CTRL+CLICK CAST #114

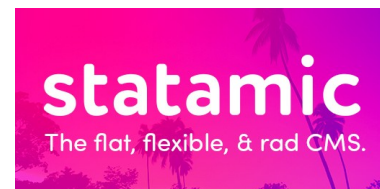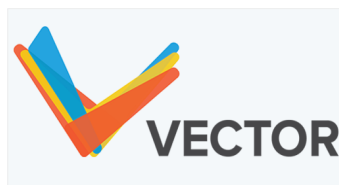## Biz Dev Strategies 101 with Alex Mejias

CTRL+CLICK CAST is proud to provide transcripts for our audience members who prefer text-based content. However, our episodes are designed for an audio experience, which includes emotion and emphasis that don't always translate to our transcripts. Additionally, our transcripts are generated by human transcribers and may contain errors. If you require clarification, please listen to the audio.

Preview: It always takes longer to close than you think. So, if you are telling the client, "I don't know if we'll be available," early on in your conversation, I don't think that that's a good idea, even if your shop is slammed, because you'll never know how long it's actually going to take to close the sale. They made contact with you in November and you're slammed through January, but they might not close until March, so your business might be in a completely different place when they are actually ready to sign.

[Music]

Lea Alcantara: From Bright Umbrella, this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today, Alex Mejias joins the show to give us a primer on business development. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis!

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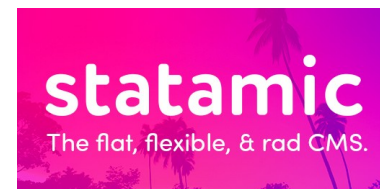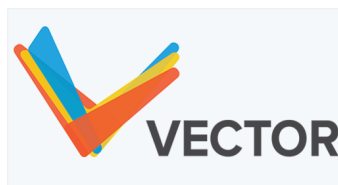
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[Music ends]

Emily Lewis: So we choose topics for this podcast because they interest us and they impact our daily lives, and that's why we've had a lot of episodes focused on business and how to run your own agency or to be self-employed. We have talked about pricing and marketing and outreach and strategic partnerships, and today we're finally adding business development and sales to the mix with our guest Alex Mejias.

As the Director of Strategy and Business Development at Foster Made, Alex provides strategic leadership in the area of business growth and scaling. In addition to using his skills in law, business and technology for scaling organizations, he has worked to make Richmond, Virginia a more just and equitable place through his nonprofit Business Coalition for Justice. Welcome to the show, Alex.

Alex Mejias: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

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Lea Alcantara: So Alex, can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

Alex Mejias: Sure. I appreciate the introduction. I've lived in Richmond, Virginia with my wife, our three little girls, and I've been working at Foster Made for about three years now and before that, I practiced law so I've got a few different things going on in my background, and yeah, I'm just glad to be here.

Emily Lewis: How did you go from law to working for a digital agency like Foster Made?

Alex Mejias: Yeah, that's a good question. The law firm where I work actually had a fairly sophisticated software business within it. We were building sort of custom portals for a lot of our cases and clients, and so I kind of got exposure to the web development process, the software application development process there, and I have always kind of been interested in web development and in addition, I worked with the partners there, too, on business development. So about two years into my time there, I transitioned into full-time business development within the firm so it sort of felt like a natural fit. Shawn and I, he then approached about the job and it sounded like a really exciting time for Foster Made and so I was excited to make the transition.

Emily Lewis: Cool. I'm really excited about today's topic, but I was also really intrigued about your nonprofit. I think your mission is incredibly important, but at the same time, I think it's incredibly challenging. Could you talk a little bit about how you started, what you're trying to do in your local community?

Alex Mejias: Sure. Yeah, we got started really kind of in the wake of a lot of the news that we were seeing about issues of police brutality and it felt like we wanted to get ahead of any of that type of thing in Richmond, and so we called together a group of businesses to have a conversation between amongst ourselves, but also with the police and just talk about those issues that we were seeing and what they were doing to prevent it.

