

A portrait of Chris Shihadeh, a man with short dark hair, wearing a dark blue checkered blazer over a white shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred cityscape with tall buildings.

SCALING A MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR PAY PER CALL EMPIRE

The Chris Shihadeh Story



Chris Shihadeh is an amazing marketer and entrepreneur. I love Chris' passion and dedication to not only his business, but his family. He and his wife Jacquelyn work together and have an incredible relationship. I think this dedication to others is really why he is successful. It flows over into his teams, customers, and everywhere else in his life. Here's his story ...



NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL JUNGLE

As a child, my world was filled with wildlife fact files and a deep fascination for the animal kingdom. I dreamed of being an explorer, venturing into the jungles to encounter creatures whose names I couldn't even pronounce at four years old. But as life unfolded, my path led me elsewhere.

From a very young age, I knew I didn't want to spend my life taking orders; I wanted to carve my own path. When I was six years old, I started a car wash business in my neighborhood. I remember going from door to door, convincing my neighbors to let us wash their cars for five dollars. I quickly realized that I could make more money if I got my friends to help. So I rallied all the kids in the neighborhood and we had a sweet little operation going on for a while. We may not have done the best job washing the

cars, but I learned some incredibly valuable lessons about hard work, teams, and the power of leverage.

Nothing was handed to me on a silver platter, and I learned the importance of hard work early on. My parents taught me that if I wanted something, I had to work for it. I remember wanting a Go-ped one year, those little scooters with the lawnmower engine on the back. My parents encouraged me to earn the money for it myself. So I took a job doing data entry at my cousin's auto shop. It was a long summer, but I felt so incredibly accomplished the day I finally had enough money and bought the Go-ped. I think that experience laid the foundation for my entrepreneurial journey, discovering first hand the satisfaction of earning something rather than it just being handed to me.



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As I grew older, the digital world caught my attention, and I quickly realized the potential it held. The transition from childhood curiosity to a career in digital marketing might seem like a leap, but for me, it was a natural progression of that same explorer's spirit. I found that digital marketing was not just about selling a product or service; it was about exploring new possibilities, understanding consumer behaviors, and navigating through an ever-changing digital landscape.

I kind of fell into it through a series of experiments and leaps of faith. In college, I stumbled upon an opportunity on Craigslist to broker data lists and leads. Someone had a bunch of lists, and all I had to do was sell them to businesses who needed them. This experience was my first taste of the lead generation space, and I was hooked. With my dad's connections in sales and insurance, I quickly built a network and began brokering leads. It was exciting to see my efforts pay off so well, especially for a young college student.

This initial success led me to co-found a tax resolution company, marking my entry into a more serious business venture. I learned a ton about marketing, especially how to use TV and radio ads. I had to script and purchase remnant spots across the country, a task that honed my marketing skills further. But tax resolution takes a lot of time and is full of uncertainties and risk. Too often the cost of service was more than the revenue. So, I decided to leave that space and figure out something else.

Building a digital marketing agency—how hard could it be, right? As it turns out, pretty hard. The early days of this new endeavor were tough. I had a few high-paying clients, but most wanted high levels of service for bargain prices. It really wasn't sustainable. I really started to doubt myself and wonder if maybe I wasn't cut out for this entrepreneur thing after all.

Then one day an unexpected call from a high school friend turned things around. He needed leads for his student loan company, and asked if I was still selling them. And as any young, drifting entrepreneur would do, I said "Of course! What do you need?"

And just like that, I was back in the lead gen arena. I quit the agency model and fully immersed myself into leads and calls. I dabbled in the student loans space, mortgages, and auto insurance. Each vertical taught me a lot, but never really hooked my attention for long. It wasn't until I got into the Medicare vertical that I reached a turning point.

Medicare presented challenges, sure, but the rewards were incredible. My willingness to take risks, to sometimes leap before looking, has been a crucial element of my success. It's interesting to see in hindsight that hitting the bullseye more often than not has been a combination of calculated risks and sometimes, just going with my gut.



