

Stephen McCormick

00:02-00:25: GL:

Hello and welcome to The Apple Cart now. My guest today is Stephen McCormick, and you might be surprised to know that Stephen and I used to work together in a business that helped MSPS.

Now, if you're a creative, you'll have no idea what that is. So we will ask Stephen to explain what an MSP is, but Stephen is an MSP community influencer and marketing expert. He's based in Birmingham and he has over a decade of experience of working in it.

He's an active member of a lot of it and MSP communities like the tech tribe, and he's an advocate for well-being for small business owners. Stephen, thank you for being here. Welcome to the Applecart. First of all, we've just mentioned MSPs. So what is an MSP?

00:45-01:09

Well, first of all, Gudrun, thank you for having me. A managed service provider or MSP. Imagine if you were a larger business, you'd have very different departments in your central office, so you'd have a facilities management department, you'd have a HR department, you'd also have an IT department.

But for those businesses that are smaller, that have maybe one or two people working for them, they need it support as well, so what they can do is they can look to hire the services of an MSP. And they will basically provide them with all the with all the equipment and software that that business might need.

So they might need access to Microsoft 365, they might need an antivirus and firewall. And anything along those lines are what a MSP can provide. And they will also have a service desk to answer any queries or to deal with any issues or service requests that the users might have.

So, for example if you're an accountant, you're a one-man band. You will use software like Xero or Sage. You will also need to have a business website, so all those things can be looked after by a managed service provider.

02:54-03:18: GL:

So an MSP is the kind of partner that most small businesses should think about having.

SMc: Definitely.

GL: yes it works for anybody. And at this time of recording, I'm having some huge tech issues with my website and emails. So perhaps if I had an MSP, this wouldn't have happened.

When we worked together, we were creating content together. And the IT space, like many more traditional industries, they're not great at marketing, and thinking outside the box as it

were. What do you think MSPs can do to stand out? And to try and see that marketing is a good thing, not, as I was told, black magic once at an IT event.

SMc: Yeah, I think that, and I think this goes for a lot of small businesses too. I think that the greatest assets any business owner has when it comes to marketing is themselves and their people.

So when I got involved in the managed service provider community a couple of years ago, I met a lot of IT business owners who were looking to set themselves apart in what is a very, very crowded market.

So if you imagine the typical IT small business, they've got a website, they usually have pictures of computers and the geographical areas that they cover. So they will be looking to be the most remarkable IT small business in that geographical area.

So set themselves apart instead of showing pictures of router switches and cables and hardware. Your best bet is to use a picture of yourself, of your staff in their uniforms. If you've got a branded van, that will also look great/

And include lots of testimonials and reviews from your customers. Because the people that are going to be visiting your website, which is more or less your storefront. They are going to want to be looking for the kind of things that will be different to the Tom, Dick and Harriets that they go to next.

They can see that you're proud of the people that work for you, and you are proud of the interactions you have with your customer base. I think my top tip for managed service providers would be make more use of yourself and actually make that your kind of main selling point.

GL: And that's true of all businesses. I was talking to somebody I've met through networking yesterday. And we were talking about, you know, people who say, Oh, I'm a small business. And she always says, you're not a small business, you're a small business owner.

You're a person. And I think in lots of industries, but certainly in IT, there's a tendency to want to explain the techie stuff that you can do. And really, what you need to do is explain how that helps the person on the other end and how you can do that through a personal approach.

And if you think of marketing and sales as one person helping another, I think that I think that really helps, doesn't it?

Yes, and I think that I think that a lot of, a lot. A lot of people forget that you're in business to provide a service and help people with an element that they could probably do themselves, but they don't want to do.

They want to trust a partner to actually help them deliver what they need to and help. And both of those businesses form that kind of connection, which helps both of your

businesses grow, so it is about that growth. It's about finding that that right partner to partner up with, and having that trust between you both to be able to facilitate what the other one needs.