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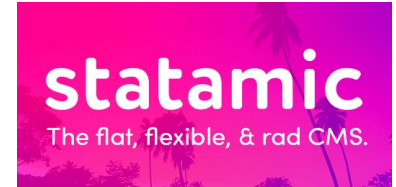
And from out of that conversation, our organization developed really with the desire to raise awareness within the business community about issues of racial equity to make the case that it's not only the right thing to do from a moral perspective, but that it also is a good thing for business, it's a good thing for our city, and that we as businesses can play a part in working for racial equity and that looks like a lot of different things, but certainly, we need to have an understanding of the history of race in our country and how businesses have interacted with that and what we can do now as businesses to have a positive impact in that realm of our society.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, wow. I mean, that couldn't be a more relevant topic considering how businesses are kind of in the news a lot lately for racial bias. Just for the past three weeks, there's just been, it seems like, a lot of media coverage. I don't know if it's actually more or we're just seeing more of it on the news.
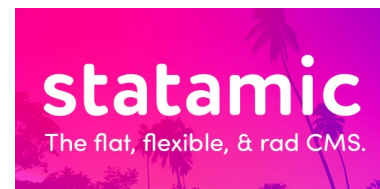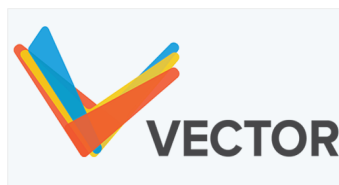
Alex Mejias: Sure, and it's interesting. I mean, in addition to just being bad PR, it actually can really affect the bottom line of businesses.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, in a sense of a community, too.

Alex Mejias: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: It really can hurt a community.

Alex Mejias: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Lewis: That's fantastic. I've been to Richmond a number of times. I was born in Virginia, and so it's a city that's got its own history of racial tensions and stuff, and I really love hearing that this is something that not only you're working with police, but businesses, because I think you're right, it's almost like a frontline of how you treat people in your community and how you set the tone for what's acceptable.
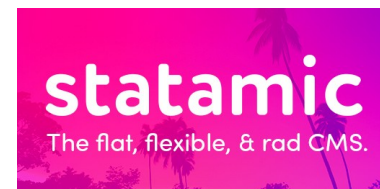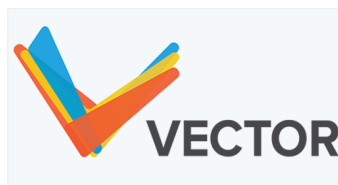
Alex Mejias: Absolutely, yeah.

Emily Lewis: Ah, I can tell. Honestly, definitely, I have been really interested in reading about lately so I could talk about it forever, but that's not what this episode is about. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: Yeah, me, too.

Emily Lewis: So let's turn to today's topic. Before we get into business development specifically, I wanted to talk about business growth because the reason this came up for me as like sort of an umbrella idea above — like growth can include business development, like as a way to grow is from. Lea and I went to Owner Summit earlier this year, and that was one of the topics. Like what is business growth? And I went in there with a very — even though Lea and I have been doing this agency together for a while, I think I went in with a bit of a freelancer mindset — and I really only thought growth was like a bigger client or a little bit more money.

And I didn't realize that it's actually a nuanced topic, and so I was hoping you could sort of explain what really growth is and what that looks like for people who work in the digital world.
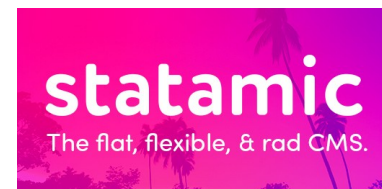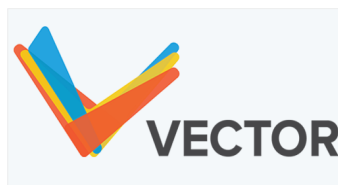
Alex Mejias: Yeah, it's great. I think it can and should mean different things to different companies. I think that a lot of digital agencies, a lot of just agencies in general equate growth with just adding more people, and that can be a really dangerous thing to do. That certainly is a way to grow, but really scaling a business is a very different proposition than just pure growth I guess, and so I think that understanding that your business can be 10 or 20 or 30 or 100 people or more and all the profitable, successful fulfilling and growing I think is an important thing.

