FAQ MARKETING LOGIC

ARCHIVE AUDIO INTERVIEW

Shaun Clark

Guest Interview Transcript



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Shaun Clark

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Shaun Clark Interview

Editor:

Today we're excited to have Shaun Clark with us. He's the co-founder behind HighLevel, a groundbreaking platform that revolutionises how agencies handle marketing automation and customer relationships. Shaun has leveraged his deep understanding of the needs of marketing agencies to craft solutions that streamline client management and drive growth. Shaun, it's great to meet you.

Shaun Clark:

Yeah, likewise. Thanks for having me here.

Editor:

Could you maybe start by sharing the story behind the founding of HighLevel and the vision that drives it?

Shaun Clark:

Sure, yeah. Myself and my co-founders, we've always wanted to help small businesses and early on we probably like a lot of people started to build a product in a way that we felt like would help small businesses the best. And we very quickly found that a lot of the small businesses we talked to, they would sort of say weird things to us. So they would sort of say, "Oh, this looks great, but we just don't have time to implement it." And that was a very confusing statement initially because we didn't understand how we could build something someone would think would help them but wouldn't bother to want to use it. But I guess all of us know that if we go to the gym more often, we'll probably be healthier, and yet we still don't do it. So it's definitely a human thing. But what we were lucky in is that early on we discovered that if you really want to help the small business, you need to help the people helping the small business and those turn out to be the agencies.

And so we pivoted our product very early on and said, "We're not going to sell to small businesses at all, because really at the end of the day, they need the outcomes of the tools, but they are not going to be the users of the tools." And so we focused on helping enable agencies to take these tools out to market, and we created a business model around it where they can make money. And honestly, that is the whole business that we're in today, which is

we really make tools for professionals and we work hard to help those people do the best they can on behalf of their clients. So we're now finally helping the small businesses at a very large scale, but doing so I think in a much better way than we originally started.

Editor:

Your growth has been exponential. Everyone you talk to at the moment seems to be talking about HighLevel. For anybody who's maybe not come across the platform before, maybe you could just tell us a little bit about it and also the advantages of using HighLevel.

Shaun Clark:

Yeah, I mean we're now the second-largest sales and marketing platform in the world, but the reason why most people don't come across us is again, back to the agency concept. One of the things that we saw early on was a lot of agencies would buy tools off the shelf and or tell their clients to go buy them, and then they would pour their heart and soul into these tools to make them work, and then the client would wake up one day and fire them for it. And what we discovered was going on here is that because the tool was cheaper generally, and because the small business had no idea what really went into making it work, they had this illusion that somehow the tool was doing all the work. And so early on we allowed our customers to white label our products specifically to get away from this idea.

And we always thought, well, worst case scenario, if they do decide to fire you, at least you can continue to sell them the platform. And now that's significantly evolved now and we've realised that that actually makes a lot more money for agencies than selling services ever did and it's radically more scalable than services. But all that to say, it certainly helped the agencies retain their clients. But today it also makes it so that if you are staring right at us, you might not even know that we're there. But if you think about any sales and marketing platform on planet Earth, we have every single one of those tools all in one spot. And because we're sort of agency-focused, we also have it broken out, we call it multi-tenant enabled. But the simple idea is that as an agency you can move seamlessly in and out between hundreds or thousands of clients' accounts if that's what you have. And the clients can also log in, but

they're only going to see their accounts. So it's a very sort of multimodal system from that perspective.

Editor:

And who would you say, who were in your crosshairs? When you were devising HighLevel, who did you want to target? Which businesses?

Shaun Clark:

You'll be surprised to find we have no master plans. So what we've realised early on is that the best thing we can do is get close to our customer, listen to them and follow them. And having done so now at 3 million customers and climbing, we are helping everyone and their mother. So everybody from the local plumber to the biggest Fortune 500 companies, big influencers, course creators, you name it, the platform is vast. That's probably the best descriptor for it.