I think that is really, really important there, yeah. And I know when we were working together, what we were starting to pay attention to was what we were describing as nimble MSPs, or just disruptive MSPs. And this podcast is all about trying to do things in a different way and be disruptive.

What is it that they're doing that stands out, and why do you think that not everybody's so keen on that? Do you think people are just uncomfortable about standing out and being different? Do you think they think they're going to get into trouble for changing the way things have always been done?

I think it's a very interesting thing because that a lot of a lot of MSP business owners, particularly they are very introverted people. They prefer to do the analytical parts, which is problem-solving.

It's about being in a quiet space where they can take apart a piece of tech and figure out how all of those parts work. So standing out doesn't come naturally to a lot of them. But I think we live in this world now, where social media and marketing is.

It's pretty much a part of everyday life, and I think we are always marketing ourselves in some way. We're always trying to put it across our, our culture and our brand. Whether that's if we're in a conference environment and we're meeting new people.

We're actually there to get them to like and trust us, so that they'll eventually work with us. And I think that I think that not standing out you kind of, and being a bit of a wolf and a bit being a bit of a wolf blower.

You won't achieve the levels of growth that you're looking for as a business owner. And I think it's very important to step outside your comfort zone anyway. Because all businesses move so quickly, and especially in the tech sector, you you've got to always be trying to get to stay ahead of the curve.

By staying ahead of the of the curve, you are already setting yourself apart from your competition. But you need to be motivated to have that confidence, to do more handshaking, to be in a room full of potential customers and actually meet them and get to know them.

And if, and if you can, and not everybody can. But expose yourself to things like podcasts and videos because they are massively good at engaging your audiences. And I think that that's why you should have one. And the Apple Cart sounds like it's trying to do just that.

GL: So, yeah, I think so, but yeah. Top tip: don't actually expose yourself. That's not the kind of audience you want.

SMc: You had to go there, didn't you?

GL: I can say these terrible, don't expose yourself in in that way.

SMc: No, no, not in that way.

GL: Not a marketing tool anyway. Um, I think, I think you know this thing about, about having to be the front, the face of the business. It's a challenge for everybody. You know when we started our businesses. What you do is you, you take your strongest skills and you sell that, and you, that's what you're used to doing.

And you. You don't think of things like sales and marketing and accounts and admin and websites and things like that, and it's really hard. And I remember Laura Robinson, you know, Laura, she's a fellow copywriter, she said the hardest thing about running your own business and pricing is that you've never had to think about how much you're worth before.

You've only ever been in a job where somebody else tells you this is how much it's worth for you to deliver this, this skill that you have. So it's no wonder that people struggle with pricing and selling themselves, because it's not, it's not natural.

Nobody's ever done that until they have to do it. And I think that's, I think that's really. That helped me a lot. I mean, my pricing probably still needs work, but it's different, isn't it, when you've got to try and communicate your own value.

SMc: It is. And I think that a lot of people assume that what they've been contracted for in in the past either still stands or is going to be set in stone. And I think that I think that there's a lot to be said about the value-based pricing model.

Which is not about how much you think, um, your skills are worth in the market, it's how much value you bring from using that skill. It's a very common topic in the in the managed services space, people are always talking about value-based pricing.

And it is about that, because you if you're delivering a product for a business and. And they, and it helps them get more sales, or it helps them become more secure. It's about how much value that brings to that business.

It might be a skill that comes second nature to yourself, but and it might only take you a couple of hours to deliver a piece of content. But for them, if it generates them, you know, x number of extra engagements or potential sales, then it is worth a lot.

You should always aim your pricing at that, and not about you know how long it may take you because people pay for those expert skills and you should really value yourself more and that again, that comes down to confidence.

GL: What you've just said there about communicating value. See, that's why you've got to stand out, because otherwise nobody's ever gonna know that. And I think again, many

businesses, including IT, they're guilty of talking about features, not benefits. And it's always the end thing.