But ultimately, I think business owners have to really define what that means for themselves and determine what that looks like. So for instance, it could mean certain number of staff, but it could also mean like you're saying the size of clients and the type of work that you're doing. So I would say that it's kind of a combination of the type of work you're doing, the profit margin and the size of your company, but those things I think are set in stone, and you have to decide the right mix for you and your company.

Emily Lewis: Do you think there's anything that is kind of common to digital agencies when it comes to that scaling or approach to growth?

Alex Mejias: Yeah. I think one of the pitfalls that I think that agencies run into is just acquiring of a client that's larger than a firm is really able to handle, and so they kind of quickly staff up to meet that need and that demand without sort of really making a plan for that growth, and as a result when that client goes away or the project ends, they are then in a place where they have to lay off people, and so the agency sort of ebbs and flows in terms of number in terms of staff.

And I think that can be really disruptive if you're constantly growing and then shrinking and growing and then shrinking and not really being more thoughtful about the way that your company grows from one to ten to twenty or more. Yeah, but that's something that we've seen in sort of our colleagues and partners in the space of just really having a difficult time managing growth because of staffing up too quickly to meet the demand for a larger project, and it can be really difficult because if a large project

comes your way, then it's going to bring a lot of money in for your shop, you want to take it, but the reality is if you're a smaller shop, there are projects that are too big for you and you should probably not take them, at least not on your own, and I can talk a little bit more about how we manage that situation at Foster Made.
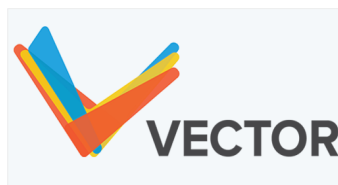
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Emily Lewis: So I have to say that before I went to Owner Summit, and Lea can attest to this, she can frustratingly attest to this…

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: I didn't really want to grow. I was like, "I'm happy the way we are. I'm happy with what we're doing. I want a little bit more of what we have." So I didn't view that as growth, and it wasn't until I went to Owner Summit that I really felt like I could redefine what growth meant. But is it important or is it okay to stay small? I mean, what are the pros and cons of growing versus staying where you are?

Alex Mejias: Sure. I think it depends on where you are now. I think with growing, I think the hardest part about growth from an internal perspective is maintaining the culture. As you add more and more people, it becomes harder and harder as an owner or as the leader of your business to give them the attention that they need in order to really understand and embody the culture that you want your company to have, and even beyond that, beyond the cultural perspective, as you add layers and layers of management, you have to really begin to make sure that even just policies are being upheld and that on the human resources' side, everyone is being taken care of.

And I think that to me, the people side of growth is the most challenging piece. It's really difficult to have employees. It's really difficult to have a healthy company culture. It's really difficult to manage
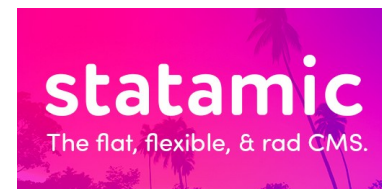
people and to really kind of get the most out of them while also providing a fulfilling place to work, and I think that it's not something that you should do lightly. You should really think through how many people you can handle at right now, and as you grow, how you're going to make room for more people to be on the team and make sure that you're setting them up for success.

Lea Alcantara: I think this brings up a few issues here like with what you've kind of touched on because there's a ton of risks involved with growing your business, but it does seem like a chicken and egg situation. As you mentioned, it's like if there's a large opportunity that comes your way and you're still a small shop or a smaller shop and don't have the current capacity, you suggested that maybe the case is you don't take that project, but a lot of people receive like accidental growth.

Like how do you become more intentional about this to avoid those particular risks, or is it really one of those that Emily mentioned where it's a mindset because some people don't even consider growing until an opportunity like a large client or somebody shows their way.

Alex Mejias: I think sometimes that works out. I think a lot of times it doesn't. I think you really have to have a plan for people and a plan and a vision for your shop beyond that project. I think one way, like I said, that we handle that is by partnering with other shops. So if we feel like this project is a great one for our firm that we can't really handle it right now, I think if at all possible, we want to partner with other shops and do the work together so that on the other side of it, if it goes away, we're ending a relationship with a partner or subcontractor and not having to lay off an employee.