But we are good product and engineering people. That's something we feel like is in our wheelhouse. We're not great marketers, we're terrible sales people. There are many things we're terrible at, but we're great product and engineering folks. So the platform now serves a huge variety of businesses. There's really probably not a business out there that we don't serve. And mostly, again, because of the agencies, an agency could have ... You could be a local agency and serve 20 different types of businesses, you could be a specialised agency and go deep into a niche, but we fundamentally ... Or niche, depending on who you are. But now because of the platform, we're able to serve all those folks.

Editor:

You mentioned white labelling as well. How much of a game changer has that been to your business?

Shaun Clark:

Massive, because again, it really spoke to the need that we saw in the market, which is agencies were not getting the respect that they deserved for the work that they were doing. And honestly, the other bit, really sad part was that when they would lose the customer, the platform that the agency had brought forward would retain them because software is incredibly sticky. And we thought that was entirely unfair. And if anything, we also then as we pulled

that string, I think we realised that many of the largest CRMs on the planet were getting a bucket load of customers for agencies knowingly or unknowingly in many cases. And we sort of took the challenge of, well, how can we not only change that narrative, but also how can we help the agencies make money?

And so now agencies are able to white label and resell the platform. And what we've done is we've turned agencies into de facto software companies and given them the same margins the software companies were enjoying before. Many of our customers either have agency services as an add-on to that now, some of them give them up entirely, some of them seamlessly interweave it. But either way, it's radically changed the game for them because they have almost no churn and they have super high margins on the software side.

Editor:
In terms of the marketplace though, the software as a service marketplace, I guess now HighLevel is almost seen as a bit of a disruptor because I've noticed there's a couple of other well-established companies, shall we say, I won't name them.

Shaun Clark:
Yes.

Editor:
But they've now also started offering white labelled versions of their platforms. Is that something that you hoped would happen or that you are unhappy is happening?

Shaun Clark:
Well, I don't even know about that, so that's news to me. I haven't seen anyone who's bigger than us do it, but there aren't many left who are bigger than us. To be fair, there were other people who did some of this before. I mean, I guess the question then just though is how much are you committed to this? Because for us, it's agency or bust, and so we don't have cross-channel conflict like other people do. We don't have a sales team that's out trying to sell against your customers like other people do. We just don't have those dynamics. We really do believe this narrative that agencies make the difference between success and failure of the end customer, and we would

never want to get in the middle of that. And so as a result, white labelling is important, but it's not the only thing here. You need to really believe the story. It's not like a trick you can pull.

And I think if you've been an agency for any length of time, you've lost a client to some software company who pretended to be your friend. And I think the difference between us is that we have no desire to go out and sell directly to SMBs. We think it's a defeatist concept because again, I think you're kind of lying to people. You're saying, "Oh, hey, you can be the best plumber in town and stay up to date on all the latest plumbing technology, which there is and know how to instal it and all these other things. And by the way, you can be a genius software marketer on the side." It's just a ridiculous notion for us. So for me, unless another company is willing to go that direction, I have very little concern about white labelling being a competitor to us.

Editor:

That makes sense. I mean, Shaun, and what's your background? How did you end up here?

Shaun Clark:

Sure. Yeah. So I'm a software engineer by trade, not a very good one, I'll be frank. But I like it. And I had a SaaS company before that was in the invoicing space that I kind of built off my kitchen table and was like an add-on to Xero and QuickBooks and gave me an opportunity to really meet a lot of the small businesses that we're now serving through agencies and get a perspective on what their needs were. And so I built along with my original co-founder, Varun, who's still with us today, my CTO, the original version of HighLevel. And then once we got large enough to kick me out, they kicked me out. Now the product is even better and the rest is history.

Editor:

And whereabouts are you based? And where's the company based?

Shaun Clark:

I'm based in Eugene, Oregon but the company is based ... I guess theoretically we're based in Dallas, Texas. But that's just because my other co-founder had an office. So it was either my house, my CTO's house in Qatar or our third co-founder's office in Dallas. And we just thought that looked more

legit, but there's no one in that office these days. So we have 1,800 employees worldwide in every manner of country. We've been remote since inception and continue to be remote to this day.

Editor:

Got you. And I guess this is the $10 million question in many ways, which is do you use the platform yourself?