You want a hole in the wall when you want a hole in the wall. So you can put a nail in the wall so that you can hang up a painting of your family, you know, it's you don't really, you don't really want the whole world, but you want somebody who can do that for you.

So that you see the picture of your kids and then you get the warm and fuzzies every time you go past it. Although maybe not me so much because I'm not photogenic, it's probably why my parents don't have pictures of me. But the theory still stands it's the outcomes. It's why you need to be creative and disruptive, I think.

SMc: I think as well. It comes down to who you have in the room that you're having a conversation with. So if you're talking to another technical person, then explaining the features of a product is fine, because that will interest them.

But if you're talking to a business owner or an executive, they want to hear what the outcomes are and how that will help them to grow their business. And yeah, and I think having the awareness before you go into those potential sales meetings will help you a lot.

Because you really want to be talking to at the right level, to the right people. Because a director's not going to care that their new software product has Copilot in it, because it just means gibberish.

GL: Does it mean how many MSPs are really going to be having other tech businesses as their clients? And it's one of the things I always said when, whenever I've done writing for people.

And they say, Well, how can you write about my industry? Including IT. Because I do a lot of writing about MSPs and IT and tech and stuff. You're not an expert, which is often why I had to ask you to help me to understand a term.

But I always say your end users, your customers, your clients, aren't the experts either. That's why they're coming to you. And if I can explain it, if I can explain it to myself and understand it, then I can communicate it on your behalf to your customers so that they understand it because they need, the basic facts.

They don't need to know spec, and which version of Microsoft or whatever. Patching has just taken place and updates and upgrades they don't know, and they also don't care. And I think it's key for all small business owners - because we're owners, not businesses - to think about the person at the other end.

SMc: It is. And there is a fine line between between kind of over explaining features and getting the message across that you are an expert in your field. You don't need to bombard people with the science behind everything, you just need to be able to show that you've done this kind of thing for a similar customer and they have appreciated what you've done.

And it's about that demonstrating that value to somebody else. That will be more valuable than knowing every single in and out of every cyber security policy document. It is about making that connection with people.

And I think what you just said there resonates really well with type of people that that I meet in the MSP communities.

GL: we've mentioned there a couple of times, about sort of case studies and testimonials. And I think that's something you've got to get creative with. It's easier just to have a couple of lines of text, and I have lines of text on my website.

But you need to be more creative, and you need to gently nudge your clients into doing that. I also have video testimonials from people I've worked with. What have you seen that that you think works well in in terms of testimonials, or even from the company themselves

SMc: I'm starting to see more and more MSP business owners do more stuff in front of the camera, and they are actively encouraging customers to be a part of that journey too. I saw one MSP on their website, they had a really great short video where customers explain why they trust this company to deliver their IT services.

It's so effective, to make it short and snappy. But to also have that alongside the kind of longer case, case studies and things like that. But try and get into local news features because it's so much better when somebody else is showing your value rather than blowing your own trumpet.

But it's great when you can get the local gazette to just drop in a feature. And if that will go to a load of local business owners in the area, that is going to be gold. Because people are going to be reading that and go, "oh, we need to change our IT providers. These guys look like they're doing great work. Let's pick up the phone and have a conversation."

GL: And there's a lot to be said for appearing in the local press, especially if you know you're a smaller MSP and you service your local community. It makes sense to be featured in the local press, doesn't it?

We were talking before we started recording and you mentioned the power of collaborative thinking. Elaborate on that a little bit more for me, please?

We were talking about what it's like to be a home worker and get away from having to commute into a daily office. And how much we appreciate having our time, but the one thing we don't get much of, being lone workers is those random conversations where you can just say I've got this idea, and I want to just bounce it over with you. I'm sorry, that's my third pun now.

GL: I wasn't gonna comment on that one!

SMc: When you're thinking about a piece of content, for example, you can only take that so far before you start to just bring up the same things that that you always think about when you think about something.