So I think it's just being able to kind of have a vision for beyond that, and I think one other thing is that when you understand what your sale cycle, and we can talk a little bit about this, and understand like what you need to do to get to a place where those new staff have another project to move off onto and when this project ends, you can. I think that there are ways that you can take that project on, but you just really I think have a pretty good understanding of your sale cycle and how long it will take to

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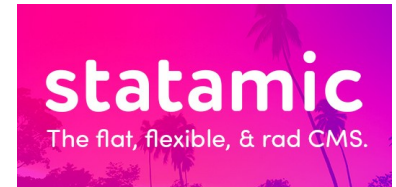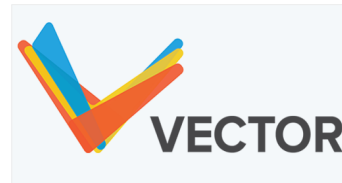
find new work to kind of get those people in place. If it's any type of larger project, it's going to months so you almost need to start selling immediately upon closing that sale.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Alex Mejias: And that's another trap that a lot of businesses get into. It's that when their shop gets booked, they stop selling.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, we were idiots and did that last year. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Straight up.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Straight up, and then we go, "Oh, no, we're fine." [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: Yeah. It's really dangerous. We've been in those places before. We get booked six months out, like that is a really dangerous place to be, like you need to – it will cost me to continue to sell.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, that's an important lesson. Before we get into some of the practicalities of selling, I just wanted to just touch on again, oh, first and foremost, for our listeners, definitely tune into our episode on strategic partnerships with Jake Jorgovan that we had last year. I'll make sure to link to that in the show notes, but it's really what Alex is talking about. If something comes along for us that's more than what we can handle or maybe it's something that we just don't do or don't do super well, we have vetted trusted partners that we have spent – what – over the past year really trying to build
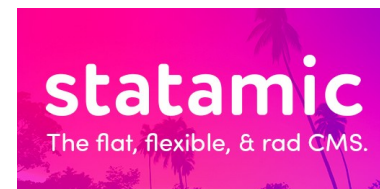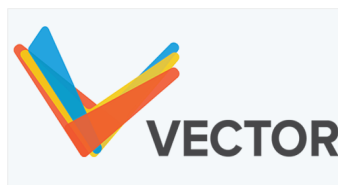
these relationships and get a sense of how they work and if it aligns with us, so that when we have something, we have a go-to or we have a roster of go-to people to bring in so that we don't have to say no to those opportunities.
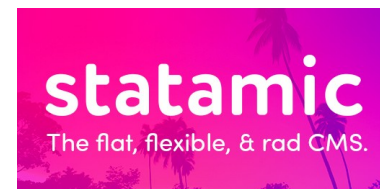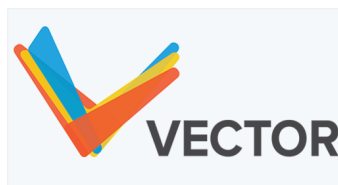
But that's a level of "growth" that I'm comfortable with because I'm not really at the mindset of feeling like we have done that sort of planning and intentional thinking forward about actually hiring.

Alex Mejias: Yes.

Emily Lewis: So yeah, check out that episode, but that mindset thing is really important. I think it was kind of – I hate using this term because it's so overused, but that Aha! moment at Owner Summit where I was like, "Oh, I can define growth for my own business. It's not what someone is telling me to do, getting up on stage and giving a talk of how to do sales or how to hire, but really defining for yourself what growth could mean for you and how you could achieve it."

