel and exploration. Chris Lukenbill, Andy Vig, Welcome to the Urban Evolution Podcast.

Chris Lukenbill:

Thank you. Appreciate you having us here.

Andy Vig:

Thanks for having us.

Bill Von Bank:

Chris and Andy, can you share with us your career journey? Chris, let's start with you.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah, definitely. So I've been in software development for my entire career and it really started out of college working with a smaller company that really introduced me into entrepreneurship. And so I'd say that's really where it started, even for what we're doing here with Shrpa. From there, I developed into building a company previous to this that was in actually the indoor agriculture industry, so a different industry, but that was taking a product from idea through acquisition. And then most recently jumping into Shrpa.

Bill Von Bank:

All right, Andy, how about you?

Andy Vig:

I'm also a software engineer by trade and started my career at Microsoft and spent about 10 years there. And since then I've effectively, gradually moved down to smaller and smaller companies until here it was Shrpa finally getting to the core co-founder of a startup.

Bill Von Bank:

Have you always been in Rochester?

Andy Vig:

No. I lived, went to school in Morehead and lived in Fargo for a number of years.

Bill Von Bank:

Chris, how about you? Have you always been in Rochester?

Chris Lukenbill:

That's a good question. No, actually I started over in South Dakota, went to school at SDSU, worked for a few years in Sioux Falls and then made my way over here as a trailing spouse. My wife works at IBM.

Bill Von Bank:

You referenced Shrpa and that's what we're here to talk about today. So give us a look into your new company, a new startup here in Rochester, Minnesota called Shrpa.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yes. So Shrpa is a company that's all based around day trips, getting people out there and exploring their communities in a new way. And so we provide the full experience of how they can get out and explore a community that they haven't already been out and explored on their own. So opening up the world to new possibilities of how people can get out and explore something new. And then for the communities, the idea is we're able to provide with them a better way to be able to expand the group. They can share their stories and really open up their stakeholder group to more people, they can help share what they love about their community.

Bill Von Bank:

Andy, where did the idea come from to start Shrpa?

Andy Vig:

It was originally Chris's idea technically, but early on, we got together and both had a similar problem where we ended up repeating similar things that we were doing, and we really wanted to experience more of what was out there. We found friends and others at our coworking space that we were at that found all kinds of new, exciting things to do. And we felt like there should be a place to go find that, a site and that didn't exist. And that's kind of what the genesis was.

Bill Von Bank:

What led to the founding of Shrpa? It's my understanding that you both met each other at a co-working space in downtown Rochester. Can you shed some light on that?

Chris Lukenbill:

Correct. Yeah. So as Andy was saying, we really started out with kind of the same idea and it was actually through working at the same co-working space that we knew each other through that. And we just started bouncing the ideas off of each other as far as what could this actually become? What would the product be? What would the business be? And it was the iteration of that conversation as we would help each other work through the ideas where really both of us got more excited about it, more passionate about it. And that's where the start of it began, is that we both really talked to each other into the idea of this is a good thing to do, and we have a lot of opportunities here. So let's give it a go.

Bill Von Bank:

The coworking space being Collider coworking downtown Rochester. Was it just basically your desks are next to each other and you just started chatting?

Andy Vig:

The co-working space at Collider downtown is a great way to intermix, to have collisions as the name goes, to intermix with different people, doing different things. I've worked at home for a number of years and this was a great way for me to get out and to meet interesting people in the community that have different skill sets for me. So it's a great way for different ideas to come together.

Bill Von Bank:

Where did the name Shrpa come from?

Chris Lukenbill:

Shrpa really takes his name as an inspiration from the Sherpas in Nepal. The people that are guiding people on adventures up in the Himalayas. And we really, really identify with that, as far as these are creators who are providing all of that information, all of the logistics, the things to expect before you go out and have this adventure, here's all of the information that you need to be able to go out and have your own adventure.

Bill Von Bank:

Andy, when did you realize that Shrpa could become a business opportunity?

