



This is an edited transcript of the September 9, 2015 Smart Solo Business podcast interview titled – [Solving Small Business Problems and Driving Growth with David Shriner-Cahn](#).

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving to work smarter, find more clients, and build a more profitable business? There is help. Welcome to the Smart Solo Business podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the Smart Solo Business podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

I've seen it time and time again. Maybe you have, as well. Too many business owners are challenged by flatlining revenue and the stress that goes with that situation. Fortunately, David Shriner-Cahn is on the podcast today to help hardworking solo entrepreneurs attack and solve these types of problems.

David founded his firm [TEND Strategic Partners](#) in 2006. Through his unique approach to consulting, he creates strategies to help solo professional service providers and entrepreneurs to solve business problems and drive growth. By the way, unlike most business consultants he doesn't just handoff his recommendations, he personally implements the necessary changes with his clients.

Beyond his nine years of experience helping business owners to break through their roadblocks, David's professional background includes eight years of working in the corporate world as a chemical engineer and over 20 years as a CEO, COO, and CFO in the nonprofit world. His executive-level experience and maturity make him a rare find among consultants.

If you're a business owner looking to break out of a plateau and achieve sales goals that seem unobtainable, then you don't want to miss the wisdom that David shares in today's interview. Get ready to take some notes and enjoy.

Welcome to the podcast, David.

David Shriner-Cahn: Steve, it's great to be here. Thank you for having me.



Stephen Lahey: To kick things off, can you tell us a little bit about your professional life before you started your own business, and then what prompted you to make the leap to self-employment in the first place.

David Shriner-Cahn: Sure. Well, like many people I spent a good bit of my professional life as an employee. I was intrigued by the idea of being my own boss and being an entrepreneur for a long time, but I didn't grow up knowing many people or maybe anybody close who was in business for himself or herself and I really didn't know a whole lot about it, so for years I worked for other people. First I was a chemical engineer in the corporate world for a little while, and then I made a shift and worked in leadership and management roles in nonprofit organizations for a couple decades, and then had an opportunity to make a change and took the leap like many people do. I took the leap of faith and said I'm going to do this. It's either now or never. And so in 2006, I started my own business.

Stephen Lahey: You're obviously a smart guy. You were a Fulbright Scholar. You have a Masters degree in engineering from Cornell, which is a top school. You've been at the C-level within a nonprofit organization, and you know that people issues, as you point out on your website, are really the toughest part of solving most business problems. I like your deep professional background and practical perspective.

You founded your company [TEND Strategic Partners](#) about nine years ago. Tell us about who you serve and how do you serve them?

David Shriner-Cahn: So my clients tend to be leaders of small organizations, privately held businesses and we also have some nonprofits in the mix, and they have a few things in common. Typically, the key decision maker, who is usually the CEO or in some cases they're partners, but generally they're people who have been at it for a while, so I would say they're usually over the age of 40, and some of the things that they have in common, they have lots of ideas, but no real plan so they're not quite sure what to work on first and they often jump from one thing to another. They typically have way too much to do for the amount of time they have available to do it and they end up focusing on what's urgent at the expense of what's important, and then there's insufficient focus and discipline to spend enough time on actions that are the most important to drive long-term success.

And people who are planning to be doing something for a while often get sort of caught up or intrigued by the buzz they hear about, you know, this person has made a killing at this tech company growing it and selling it

for X number of billions of dollars, or this other person has managed to find a market niche and something has really taken off.

But the truth is the vast majority of businesses grow incrementally and it takes a lot of persistence and consistent action to be able to grow them incrementally. And, as we know, the statistics are that most businesses fail, and most people who are entrepreneurs have had experiences of businesses that have failed before they've had those businesses we hear about that have become wild successes.

They often have trouble getting the people who are part of their business on the same page, creating a consistent culture where everybody is engaged. Like you mentioned, these are all people issues.

The people issues are really at the heart of every business. You need people to make your business work, and if you can't do that, then you're not going to be able to get from Point A to Point B. So those are some of the common characteristics of people we serve.

Stephen Lahey:

And even for solos, all of us who have aggressive goals get to a point where we need outside help. And that may be very obvious to us when we need to have a website built and we're not a web designer for example, but there are so many other areas where we could get outside help and I think it takes a certain skillset, including leadership skills, to work with outside service providers like that.