And once that shift happened, that moment happened, then Lea and I began that actual work, and we're still at the very beginning of sort of formalizing a plan, envisioning what we want, what do we need to achieve before we do certain things, and that kind of makes that fear that I've always had about growth a lot more manageable, because we're just treating it like we do everything; carefully, thoughtfully, planning, analysis.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and I think that that's something that I feel like is difficult for a lot of people in this industry to do because we come to it usually as craftspeople, as the designer who starts freelancing, developer who starts freelancing, and then everything is word-of-mouth referrals, which is great at the start, but running a business itself and a sustainable one, and especially if your ambitions grow, it's far different type of mindset and planning and execution.
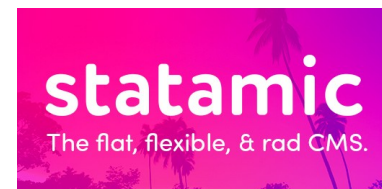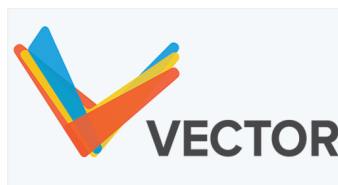
Emily Lewis: All right, now we've sort of talked about growth, sort of how growth could be scary, but it's something you could plan for if you wanted to. Let's kind of dive into the ideas of business development and sales because those are both ways you can grow a business. So Alex, what is business development.

Alex Mejias: Business development, for the most part, I think in the business community, it's just another word for sales. I actually think of it, and I think the others, I'm not the only one, they think of it as something more than that. I really think that it is kind of like the way that and the strategy that you use to grow your company, and I think that from a sales perspective, that is one piece of it, but I think that really it can go beyond that. I think it's probably it's helpful to talk about sales, but I just wanted to noted that for me, and particularly because my job has a partial internal focus, to me, I think that there are all types of like internal things that really can help drive sales that I think should be considered part of business development.

So project management has a business development component; how your project managers are interacting with clients, I mean, because sort of the best business that you can get, the easiest sale you can make is through an existing client, and so as somebody who's in sales, if you're just doing sales, you're usually handing off a project to a project manager, and you might have an account manager, but you might not, but it's really important that you don't stop selling to that client, but that you continue to look for ways.

So I think that there is both an internal and an external component, but I think what a lot of people consider business development, it's really just that sales piece of what happens when someone calls you or emails you and how do you go from sort of a lead to a closed deal.

Emily Lewis: One of the things that occurred to me was you were sort of describing business development as being more than just sales and you pointed to project management. Another thing

that occurred to me was, for example, Bright Umbrella's content marketing, Lea uses it in her sales, like I'm writing content to help her sell stuff.
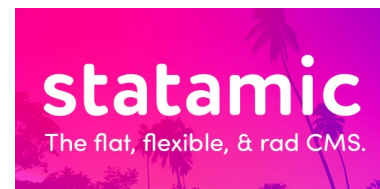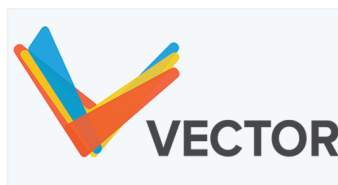
Alex Mejias: Absolutely.

Emily Lewis: So that's also in a way business development because, yeah, we've stopped writing content just for the goal of writing content. [Laughs] There is a strategy behind it to support the sales goal.

Alex Mejias: Yeah. And as somebody who's working in business development, I actually interact with every single person on our team. I interact with the developers, the marketing people, HR, everything, because it really all can play a role in sales, and you want everything to kind of line up so that when you get to that point of sales, you have the materials there. You have the experience of the developers, the designers or whatever; they all have shared their expertise with you so that you can talk intelligently about your services. I think it's certainly important to do.

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Emily Lewis: I think that's a really important point that if someone is going to go into the sales process, they really do need to know what the realities of what the company can deliver and what the developers can do because I once worked for an organization – I won't name names – but the salespeople would sell stuff that didn't even exist and then they would come home and talk to the developers and be like, "Can we make this?"

It would be just really backwards process, and as the project manager on those projects, I got to deal with the client who was like, "Well, this was what was sold to us, and it's the worst." So I do think that's really important that I don't know if it's overlooked, but I was in an environment where it was

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often overlooked where the salespeople were disconnected from the actual software, from the actual development.