Let's use for an example we were talking about last week, the song Red Dress by the Sugababes, right? So I've got I've got a particular idea about why I like that song. And why I like it is because there's several layers to it.

It changes tempo, there are bridge choruses before the actual chorus. There's a lot of beats in it and I like that kind of complexity of the chorus. But if I was to ask somebody else who also likes that song why they like it, I'd get a completely different answer. And that's why I love collaborative thinking.

Because you will go down one route when you think about what you're going to write, and you'll kind of meander down that route. And you, you might take a few detours and come back to your point. But if you get a different perspective on it completely, that can change your entire way of thinking.

Because you'll start to think about what they're thinking about, and it's it might not be exactly the same thought process, but you will then be thinking of things that you hadn't even considered, and it will completely change your perspective on it. Which makes it so much nicer for the for the reader.

Because they are, they are getting your viewpoint, but they're also getting a counterpoint. That you probably wouldn't have put in there because you were doing it by yourself than if you asked somebody for their perspective on it. And I think we've gone down this, this route bit before, Gudrun, when we've been thinking about topics.

And there's only so much you can talk about when we consistently talk about things like cyber security, or we talk about mental health. I mean, there are lots of facets to both subjects. But we will be convinced to go down the same routes a lot of time.

But to have that, to be able to say, Oh, have you thought about this? or have you thought about that? with somebody else, it's so much more valuable. There are more strings to pull to take that in in a different direction. I think it's so important to have that collaborative thought process.

So I would probably urge, even if you are a solopreneur, find a community or a group of people where you're not afraid to share some ideas because you will get so much value from that, for sure.

GL: Yeah, yeah, that's really good advice. And the same applies for if you're creating, or thinking about creating new services in your business, or you want to put a package together. It's easy to think, well, I'm the expert and I know best, but actually, it's worth asking.

I know in the MSP space, the community is really strong. Asking your peers how they would approach it, or asking somebody else in your industry or a different industry, or even asking your customers.

That collaboration, the result of whatever you create from that collaboration, will always be stronger than if you'd done that on your own. And as it happens, I only like Red Dress because it makes me dance around the kitchen.

So I'm not even thinking about beats and choruses, I'm just waving my arms in the air. It's just a great song.

SMc: Yeah, it is a great song.

GL: I like the Sugababes. I blame my husband, he got me into them. I didn't. I was very sniffy about pop music, but he talked me into it.

I think we've covered a lot there. Have you got any random questions you would like to ask me? Because you are welcome to? The format is feel free to ask me a random question? If you want, you don't have to, but if you have one.

SMc: So I guess because we're on a technical thing here. How do you think AI has bettered marketing? And what are the pitfalls that people often fall into when they're using it in a bad way.

31:01-32:26: GL:

Oh, I like that. I think, given what we've just been talking about in terms of collaborative thinking, I think that's where the strength of AI is. Because it will think of things, I say, think, , it's not thinking, but it will come up with things that you haven't considered.

And that is invaluable, and in that sense, I think AI is like an evolution of everything else that we do in terms of research. When, when my dad was doing his degree, he had to go to the library and come through textbooks, and you got that reading list when you started uni?

Whereas when I was at uni, we had an Athens password and we could search very quickly for a reference. And likewise, when you were a kid, you'd go to the library and you'd look at an atlas or whatever the book was.

And then we had Encarta, which was encyclopaedias on disc.

SMc: Many discs, very many discs.

GL: And then we've got Google. So I think in that sense, I think AI is a positive because it's anything that gives you more information quickly can only be a good thing. I think if you can spend more time evaluating that information, rather than taking it on face value...

And that is the benefit, and sometimes the detriment of the internet as a whole is that, you can have the info but you need to be able to apply critical thinking.