One of the biggest issues for my audience is new business development or "prospecting" for new business. If you can't do that, if you can't bring in new customers—obviously you want to retain your existing ones—but if you can't bring in new customers, you're eventually going to crash and burn.

Prospecting is a major pain point for a lot of my listeners because, well, they typically came out of the corporate world and relied on their network probably for years to bring them business and just traditional networking. They didn't really develop sales skills and never had any sales training.

David, I've noticed that you do some workshops around generating new business and more business from existing clients. So, here's a question, what are the biggest mistakes that you see professionals, whether they're solo professionals or leading a small organization, making relating to those activities that are new business development oriented and how can we get better results in that area?



David Shriner-Cahn: Sure. I would say there are two key elements that I see as being really critical to success in any new activity. If you're not good at marketing and sales, or you think you're not good at it, or you don't have a background in it, like you say, you don't have the training in it then the two key elements are taking consistent action on implementation of something and having a team to support you. And the better you are at those two areas, at consistent action and having a strong team, the better your results will be.

Stephen Lahey: Let me cut-in just for a second. If you're a solo professional and you're thinking, I don't have a team so I'll tune out for this part. No, please keep listening because we all need support, whether it's technically from an employee or not. Wouldn't you agree with that, David?

David Shriner-Cahn: Steve, I have yet to meet a solo professional who doesn't have a team. They may say they don't have a team and they do everything themselves, but when you start to probe, they don't.

As an example, let's say you're a solo professional attorney—and I know lots of attorneys that work on their own—who fixes your computer when it breaks? I bet you don't do it yourself. Who do you call when your air conditioning isn't working? You probably don't fix that yourself. So there are people that support your environment that helps you create success in your business and in your personal life.

Stephen Lahey: Now, let's say a solo consultant, since many of the listeners are solo consultants of one stripe or another. Let's say they want to develop a better sales process. They say, okay, I know I have to develop a better sales process. What best practices should they keep in mind in terms of developing a sales process and prospecting?

David Shriner-Cahn: Well, I would say it really starts with marketing, and marketing and sales are different. Marketing is about creating greater awareness of what it is you offer. And then once you get a lead for new business, the sales process takes over and it's about converting that lead into a customer, or determining that it isn't a good fit and that person is not going to become a customer.

So the first step is really, you've got to understand who is your ideal client? And this is counterintuitive, and I'm sure you've had other guests who have talked about this, but it's counterintuitive, but the narrower your focus is on who your ideal client is, the better your marketing effort will be.



Let's go back to the attorney example. I have a friend who is a labor attorney. Labor attorney is very general. They can perform lots of different functions. But he talks about being counsel to executives in transition, somebody who is at C-level who is either moving into a job or moving out of a job, and he describes that he can help them make more money in their exit negotiations and he can help them make more money in their negotiations going into a new job. So that's pretty narrow and it helps us understand, we can start thinking about individuals we know who actually have those characteristics. If I say I'm a labor attorney, what does that mean to somebody who's listening? It's way too fuzzy. So being clear on your ideal client is really important.

Then the next thing is once you've identified who your ideal client is, try to think like your client does and think about the kind of pain that the client might be in where the client needs help.

You talked about we all need help. So think about when your client needs help, what's the pain? What keeps them up at night? What do they struggle with? And if you can describe something that's an agonizing struggle, if you're able to provide a solution so that they're able to overcome that struggle, chances are they'll be very anxious for you to work with them.

Then you should think about, if you can understand the ideal client and where their point of pain is, where do they spend their time? Where do they hang out? And, in particular, who do they complain to when they need to vent? Because the person they're complaining to when they're venting is your referral source.

Stephen Lahey:

That's a great distinction. And beyond just generating new business—I think you just described a process that's necessary for success. We must understand our ideal client and their world. I don't think you succeed long term without that ideal client focus. I developed [*Expand and Improve Your Client Base*](#), this free tool I give away to subscribers, based on that idea.

Beyond generating new business, and I think a lot of my listeners feel that they not only don't have time to do that but they also don't have time to develop any exciting new service offerings that could potentially set them apart from the competition. So how can they break out of that time and resource starved mode and follow through on their business ideas and get things done?