Andy Vig:

From early on, we realized there was a lot of potential. It actually took us a long time to iterate and find an actual target market. The core vision has stayed the same, but we really worked through different iterations of how we could take what we considered a really valuable idea and actually make it into a sustainable business that can generate users and revenue and build a team.

Bill Von Bank:

And then let's dial back a bit. When did you really start this platform and get the business rolling?

Chris Lukenbill:

It started in very early 2019, and that was really where the idea started up. And we worked through everything that first year, as Andy was saying, it really always started out as the idea of how do you get travelers and creators? How do you connect them together? People that can highlight what they love to do in their local community and people looking for something new. We want to have that way for them to be able to connect. And throughout 2019, we started developing that idea and trying to figure out what it could be as a product. And that's what it's developed into and 2020 is when it really started to go into a business and become more than just a product.

Bill Von Bank:

In the early stages, I'm guessing you did your research, combing the internet and other sources to see if there was something that matched your vision and there wasn't?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah. As a creator, we're not looking to recreate something that's already been done and try and do that better. If something already existed, I would have used that. We were looking for a solution to a problem.

Bill Von Bank:

That you had.

Chris Lukenbill:

Exactly. And so if there was a solution already, that would be a lot simpler. We wouldn't have to do all of this. They would already be out there and we'd be using that. And the fact that there wasn't a solution is really what led to us creating it.

Bill Von Bank:

From day 1 to today, early 2021. Talk us through the evolution of this platform.

Andy Vig:

Initially it started off as the core site for travelers. And initially the core of it is a content platform. So it started off by bothering our friends and others in the coworking space to try to come up with the fun stuff that they were doing anyway, and just put it on the site. So it started off as just a primitive way to get that content out there. And we've built up over time, a better content creation experience. So it's easy and fun for the creators to actually put content on the site. We've enhanced the way that travelers can discover. And more recently we've built in some more power for communities to highlight the fun things to do in their community in aggregate.

Bill Von Bank:

And I just want to be clear, you don't really have any identified competition for this right now?

Chris Lukenbill:

Not directly. On the traveler side of things, there's the Trip Advisors, there's the Yelp type of solutions out there. There's places that do reviews and people can find out what exists out there, but then being able to put that into a full experience on the other side of it, a little bit there's Airbnb experiences, which is really just a tour guide marketplace. So there's things that are touching on it on a little bit, even on the traveler side and then for the communities really solutions that are out there for the communities. There's other solutions that do similar things, but nothing really that's taking on this content creation, helping to amplify the voice of your community to be part of just telling that story. And so that's where we've found that there's indirect competition, but really nothing directly yet.

Andy Vig:

There's plenty of sites and blogs that have like a top 10 list of things to do, but nothing that really highlights true experiences that actually remove the need to go out and do a bunch of research and planning. And that's the idea of the core value of our site.

Bill Von Bank:

So you found a niche.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yep. That's right.

Bill Von Bank:

You talked about your customers, but I would just want you to drill a little bit deeper because it feels like it's layered.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yes, it is. It is. And it really did start with that, the travelers and the creators and connecting those two together. And that's what I was saying in 2019, that was really our focus. In 2020, our customer has really evolved into the destination marketing organizations, the visitors bureau. So now we've really introduced almost this third side to the marketplace. These are the people that are looking to do the same thing that we were looking to do. How do they connect travelers with the people that have the information about how to experience their community? And so that's where we turned to them and said, hey, you're trying to solve the same problem. How can we work with you to be able to bring this solution to market, to be able to expand it here locally, be able to grow beyond our region? And so that's where introducing it to that third side of the marketplace has really helped us to be able to build this into something bigger. And we're just starting to tap into that.

Chris Lukenbill:

The customers that we're really looking at, at that level is it's anything from a community of less than 1,000 people that are using this because it's a platform that can scale with the community, all the way up to the larger destinations. When we think about tourism destinations here in Minnesota, we work with Brainerd, we work with Mall of America, those types of places that are larger entities that can help again, we're helping to tell their story. All of these organizations really need that assistance. They don't have the resources or even the amount of people that they would need to be able to tell the story of all of their community members.