Alex Mejias: Yeah. And as you grow, at first, a lot of owners are selling themselves and they might be the developer, the creative director, and so they know exactly what's happening, but you hire someone and you put someone in that role and all of a sudden, they don't have a background in development, they don't have a background in design, and so there's an obvious knowledge gap that you need to try to figure out a way to get them up to speed, because otherwise, they are not only selling things that you can't do at the shop or they may not be able to answer basic questions, and so

I've actually spent quite a bit of time learning and understanding the software development process so that I can kind of handle all of the surface-level questions on an initial call or even the first or second call so I don't have to like pull in a developer and take them away from work to answer questions that they're kind of recurring questions that kind of come up again and again and really kind of saved them for the deeper dive-type questions.
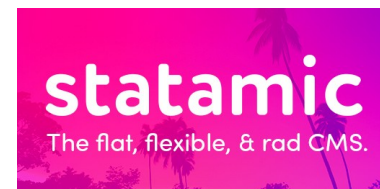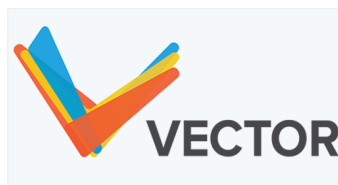
Emily Lewis: Do you have your own internal resource that you reference, because you're not a developer so it may not always be top of mind with that, so you can always answer those common questions?

Alex Mejias: That would be good to have, but no, I don't.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: Yeah. I don't have a specific resource. I mean, we deal with really a limited number of technologies and programming languages, so that makes it a lot easier. In general, I think business

development is a lot easier if you have a more focused business, so I've over time just gotten familiar with the answers to the most common questions, but I think that would make sense to have.
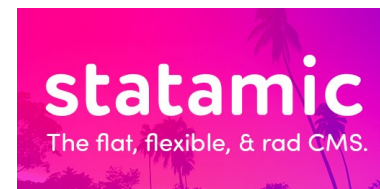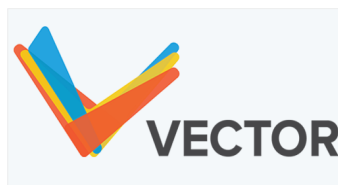
Lea Alcantara: So I feel like we've been talking about business development and defining it in more general terms, but I think it's time we talk about specifics, what is your biz dev process, like from the very beginning?

Alex Mejias: Okay, so biz dev for me, really the sales process begins when you have a lead that has called us or emailed us or been referred to us. There's a whole lot that needs to happen before that point, that you all may have covered in other podcasts and I'm happy to touch on if you want of getting the lead in the door, but hopefully, you have leads that are coming in. Is it okay if we start from there and move…

Emily Lewis: Yeah. We do have a couple of listener questions about lead generation, but we can loop those in later. I think it makes sense to sort of just get a practical sense of how you approach this, and if you would approach it starting with once that lead is in the door, what you would do from there. Let's go ahead and go that direction.

Alex Mejias: So once a lead gets in the door, I think the first thing that you have to do, hopefully, you have enough leads that time management is an issue for you, but you really want to qualify that lead. So you hopefully defined kind of the type of work that your business is looking to get, and so the first thing you need to do is determine whether or not they fit within your business goals for the type work that you want, the type of project, the type of client, the budget, all of that type of thing. So it really begins by asking a lot of questions, and trying to get to know their specific need. Honestly, I do background research.

As leads come in, I'll google their company. I'll try to learn as much as I can about their business model. I'll look at their website. Sometimes I'll even look at the source code of their website, trying to

determine what platform they're on, what programming language that they've used, and really try to understand who is this client, who are they, what are their goals, and do they align with the type of work that we want to do, and so that's kind of step one. It's really trying to understand the lead. The second thing is then helping them understand us.
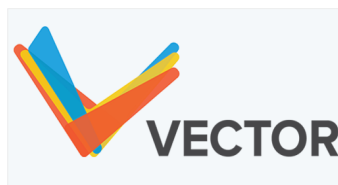
Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Alex Mejias: I mean, I think that you have to start by listening to what they need so that you can answer honestly whether or not you believe to be a good fit. So for the sales process, to me, it really is finding a fit where their needs match what we're good at doing, and I think that it's my job to both determine what those needs are and really understand them, but also to communicate clearly why we are a good fit for them, and I think that that part of the sales process can be difficult, but hopefully, it's made easier, like what you were saying, by your materials, by your portfolio and all of those things where you can show the client, and I think it's really important to show the client that you are a good fit and not just to say it.