David Shriner-Cahn: Let's say we take a consultant as an example. If you're just launching a consulting business or you've been in it for a while, if you're launching a consulting business it's based on some skillset and some experiences that you have that you believe you can use to help other people and for which they'll pay you money. Think about what it is that you're best at, that you're best suited to deliver, and around that what is your most valuable offering? What is it that you do best and for which you are likely to be able to be most profitable. So it's a little bit of thinking about your business model and then thinking about how you can attract clients down a funnel that will be geared toward your best offering.

And then as you're developing your marketing effort and you're planning how to spend your time marketing it, and if you're going to invest any money in marketing, the most important thing is to track your activities and track the results. Consultants do a lot of networking, as an example. If you're doing networking to try to develop new business, where do you network, who do you network with, and track who you spend time with, how much time you spend with them, and what the results are and who actually makes the right kinds of introductions for you. If you find that there are certain characteristics or certain individuals who make better introductions for you, then you want to spend more time with those people and less time with the people who don't make introductions or don't make good introductions.

Think about what you can do in your message that you send out when you are with other people where you're networking and where certain things that you say will trigger a better response than others. So it's not just who you're with, but it's also what you do in that interaction.

Think about how you can provide value to potential clients that are not yet clients where you could provide value that's free or low-cost to get them interested in you. Because we do business with people we know like, and trust. Right? So, especially if you're a consultant, you want to get people who will start to know you and start to like you. And generally, if you're offering something of value that doesn't take a lot of effort on your part to offer and it's free, people will start to pay attention. If it's valuable to them, they'll react.

And then think about how you can introduce something where the fee is reasonable and it's not a huge decision for somebody to become an initial client. Because you're generally, especially if you're offering services, chances are—and you're offering a service to a small business—chances are they're not going to sign on for a big ticket item for the first engagement. It's going to be something small. So what can you offer



that's going to be a low-cost item to get them to do business with you? Then you can find out what else they need and offer to help with something else.

Stephen Lahey: I'm hearing a couple things. I would term that offer to be your tip of the spear, meaning how you can penetrate their consciousness and make ideal potential clients aware that you're someone that they might want to do business with.

New business development is a little like dating. You and I have been married to our spouses for years, and yet when you go thinking back, you probably didn't walk up to your spouse when you first met her and say, hey, let's go out on a date and if it goes well, let's get married. Probably not. But there may have been a creative way that you approached her that made it interesting enough for her to go on that first date. Some people hate those dating analogies, but I think it's relevant. It's just commonsense that there is sort of a warming up period, even in business, because we're just people dealing with other people and we can't work against human nature and expect to succeed very often.

You pointed that out that the biggest issues we deal with in our business are people issues. Well, it's the same thing with marketing and sales. I think a lot of it is getting into the right mindset. As you put it before, and I'm not sure if you used these exact words, you said you really have to understand their world and what their pains are about and all of that and show them that you can speak their language and then give them a low risk way to get to know you, like you and trust you.

One of the things that I've seen a lot of people do, and it doesn't make sense for every business, is to provide some sort of tool that they can actually use. And if they use it, they'll get some results, and then they'll start asking themselves the question, well, if this low-cost or even free tool provided this much value, then how much value would I get if I actually worked with this person?

David Shriner-Cahn: Right. The other thing you can do is you can ask your current clients what works for them in your relationship and where can you do better, and you can ask them what they would need to know to feel comfortable making a referral, or what you can do in your interaction with them that will help generate a referral from them. Because your current clients, if they're good clients and you have a good relationship, they know, like, and trust you and they're the ones that are in the best position to suggest potential new business for you.



Stephen Lahey: There's no doubt. And talking to our clients and really understanding them, asking them, is an underutilized strategy.

David Shriner-Cahn: Yes. It really is.

Stephen Lahey: Why do people like to guess? I don't know. But it would say that if you want better results, get your information right from the horse's mouth, as they say.

David Shriner-Cahn: People, I think, are often afraid to ask because they don't want to be rejected. So like if you go back to the dating analogy, if you're dating someone, are you going to ask them how am I doing at this? What can I do to enhance that relationship? What can I do so that you'll refer me to somebody else so I can also date somebody else?

Stephen Lahey: It's that human touch and finding ways to have more open conversations with clients. And once you open up a real conversation, wow, it's so valuable. Get out of the business mode and into the personal mode. I mean, people say oh, it's not personal, it's just business. I say BS. It's all personal.