Bill Von Bank:

Was that really how you monetized the site?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yep. That's the business model there is that we sell yearly subscriptions for them to be able to help to be promoting that community engagement. Also, there's a little bit of content creation opportunities in there as well. And that's how we work with our customers currently.

Bill Von Bank:

The platform subscription is to a convention visitors bureau, a chamber of commerce and other destination marketing organizations.

Chris Lukenbill:

Correct. Yeah. Anybody that really has a need to be able to help bring in their community. We found that visitors bureaus definitely fall into that, destination marketing organizations definitely fall into that. Depending on the community, the way that they're organized, chambers fall into that, EDAs as well. And even organizations you wouldn't really think of. Again, Mall of America, they're really a DMO on their own, just very strict boundaries of where they're at. So we see there's a lot more opportunities of other organizations that we can start to work with. And is really just a matter of helping to identify those, helping them to find us and finding ways that we can work together.

Bill Von Bank:

You have a partnership with Explore Minnesota, the tourism promotion agency for the state of Minnesota. Talk us through that.

Chris Lukenbill:

That started in late 2020 is when we started that conversation. We found out there was an opportunity. We were introduced to it from Lisa Havelka. She's a part of the Southern Minnesota tourism group here, part of Explore Minnesota. And the nice thing about just being introduced to that, again, being part of Rochester here, we have an opportunity to get connected in with people from around of course our community, but then also the extended community of the state. And that's really where that introduction started. How we've been working with them is they have a co-op marketing program. And the idea with this co-op marketing program is what are the ways that they can introduce more innovative ways that communities can help tell their story and get the word out about what they're doing. And so our platform falls really well into that, it really compliments what they're looking to do. And how that works is that Explore Minnesota is able to provide some of the financial incentive to these communities so that they can get a reduced rate on the subscriptions.

Chris Lukenbill:

And then it also helps us to be able to, one have a little bit of a stamp of approval from a larger organization, like Explore Minnesota in addition to helping to introduce our platform to a lot more communities. And that's really the biggest thing that we find as a challenge is just getting our name out there, letting people know that we exist as a new startup. That's always going to be your challenge. But the fact that once we have those conversations, most of the times they find that this is a good tool for what they're looking to do. That's a great way to be able to get the word out there.

Bill Von Bank:

Andy, what roadblocks have you encountered along the way as you develop this site?

Andy Vig:

Awareness has been a big part of it. And I think part of that is just our skillsets. I'm an engineer by training. So for me building the site is the easiest thing, but marketing doesn't come naturally. So people have so many distractions these days, it's hard to get the word out and connect with the right people in the right way and get that messaging solid.

Bill Von Bank:

And as an entrepreneur, you kind of have to do it all.

Andy Vig:

Yeah. Being in a startup is an art of doing all the things you're not comfortable with. So that's a good test.

Bill Von Bank:

For you, both because you both have young families. How do you balance all the work involved with a startup and family life? Are your family's involved in the business as well?

Chris Lukenbill:

Our families aren't involved in the business other than when you're in a startup, they kind of always are no matter what. So maybe not directly, maybe not making phone calls, maybe not writing the code.

Andy Vig:

They go on the day trips with it.

Chris Lukenbill:

They do go on the day trips. Yep. They get to experience it. So maybe the best part of all of it. And actually they helped create some of the content too. My wife has definitely been there helping, creating content. Same thing with Andy's wife. For us, I think both of us can probably agree that it's all about the prioritization. You only have so much time. And so how do you prioritize what needs to get done when it needs to get done? And then I would say even for myself, especially being able to say no to things, I always want to try everything, try and get out there and try and help where I can or try and get involved with more things. And it's trying to balance that out of what can you be involved with? What can you take part in, but be able to say no to enough things that anytime you are saying yes to everything you're by default saying no to other things. So being able to be aware of what that is.