So I think, in that sense in terms of finding out information, make sure you check. Because you know, ChatGPT has that disclaimer that it can make mistakes, but I think to give you more information, to help you come up with things that you haven't thought of. U

Because we know that people are all searching ai for answers, it will help you by showing you what other people are searching for. So, in terms of coming up with a service, or writing a blog, or creating a video on something...

If you know that the AI has that data, it can say actually, last week everybody was searching for this, that is a gold mine. I think the problem is it is over-reliance on it. And I think from a content creation point of view, because I don't use it myself for my own writing.

I think there's a real danger - because it looks good when you see it spewing all these results in seconds. And it even puts paragraph spaces in, which is lovely. I think there's a risk of just copying and pasting and publishing without actually looking at what you've said.

And I think that's where people have got to be really careful. Because already, your readers can see that you've used AI, even if you don't think they can't see that, they can. There's certain words aren't there that it uses, and it likes little rocket emojis and things.

And you want to be working with people. It needs to express your tone of voice, your views, and viewpoint, and your values. And I think, if you just use an AI tool and go, Oh, this looks good. It's given me 750 words on this topic that I've asked it for I'll post this.

And if you haven't checked it, then you haven't edited it even a little bit, so it sounds more like you than the computer, then I think that's a real danger. And I think as time goes on and AI is fed more data, but also there is more AI generated data out there.

We're going to get into a bit of a cycle where quality is really going to be impacted. Because you're just getting regurgitated AI guff.

SMC: My one concern is that we're just going to be publishing more things that are all generated by artificial intelligence. That's going to be referenced by the next and the next, and the next and the next, so it's just going to create this mandala effect.

Where if the information was wrong to start with, people are going to be reading it again and again and again in different places. And all coming to the same conclusion that this information is false, I think we do need to be careful about that.

However, having said that, once we end this chat, I'm going to be I'm going to be typing into ChatGPT what do you think of the Sugababes song Red Dress?

GL: Now that is a question I would very much like to see the answer to! Anything else you would like to share?

SMc: Over the last year. I've been self-promoting myself on LinkedIn and one of those things, uh, is, uh, to share my health journey. I've lost five and a half stone in the last year, um, which I'm really...

GL: Stephen is looking very buffed! You can't see him on this audio, but he's looking great.

SMC: I'm feeling so much better now. And it has inspired quite a few people to look at themselves and make changes. So I'm actually quite proud of that, and I have a regular accountability post that I do.

But I think, even though that's not directly marketing for my business, it. It still keeps me in touch with my audience and shows a human side to me. Which you wouldn't get from a content creator's point of view necessarily. I'm quite proud of that, and I'm proud of the fact that it has inspired others too.

So, yeah, just wanted to give a quick shout out to that. And if it's helped anybody else, or at least inspired them to make a few changes, then great.

GL: It is amazing and inspiring, and you've done incredibly well. Five and a half stone! Blimey I see your posts and I do try and like and comment them. Um, but yeah, it's, it's a great thing. You've been open and honest and you've shown your personal side and I know you've inspired people because I've seen the comments you're getting

I'll share your LinkedIn link. Are there any other links you want me to share? Is there any other random link you'd like? I tell you what, we'll put a link to the Sugababes so we can have a bit of a discussion.

SMc: Definitely, yeah. I mean, if you want to say I'm on, I'm on Spotify too, so if you want me to share that, I, I couldn't share that. It's very weird. My playlists are very eclectic, they go from pop stuff like that to heavy metal. So and then pretty much everything else in between. So, yeah, a bit of drum and bass, perhaps.

And yeah, it's just it's a complete melting pot. But yeah I'm in the middle of trying to set up a new website. Um, I don't have that link yet, but perhaps when it goes out I can give you that that link too. You would think that it was seven different people.

GL: I love multiple personalities, but yeah, mine is no drum and bass, but mine is also a fairly, fairly random. My brother is a professional musician and he mocks me, whatever my songs come on, he says. I'm not adventurous enough, so, but yes, mine is equally eclectic, lovely, brilliant.