David Shriner-Cahn: That's right. It's all personal.

Stephen Lahey: Especially when you're dealing with business owners. It's their money and it's their life, it's a big chunk of their life.

David Shriner-Cahn: Right. People are very passionate about their businesses.

Stephen Lahey: Oh, and they should be. I mean, that's probably a prerequisite, otherwise you can't fight through the challenges.

Now switching gears a bit, you host a podcast that I really like and I think that most of my listeners will find interesting. Can you tell us a little bit about your podcast?

David Shriner-Cahn: Sure. So the podcast, it's geared for the audience I described, my client base, which is people who have been in leadership roles for a bit of time, generally they've had some successes under their belt, but then they hit roadblocks. We all do. Even if there's a market for what it is we offer, something shifts in our business. The marketplace shifts a bit. New technology comes up. Things happen with the people who are in our business. And they're trying to create greater success, but somehow something is not working.



So the podcast is designed to understand what are those critical shift points you need to overcome and to navigate if you are a business leader in order to create greater success? For a lot of people, the way they describe greater success is they want to scale what they've created. They want it to be more. For some people it is creating something that's like 10 times more or 100 times more. They want to create something huge. And for a lot of other people it's just I want to do 10% more business this year, or 20% more business this year, over what I did last year, and I don't want to slide backwards, so what do I need to do differently? And it's me interviewing people who are successful entrepreneurs who have had their ups and downs, telling their stories, and it's also me interviewing people who have some expertise in a particular area where they work with entrepreneurs.

So as an example, a recent episode is Katherine Hosie who is a business coach who does a lot of work with businesses, particularly people in their sort of mid-career. That's a great example. These are some examples that would probably be good for your listeners. Episode 97, The Stress of Being in Charge of a Business with Rick Duris. Rick basically works as a solopreneur. In the past, he's run bigger organizations and he's had his ups and downs and he's really forthright about it. It's a great story to listen to. So yeah, these are great examples. And the podcast is called [Smashing the Plateau](#).

Stephen Lahey: Smashing the Plateau, which I think is a great name for the podcast because all of us deal with plateaus—

David Shriner-Cahn: We all do.

Stephen Lahey: —for short or long periods of time. As self-employed people, it's just par for the course. The question is, how do you step up and out of the plateau you're stuck in? And that's not always easy, and sometimes doing it requires a pretty major shift in thinking. I don't want to scare people, but sometimes we take advice from other people and we get that outside catalyst in our brain and all of a sudden we find that answer that we probably couldn't have found on our own because, as that old saying goes, it's hard to read the label on the bottle you're in. It's very tough to see ourselves from an outside perspective.

So, I mean, I think that's one of the things that you bring and that other really competent consultants and coaches bring is an objective outside perspective where we can gain insights that we're just too close to our business situation see otherwise.



As we wrap up, David, I do want listeners to connect with you online and get to know your work. How can they do that? And feel free to list the URLs where they can find the free download, which I know you're going to discuss, and your podcast and so on.

David Shriner-Cahn: Sure. Thank you, Steve. So the podcast you can find if you go to SmashingthePlateau.com. We also have a free offer of a book that is called [*Five Setbacks Experienced by Superstar Entrepreneurs and How They Overcame Them*](#) which is some examples of some of the great stories that some of my podcast guests have shared with our listeners, and you can get to the EBook, *Five Setbacks*, if you go to www.TENDStrategicPartners.com/5-setbacks.

Stephen Lahey: It's very interesting. And, of course, then they'll get your updates and be notified when you post new content, and it's all good stuff. One of the things that you and I were talking about before the interview is that I love your no nonsense, no fluff style. And you and I said both tend to have that style, and it's just sort of part of who we are. So if you like this podcast, then you'll probably enjoy David's podcast as well because he has that no nonsense attitude.

Thanks again for joining me, David. Really appreciate it.

David Shriner-Cahn: Thank you, Steve. It's been great to be a guest.

Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you so much for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, visit SmartSoloBusiness.com and subscribe by email. Along with fresh podcast and blog content, you'll also receive my free interactive workbook, [*Expand and Improve Your Client Base*](#), to help you attract and acquire more of your ideal clients. Thanks again for listening today and best wishes for your success.

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