Shaun Clark:

Of course, our entire company uses the platform. I use it every day, 100%.

Editor:

And that must mean that again, you are able to find those areas where you maybe want to refine the platform because I know a lot of companies that will sell you a product, but of course they use something different themselves. They'll use Salesforce, ClickFunnels, whatever it might be.

Shaun Clark:

Oh yeah, I wouldn't have it any other way. I think a couple of crazy people have advanced that theory at one point or another, but I just shut that down because that's nonsense. If you don't use your own product, I mean, what's the point?

Editor:

Yeah.

Shaun Clark:

Although I won't go as far as to say ... I mean, there's certainly things that I've noticed over time that I feel like have been meaningful to fix, but I'll be very careful to say that the driver of our product is our customer, not me. We really feel like we are in service of the agencies that we work with. They are the experts, they know how to build a product, and our mission is to just get behind them and do what they're asking us to do, which is why we have a public ideas list where our customers can vote on what it is that they want to see next. And our product teams literally pull from that ideas list. I put up my favourite thing to do, and probably my biggest job is I do the release videos, which are every day now, which is amazing.

But what my biggest thrill is to say is like, "Hey, this new feature or this new change or this new enhancement has come out. And oh, by the way, it's because of this idea on the ideas board that you all voted up and the team delivered." I did two of those this morning already, and I'm thrilled because it shows a beautiful ... The way this works, which is our customers asked for this, they tell us based on a democratic process what's more important or less important. And our job is just to deliver those things and they'll take it from there.

Editor:

I must admit, the transparency is great to see. Maybe you could share some insights, Shaun, into future developments and what we can expect from HighLevel moving forward.

Shaun Clark:

Sure. Yeah. So I mean, like everybody, I think AI is our big focus of the year, but I would say the difference for us is we try to follow, not lead. And I bet very few people will say that, but again, when you have customers that are so smart and such experts in what they do, you'd be foolish to otherwise. And so I think with AI, what's really important to us is that what are the products that agencies can deploy on behalf of their customers that actually create value, and make those customers money, but also help make the agencies money? And so for us, that is inbound voice AI and all of the conversational AI across all the channels. So WhatsApp, SMS, webchat, et cetera.

So really we think of that in terms of an AI agent system. So really for us, it's about, "Hey, look, you're serving a plumber, a doctor, a lawyer, or a tattoo shop, whatever. Here's the AI agent for them that you can put in place that can pick up calls that they miss, that can pick up chats that they miss, can do back and forth SMS with their clients and achieve certain outcomes, which is the most important thing."

And so the easiest way to think about this is your front desk receptionist. The number of small businesses that miss calls every single day, huge. And those calls are never people calling asking about the weather, they're calling to buy stuff. And so if you simply convert a couple of those calls every month to a booked appointment, that's just magic for every small business. So really for

us, it's about ... We have a great system out now that does this, and it's just helping agencies compartmentalise those for each of the industries that they're working with, getting those deployed and helping them continue to push those out. So that's a big focus of our year.

Editor:
Yeah, that's great. I mean, if you'll just role play with me for a little bit here as well, Shaun.

Shaun Clark:
Sure.

Editor:
My question is, if I run a small business and I like the idea of becoming a client for HighLevel, what's the best way of doing that? What would you say is the best way forward?

Shaun Clark:
I mean, well, we have a directory now of great folks, directory.HighLevel.com, of people who can help you implement it. But the question really I think is how do you find ... However you do it, how do you find somebody who can help make that happen for you? And if you go to our YouTube channel, which is always the best place to learn everything about us because we have interviews with some amazing people, it's just incredible how fortunate we are just talking about their expertise for free. But connecting with someone who you feel like can make that happen for you, because a great small business owner is awesome at a craft. And what you don't want to do as a great craftsperson is stray too far from that craft because that's what makes you great.