Andy Vig:

I have young kids and actually I think that was a good intro into being in a startup in some ways, because when you have a new born, prioritizing things and ignoring things is essential to actually getting sleep. And relative to that, I think prioritization in the startup is somewhat easier.

Bill Von Bank:

I want to get into the COVID-19 pandemic because you can't ignore it. It's been in our lives for over a year. How has it impacted your business as you develop it?

Chris Lukenbill:

As we're working with travelers and creators, there's been a enhanced need to get out and just get some type of even just locally getting out and exploring their local communities. One is just to help support those businesses, to be able to find an outlet, to be able to get out there and provide some of that support. And especially as you're exploring somewhere, having all of the information that you can ahead of time. Anytime that you feel unsafe about things, having more information is so valuable. And so that's something from the traveler side of things, even from the creator side of things that it's really enhanced the need for what we're providing.

Chris Lukenbill:

When we talk about the communities that we're working with, it's really accelerated that as well because they've never had a lot of resources. They've never had more than enough people to be able to do what they're trying to do. And now with COVID in the restrictions are the limitations on their budgets, the limitations on the amount of people they just have in the office anymore. It's made that even more potent, even more focused that we need to really be able to help out in any way that we can. And so I would say more than anything, it's just accelerated the need for all of the groups that we're serving.

Bill Von Bank:

And how many groups are you serving? What's your client base right now?

Chris Lukenbill:

We just went over 25, I think we're at 27 communities throughout mostly Minnesota and a few into Wisconsin currently.

Bill Von Bank:

And Wisconsin is an expansion state for you?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah. We're focusing on Wisconsin next. We're working actually with Travel Wisconsin, looking to do something similar as Explore Minnesota with their state as well. That's something that we're looking at to see what all of the states around us have that as far as an opportunity. And then the next expansion is really, we're looking at a different strategy for expanding nationally. So we have a couple of different routes there.

Bill Von Bank:

As you look to a national strategy, I just want to share some current travel and tourism data with you because it's not pretty. But it's real. The US Travel Association shares that the tourism industry saw an unprecedented 42% decline in annual spending in 2020 with hotel occupancy rates at an all-time low. McKinsey and Company notes a recovery could be slow with an optimistic scenario of a full recovery, not before 2023. So you look at information like this, does this information and the projections change your strategy? Do you feel like it only makes it easier for you to sell your product because of these stats? I mean, how do you take these stats and look forward?

Andy Vig:

It reminds us how important it is for us to provide value and how much the right tool can really help different organizations and communities and helps prioritize, helps us focus.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah. That's something that with those communities and with the stats that you're mentioning there, it's definitely ... We all know that it's starting to come back with local travel. And so how do we help improve that local travel? And maybe it's not somebody that's staying in your hotel, that's coming from two states over, but maybe it's somebody that's from the other side of the state that is staying in your hotel. And so how do we help improve that local travel, get people to start exploring a little bit more. That's just going to help expand upon that as it starts to grow. And so I wouldn't say that it helps us in any way, as far as making it easier, but it helps as far as it really focuses in that need for it. The budgets are still constrained so there's the challenge there, but it really focuses the need that they need this even more.

Chris Lukenbill:

And even when we talk about community engagement. Community engagement was something that industry-wide had been a nice to have. And it was talked about maybe for the last three years. How can you really build up that stakeholder network? How can you make a more robust and inclusive group of stakeholders in your local community? And that wasn't nice to have, and now they're finding it, that's a necessity.

Bill Von Bank:

[crosstalk 00:19:59] selling proposition for you?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah, exactly. And so that's really what we're leaning into, especially on the national expansion is how do we help with that community engagement and really help each one of those communities as they were looking to build out what they can do locally, and then be part of that conversation when it starts to becoming that national travel and international travel as well.

Bill Von Bank:

What are some trends you are seeing with travelers and the users of your site?