I think it's much more powerful when you can point to a case study or a previous client that is in a similar position to them, and so you can end up kind of falling into a little bit of a niche, and different people have different thoughts about that, but I do think it's important that you can communicate to your clients that, "We've done this before. This is the type of work that we're good at doing, and we believe that we can help you get a good result."

So it's sort of listening, then communicating, and then sort of the process of closing I think is really a process of sort of gentle persistence where you're not pressuring them or pushing them, but trying to give them some loose or flexible timeline for them to kind of come to a decision, and sometimes they will have a point where they need to make a decision.

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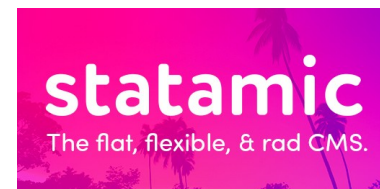
Other times there won't be one, and I think for us, the real challenge with sales closing is from a scheduling perspective, and I think that it's important to be transparent about that while also not pressuring them or saying, "Oh, you have to sign by X date or we're not going to be able to handle this for another three months." I think you want to try to push them in the direction gently, but not threaten or anything. The one thing that I'll say about that though is that it always takes longer to close that you think.
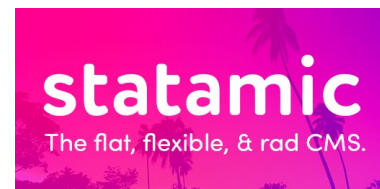
Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Alex Mejias: So if you are telling the client, "I don't know if we will be available," early on in your conversation, I don't think that that's a good idea, even if your shop is slammed, because you'll never know how long it's actually going to take to close the sale. They made contact with you in November and you're slammed through January, but they might not close until March.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Alex Mejias: So your business might be in a completely different place when they're actually ready to sign. So again, it's sort of I emphasized don't ever stop selling, and I think that a lot of us can get in trouble, and it's happened to us, too, at Foster Made where we've just been slammed and a lead has come in and I've just sent them away essentially, and I think that that's probably not a good thing to do in the early part of the phase. I think as you get a little bit further into the conversation, then you can begin to have a conversation about scheduling, but that really I think needs to wait until the final stages of the sale and it can be a helpful way to kind of help hopefully close the sale.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah. If I can interject, this particular anecdote is so true with this recent client that we just had. I think Emily, you know what I'm talking about where, remember, we started talking with them in December. They wanted to start doing something in January. We had some verbal confirmation. We didn't really get anything started until almost late February, and then didn't even get
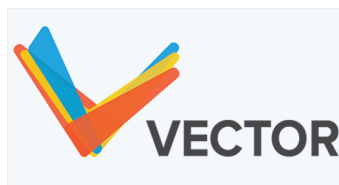
anything really scheduled in until like March to get a bunch of stuff done and then we even continued projects with them again with like verbal confirmation with all this stuff, because sometimes there's also like internal stuff going on where the signing person is actually on vacation, like stuff like that just suddenly shows up and then.

So it's something that you thought you'd sign or get signed at the beginning of the month is actually at the end of the month, and then you can't schedule anything until the middle of that month, and so definitely, it's happened to us, and it's a lesson that we always have to continue reminding ourselves that clients are going to client, and they're going to take their sweet time based on their schedule and you just have to plan accordingly and like anticipate it on your end, too.

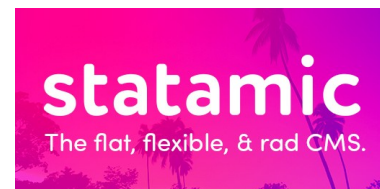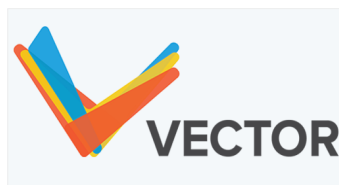**Alex Mejias**: Absolutely.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, try and build in more flexibility, like we do try and set dates for them to sign something so that we can get their commitment, but making those too short never helps. It's always best to like build in flexibility to give them extra time. It gives us a little bit more planning time.

Alex Mejias: If your potential client is a nonprofit, I would just add two to six weeks for the actual master services and statement of work process.