Now you need visibility, you need people to know you're great at that, and that's what great marketers do. And so it's really just about finding somebody who you feel like can help you implement that. And again, that's why we have our certified partner programme now at that directory site because we feel like it's kind of fun because we proctor all the exams live so you can't cheat. So the people on there actually know what they're talking about, and we're constantly releasing ... As we release new feature sets, we also go in and create courses around this and testing around this, and they have to actually redo a new proctor exam for every single one of them. I laugh because it's

one of those things where they'll complain about it, but then as soon as they pass it, they're like, "Yes." And it holds a lot more value for them and for the people that they serve. So it's really cool.

Editor:
Oh, absolutely. And HighLevel is a relatively new platform.

Shaun Clark:
Yeah, only six or seven years.

Editor:
And when you did start, how quickly did you start to see the take-up of the platform?

Shaun Clark:
Well, I mean, once we got our act together, initially we sold directly to small businesses. And we found the issue there of people saying, "We love the platform but we don't have the time." But once we figured that out, I would say in the first six months, we bootstrapped the company. Since inception, we've been profitable since its inception. So it was fairly early on.

But again, I think it was all about finding the right customer and really focusing on that customer to the detriment of all else, really saying, "Hey, look, if you're not an agency, please don't call me. We're not interested in you." Because we really understood, and actually to be fair, our third co-founder, Robin Alex is really who changed our world here. He was the agency owner who came into our lives and really opened the door here. But he showed us that if you really truly want to help people, you've got to help the people helping the small businesses. And at the time, he was an agency owner with 80 clients and 10 employees in Dallas, Texas. So he really helped show us that method and model. And then of course, subsequently introduced us to everyone. He had built a Rolodex, so [inaudible 00:16:39] 10 years, 20 years of being in the business. So he did an amazing job to help us. But what we did is try to take that opportunity and say, "Look, this is the right answer. Let's go all in." And that's what we did.

Editor:

Yeah. I think as well, maybe a lot of people that are listening to this or reading this may have actually experienced HighLevel themselves maybe without even knowing it. Have you any idea in terms of numbers as to how that might look?

Shaun Clark:

I mean, I will tell you, I was researching a product yesterday, and I came across a HighLevel customer. They're in the sauna business apparently. They were at their local sauna store, and they use HighLevel. So we are very much everywhere now, which is so cool. But to be very fair, that has very little to do with us and has everything to do with the agencies that we serve because again, that sauna store is being served by an agency who knows to put that chat widget on their website, which is how I discovered them. So it's pretty cool because I know that when those leads come in, there's a lot more behind that, and all of that's being built out by that agency. But also that agency ... Unlike other software companies, that agency is actually charging or a recurring monthly fee for that software. So they're also benefiting from it from a business perspective, which I think is the best part.

Editor:

Absolutely. I completely agree. In terms of HighLevel though, it is almost like an all-in-one platform. Do you ever get the itch perhaps, to look at other software as a service ideas to have those as a completely different product? Or when you have those ideas, do you think, actually that would fit HighLevel really nicely?

Shaun Clark:

Well, we do that all the time. Yeah. So we take the latter, not the former. Yeah, so we're constantly looking and actually ... So I mean, depending on where you live, but we think of it kind of like the Costco model. So the customer comes in the door and to buy the thing that we sell, and then we just ask them all the time, "What else do you do? What else do you buy?" And then we just stock the store with whatever else they buy. So maybe we didn't have tyres to start with or wine, but now we sell tyres and wine and people love us for it. So yeah, we absolutely add ... If they say, "Oh, I love everything you guys do, but I buy this other thing from this other person." If we see enough people doing that, we just add that feature to the platform. So 100%.

Editor:

That's amazing. Well, for anybody who perhaps has got a marketing agency that would like to find out more about HighLevel and how it can benefit their agency, where should we go for that, Shaun?

Shaun Clark:

The YouTube channel, every time, because that's really where ... Our website is one page. People are shocked to find that to this day, we're still just a one-page website, but let me give you a piece of advice. It works. But the YouTube channel has all the content, all the features, all the interviews with all the amazing experts that we get a chance to deal with. So definitely check out the YouTube channel.

Editor:

Fantastic. Well, congratulations on your incredible success in a relatively short period of time, and we look forward to seeing how HighLevel grows over the coming weeks, months and years. So thanks for your time today, Shaun. Really appreciate it.

Shaun Clark:

Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

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