Chris Lukenbill:

For us, really, the biggest focus has been that excitement about highlighting their local communities. Both on the creator side and on the traveler side. There's that cry, that local pride about, oh yeah, those are the local shops that we love to explore. We love to tell everybody about that as well. And so not only are they discovering what other people are excited and proud about to be able share on their own. And so really, that trend of getting in and supporting those local businesses. And that's something that we've seen in a lot of other areas is that support for the local businesses. And so being able to help out with that has been a really big piece of it. And then it comes down to you. They see this as, oh, well, I can see this from a traveler's perspective. How can I help share what's going on in my local community? So being able to provide the platform for that sides of that.

Bill Von Bank:

Shrpa took home $10,000 in prize money for the best greater Minnesota startup at the 2020 Minnesota Cup, which is the largest statewide startup competition in the nation. I'm guessing that energized you and was welcome seed money.

Andy Vig:

Yeah, absolutely. Minnesota Cup was an excellent opportunity for us to both immerse ourselves in other organizations that are at a similar stage as us, but also to really round out some of the business planning and thinking that we should really be doing as a startup, which is great for us to not just stay focused in on the dev. But yet to think about the business model, to think about some of these larger cross-discipline areas. So that competition was a great experience for us.

Bill Von Bank:

And it's my understanding that you'll be participating in 2021.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yes, that's the case. So we finished in the perfect place. If you're not going to win the entire thing, get third place in your division because first and second, don't get to come back. And so we are in the high-tech division, the highest ranking from last year coming back. It's a little bit of pressure on us, but hopefully that means that we'll be able to get back into that semi-finals around and get some really good connections in there. As Andy was saying, it's the immersion into the group, it's the recognition that really helps. And then the opportunity to be able to get some seed money as well. So some of those funds that help as you're bootstrapping it, anything really goes a long ways to be able to help build up an even more robust team.

Andy Vig:

When you're doing a startup being part of a community that's supportive of startups and connects you with assistants and different thoughts and mentors is makes a huge difference. And that was super helpful for both the Collider co-working space and the work they do. And the Minnesota Cup.

Bill Von Bank:

Did you also receive some funding through Launch Minnesota?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yes, we did. So again, speaking of as far as a larger community, how they can be so incredibly helpful. Launch Minnesota has innovation grant. And as part of that innovation grant, very similar to Minnesota Cup where you are trying to highlight out and prove out this is the value that you can provide as a business and the viability that you have as a business. They have a panel, a board of advisors that reviews all of those, in addition to another team, to look everything over. They were able to provide with funds through the Launch Minnesota innovation grants, which is something that's funded through the state. So it works extremely well to be able to, again, be part of a community, whether it's Rochester base, statewide based, it can really support their entrepreneurs and their startups in creating something new.

Bill Von Bank:

Minute, an online technology and innovation news source named Shrpa, one of 21 startups to watch in Minnesota in 2021. Any pressure there?

Andy Vig:

It was great to get the recognition. I wouldn't say that puts any more pressure than Chris and I put on each other on a regular basis. So that's kind of the norm, but it's great to get that recognition.

Chris Lukenbill:

The recognition is huge. Being able to have that is definitely something that helps to get the word out, let people know that we're here and get more people excited about what we're doing.

Bill Von Bank:

If you could start over, what would you change?

Andy Vig:

There's a million different things that I've learned that I would probably optimize and do things faster, but there's nothing major that I would change. A big part of being in a startup is not the destination, but the journey. It's the act of building and learning and experiencing. And therefore you need to see that as part of the value and part of it.

Chris Lukenbill:

I think that probably highlights the value of having a partner, a co-founder in this, is that you have somebody who's always helping to recenter you. And Andy definitely knows this, that I can get focused on something and really go down the wrong path quickly. And I get excited about things and sometimes it's those things that get you excited, send you off in the wrong direction. And so having somebody there to be able to say, just ask the question. Is that a good thing to be doing? Or should we focus on this? Or is that really the priority now? That's something that's so valuable. And so I think instead of going on those big veers and iterations where you're like, oh, that was a really big mistake as Andy said, it's a process. And so we're learning the whole way. And so maybe it's smaller zigs and zags that we're doing to get to the destination. But I'm extremely happy with everything we've been able to do so far.