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EMBRACING DIGITAL EVOLUTION WITH RINGBA

Joining the pay per call realm with Ringba was a no-brainer for me. They were widely recognized as the best in the business, and I've always believed in starting with the best tools available. My approach was simple: why settle for second best when you can go for the top?

Ringba's reputation for superior call tracking capabilities aligned perfectly with my business needs. Their reporting and insights features have been indispensable for us.

Our first big year in Medicare was in 2021, following an introductory period in 2020. In our initial foray into Medicare inbound calls, we worked with various partners and also generated calls ourselves. This was at a time when the industry was less strict,

allowing for a wider range of advertising strategies. The Medicare program is complex and heavily reliant on relationships and trust-building. These relationships take time to develop, but they're crucial in this industry, perhaps more so than in others.

Ringba has been instrumental in our growth and scaling efforts. The insights and analytics they provide allow us to make informed decisions on scaling and optimizing our campaigns, almost on an hourly basis. It's fair to say that Ringba's tools have been a cornerstone of our success in the Medicare space. However, it's still essential for our team to continuously work on creating enough content, sites, and ad variations to generate the volume of calls we aim for.



I believe that empowering each team member to take full ownership of their tasks and be accountable for their actions is crucial for our collective success.



OVERCOMING ADVERSITY AND GROWING AS A LEADER

As a business owner, I've faced my fair share of moments filled with self-doubt and the temptation to give up. Remember that digital agency I started? It was really difficult to admit to myself that I simply wasn't providing enough value for what clients were willing to pay. It was a harsh lesson in self-reflection and understanding the market.

Back then, I was offering services like social media management and paid ads to local businesses. My ambition was high, but my execution was not aligned with the true needs and expectations of my clients. I naively set pricing that I felt was fair, only to realize that the perceived value from my clients' perspective was not matching up.

This period was a real eye-opener for me. It made me understand that simply offering a service isn't enough; what matters is the actual value it adds to the client's business. I had to face the

harsh truth that, despite my best intentions, my agency was not yet equipped to deliver the level of service necessary to justify higher fees.

At 25, I thought I had all the answers, but as I matured, I realized that it was up to me to make things happen. I couldn't blame the clients or my team or the economy—everything came back to me and my leadership.

Then came one of the most challenging periods of my life. Last year, I found myself in a situation where employee toxicity threatened the very fabric of my business. Despite the revenue and perceived success, the working environment had become unbearable. It was a tough decision, but I had to let go of almost everyone on my team. This decision left me feeling lost and unsure, to the point where I questioned my entire business direction.



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I entered a period of profound self-examination and restructuring. Not only was my business life in turmoil, but personal life challenges added to the stress. My wife and I were expecting twins, and they had medical complications that tested us to our limits. It was the most difficult pregnancy we could imagine, and we weren't sure we or the babies were going to make it through. Those heartbreaking complications and uncertainties put everything else into perspective.

As brutal as these challenges were, they helped me refocus on my business with renewed vigor. I wasn't just building a little job for myself now, I was providing for the future of my family.

I decided to rebuild my company from scratch, focusing on creating a healthy company culture and a high-performing team. This process involved learning from my past mistakes, particularly in leadership and team management. I sought help from coaches and mentors, who guided me through this transformational phase. Their insights were instrumental in helping me understand the importance of a positive work environment and the right team dynamics.

One crucial lesson I learned was the importance of hiring for culture fit and leadership potential, not just skill set. I now approach interviews with a clear focus on these aspects, ensuring that new hires align with our company's values and culture. This approach has created a more harmonious and productive work environment, and I've seen firsthand how it drives business success.

Balancing work and personal life has been a learning curve, especially with the arrival of our twins. The experience of becoming a parent has also shaped my approach to leadership. It has taught me patience, resilience, and the importance of providing guidance while allowing room for growth and learning from mistakes. This balanced approach is something I strive to bring into my business and parenting styles.

All the hardships I faced were instrumental in shaping me as a business leader and as a person. I've learned valuable lessons in perseverance, adaptability, and the importance of a supportive and healthy work culture. As I look ahead, I'm excited to continue growing and learning, both as a business leader and a parent, knowing that these experiences will only make me stronger.



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FOSTERING A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND INNOVATION

While rebuilding Skylab Digital, my primary focus has been on establishing a robust company culture, underpinned by core values that resonate deeply with me and my vision for the company. The most important of these values are accountability and ownership. I believe that empowering each team member to take full ownership of their tasks and be accountable for their actions is crucial for our collective success. This approach not only boosts individual confidence but also strengthens our team dynamics.

Leading by example is another principle I hold dear. I strive to set the standard for my team, showing that commitment and dedication are non-negotiable. This has been especially important in our current high-growth phase.

Innovation and constant improvement form the bedrock of our operations. Our industry is constantly changing, so we have to stay ahead of the curve. I encourage everyone on our team to seek new and better ways of doing things, so we can exceed our clients' expectations.

Another vital element of our culture is teamwork. Recognizing that we each have unique roles, we also understand the importance of coming together to achieve common goals. Collaboration and mutual support are ingrained in our daily operations, which results in a productive and harmonious work environment.

Building and maintaining trust within the team is imperative. Without trust, there's room for doubt and second-guessing, which can hamper our efficiency and morale. I'm focused on eliminating any issues as soon as they arise, ensuring that every team member feels confident and valued.

We are currently a tight-knit group of nine members. While I lead the executive decisions, we operate without a strict hierarchical executive team. Each member has a specific role, but we all share the responsibility of propelling the company forward. This streamlined structure not only maintains our focus but also allows us to remain agile in the ever-changing landscape of digital marketing.

SCALING SKYLAB DIGITAL

As I reflect on the future of Skylab Digital, I often find myself wondering whether to scale up to a 30-plus person operation or maintain our current size. While the idea of expanding is enticing, it also brings the challenge of building an extensive C-level team, something I've never been involved in before. My expertise lies more in the realm of conceptual vision rather than managing a large-scale bureaucratic structure.

Remaining lean and agile also has its merits. I love the idea of sustainable growth without necessarily transforming into a colossal enterprise. With a current team of nine, we're projecting a revenue of around \$22 million this year. This level of success is significant, especially considering the high revenue-to-employee ratio in our industry. Expanding to a 12-13 person team could potentially elevate our revenue to \$40-50 million, which would be a considerable achievement without needing to scale to a 30-40 person operation.

It's interesting to watch myself become the explorer I dreamed of being as a child. While I may not be hacking my way through physical jungles with a machete and a compass, the entrepreneurial landscape has been my jungle, filled with its own challenges and adventures.

For those embarking on their entrepreneurial journey, particularly those in their twenties, I'd advise focusing on self-accountability and shedding any ego. You make your own fate. Embrace learning, seek advice from successful entrepreneurs, and don't shy away from risks. Calculated risks can open doors to incredible opportunities, though they come with their inherent uncertainties.

Looking at the pay-per-call industry, I believe we're just scratching the surface. It's easy to see how great it is from the inside, but so many marketers are still completely unaware of its potential. The industry is poised for significant growth, especially with upcoming regulatory changes. The shift from outbound calling to pay-per-call could be substantial in the coming years.

Of course, as with any industry, saturation is inevitable. Over time, the landscape will evolve with new regulations and market dynamics. For now, though, the opportunity in pay-per-call remains vast, and it's an exciting time to be a part of it.

If I could go back and talk to my younger self when everything seemed to be collapsing all around him, I would tell him to take a deep breath and know that everything would eventually be alright. I would tell him to stay focused and not let external noise and distractions get in the way. Most importantly, I would tell him to take care of his wife and unborn babies. He has no idea how wonderful life is about to get.



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