Andy Vig:

A core piece of what we do is try to iterate quickly and to fail fast. And because of that, I feel like we try not to take these massive course corrections that are needed, but to come up with an idea, think about how we can test it out and then experiment to try to understand if that is the right path or not. And then you just don't go as far, if something doesn't work out like you expect.

Bill Von Bank:

Is it just the two of you or do you have staff?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yes we have. So our first full-time member joined us at the end of the last year, very beginning of this year, Hannah Angle. So she is our marketing director and she actually started out as an intern with us. And it's something where her role just evolved into something bigger and bigger. She was able to provide a lot of help with it. And then we've always worked with a good group of advisers and also contractors that we bring in, in different roles. And so we always have contractors that we're working with, especially on the development side of things, to be able to augment Andy's skills and what he's able to bring to the table.

Chris Lukenbill:

And then we've also just brought on Garrett [Leafring 00:26:29] so he's able to help out on the sales side of things. He really started out more in that advisor role of things, and he really got more excited about what we were able to do and where things were headed. And so he's starting out with us on the sales side as well. And so we see this year as us hopefully expanding and growing at a much quicker pace. And so we'll see where that goes.

Bill Von Bank:

How are you with your goals in terms of business development currently, and then let's talk growth strategy, moving forward?

Chris Lukenbill:

We're on pace. We're doing well. This is the challenge, always as a startup is you always want to do more. And so always trying to be happy with what you're getting accomplished. And so we are accomplishing, we're actually right on pace as far as developing out in Minnesota. We actually started with that Explore Minnesota partnership. And thanks to the quick response of the communities throughout the state, they actually doubled their partnership that they were putting into it because we had such a great response. And so that's just the first six months of the year here. So they're on a fiscal year that starts in July.

Chris Lukenbill:

And so as we look to what we can do now for the next fiscal year for Minnesota, we see a lot of opportunity expanding in our state, but now we're really looking at, okay, regionally, how can we replicate that out in the neighboring states? And then the other part of it that we alluded to earlier is that national expansion. And that's still the unknown. It's still the piece that we haven't proven that out like we've proven out Minnesota and been able to do in the regional expansion.

Andy Vig:

Long-term we see ourselves as being the platform for local travel and exploration. And we're thinking about how to scale to that point. And it's always trying to find the next logical stepping stone to get to that. So we've made a bunch of great steps up in the last year, and we're actively looking for those next steps to move us to the national level, to a broader scope.

Bill Von Bank:

Are you able to project out three to five years?

Andy Vig:

We can try. We don't delude ourselves that what we project will be accurate, but the act of gaming those situations out is extremely helpful for us to understand if we go this direction, these are some complications and considerations, if we go this other direction and it helps really inform our near term strategy to think through the longer term goals and strategy.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah. When we're thinking about that growth from where we're at currently, in three to five years, we're still serving the same customers. It's just that we're able to provide more value for more of our customers. Right now we're really leaning into what does that value that we can provide for these communities, because there's a really big need there. And they have that really focused in, and so how can we help them? And we can do that on a local level. And now as we get to a national expansion, now it becomes really exciting about what we can do to provide value for those travelers. And how do those travelers explore both in their local community and explore when they go further, and start to travel across the country or even internationally. And so that's where three to five years we see ourselves playing in that space, as well as still serving the same customers that we're serving today.

Bill Von Bank:

You're filling a gap. Do you worry that others will chase the business as you build more success and you scale up? Do you worry about competition?

Andy Vig:

No, not particularly. We have both the benefit of entering the space early, as well as being able to move fast. And we see being able to iterate and move quickly as one of our core competitive advantages. And if somebody can beat us at that, then so be it. But the velocity and the speed of movement is something we're very focused on.

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah. It really comes down to we have customers now and they- they see the value of what we're providing. It's just a matter of us being able to reach out to those customers quicker. And so I would be more concerned if we were still struggling to find a customer and searching for somebody. And how do we get there? We know that we want to try and solve a problem. That's just not where we're at. We're in a place where we have a solution that people are receiving and they're responding well to. And so now it's just a matter of us. How can we help those customers quicker? And how can we build our company to be able to match that level of what they need?

Bill Von Bank:

And you have a density of customers or enough customers to really help you learn, adjust, move, and grow?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yes, exactly. Yeah. And that's a really big thing as well as we build out this community engagement piece, this national expansion, we are leaning into our local customers. They're our alpha testers. They're the first ones that we're working with already to say, hey, here's what we're looking to provide on this community engagement piece. You've already mentioned that you're excited about that. Provide us with some feedback and that's what we do. We build it to the point where as Andy was noting, we don't want to go too far down the wrong path. And so how can we correct ourselves on that? Well, asking the people that know exactly what they need, that's how we can correct ourselves. We need to provide enough for them to be able to understand what we're trying to do with our platform and what we're trying to provide with that solution. And then they can guide us the rest of the way.

Andy Vig:

As a startup, feedback and learning is super essential. So leaning on those customers to be able to get that is one of those valuable things that we can get.

Bill Von Bank:

That two way communication obviously also leads to loyalty I bet.

Chris Lukenbill:

Definitely. Any time that you're providing a subscription service. So we're a SAS, service to a lot of these communities. The way that we always talk about that is they're not just buying what we can offer them today. They're buying what we can be in a year from now. And they understand that. That we're just scratching the surface of what we can help them out with. And so if they can be part of that conversation that just helps them to be just more invested, more excited about it.

Andy Vig:

It also makes us more real. We're not this big faceless corporation. We're not some contact link. We're real people that are happy to have a conversation with them and take their feedback and improve the product from it.

Bill Von Bank:

Well, you're hospitable, and this is the hospitality industry so that makes sense.

Chris Lukenbill:

And that's a nice thing as well. It's a community that it's all about connections and networking with people. And how do you have a good conversation. So we even talk about that in the solution we provide. How do we help our customers to be able to help introduce it to more people? Because they're heavily networked group. They like to help each other out. Nobody likes to hold the secrets of what they do to help their community. They like to share with everybody else to say, oh, this is the way that you can make your community better as well.

Bill Von Bank:

Well, there's a lot of pride as content creators I have to think because they want to share what they like about the community. And that only makes the visitor's experience that much more meaningful.

Chris Lukenbill:

Exactly.

Andy Vig:

Absolutely.

Bill Von Bank:

I have one final question for you both to answer separately. As you think about the growth of your startup and reflect on this past year, dealing with a global pandemic, what inspires you? Andy, let's start with you.

Andy Vig:

For me, all of the opportunity that's out there in every sense. The opportunity of the team that I'm working with, the opportunity of the community that I live in helping out, the opportunity of building something really useful that people value and helps enhance their lives. Just the opportunity in so many ways is super inspiring.

Bill Von Bank:

Chris?

Chris Lukenbill:

Yeah. That's a really good point. Yeah, the opportunities are definitely huge. In addition to that, it's the customers that we talk to, it's the people that we get to be able to interact with every day and when we're able to bring a solution to them to help what they're doing because we're just trying to provide some help with a really hard job that they have to be able to help tell their story and promote their communities and being able to be part of that and to work with them on that and the excitement that they get out of being able to serve their customers better. That's a huge win and that's definitely inspiring.

Bill Von Bank:

Chris Lukenbill, Andy Vig. It's great to hear about Shrpa, a wonderful new platform. Best of luck moving forward. Thank you for being our guests on Urban Evolution.

Chris Lukenbill:

Perfect. Thank you so much. This has been great.

Andy Vig:

Thanks a lot, Bill.

Bill Von Bank:

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