Emily Lewis: Yes. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: Because they are getting or receiving grants, sometimes federal money, they just tend to have a lot more requirements for their contracts, and so those will end up in the hands of a lawyer and it may take a little bit longer. So just a word to the wise, if you're dealing with a nonprofit, that you may want to build in a little bit extra time for the contract's negotiation once a verbal agreement has
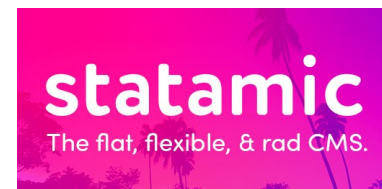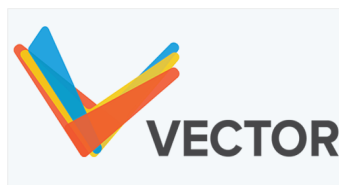
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been made, but that doesn't happen to us a lot, but there are times where there actually is a negotiation over the contract, and so you have to keep that in mind, and I don't know if that's really part of the sales process, but because I'm attorney, I handle that for our businesses, but a lot of shops will then have to engage a lawyer, so that definitely can add time as well.

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Emily Lewis: Yeah, just to do a random plug for Owner Summit, any business owner or agency owner who is looking for just a really fresh experience about running your business, one of the things they did at this last Owner Summit was so useful. They did like a role play with a client and the business dev person, kind of going through this contract negotiation, and the person playing the client was trying to be a little difficult, not like a problem client, but trying to get the things that are most important to them, and then the person negotiating on behalf of the agency was just really trying to stress like that it's important to look out for your agency's rights and wellbeing, and it was just so great in terms of how you can handle that sort of negotiation. So they might have something like that next go around. It's really worth it to go.

Alex, when you were talking about once you get a lead in and you're getting to know them or you do some research on your own as you get to know them beforehand to qualify them, but then that actual process of moving them from becoming a lead to that close, what is that? Is that typically phone calls? Is it emails? Is it a mix of both? Do you have to bring in other people? What does a typical process for that from moving from a lead to getting ready to sign?

Alex Mejias: Yeah. It's a combination of phone calls. Usually, I really try to start off with an initial phone call just to kind of explain who we are. I feel like it's a much better way of just kind of opening the conversation up. If it is a really, really large potential lead, I might even try to meet them early on, go in person. That would usually come after an initial phone call. So for some of our larger clients,

we've had a phone call really to kind of say hello, but then we very quickly schedule an in-person meeting.
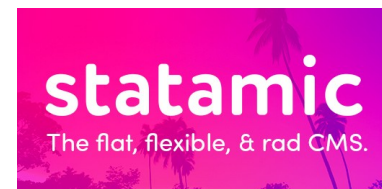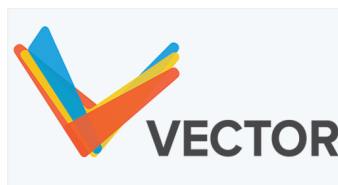
If it's a local client, sometimes we'll meet them as well if they're in the Richmond area and just invite them into the shop. But from there, it's generally emails followed by phone calls, but I'd like to schedule phone calls after kind of like the big milestones. So getting requirements from them and on that on the call after we've received their requirements, I'd like pull in a developer who can ask more questions and kind of help understand the scope of the projects because you really want to make sure you understand the scope.

So on that particular call, it would be me and a developer, sometimes a project manager, and then after we've delivered a statement of work or master services agreement, usually a statement of work, we would try to schedule a time to go through that and just to make sure we were all in the same page, but sometimes really there's just an initial phone call and then it all kind of just happens over email from there. I would say for our mid to larger clients, there are usually at least three phone calls along with a lot of emails.

Lea Alcantara: Do you ever have to even after those phone calls and emails and things like that have to write up a formal proposal?

Alex Mejias: Yes, we do write up formal proposals, and I guess, I don't know, formal layout, but we do create proposals for almost all of our leads. Our shop, being the size as it is, we tend to have just larger leads, so it makes sense I think to have a proposal, and that is typically a branded document. Shawn is kind of, and I don't know if you guys have talked to him about this, but he's very concerned with aesthetic in our branding and really wants everything that we do to be excellent, which I would recommend other people do as well.

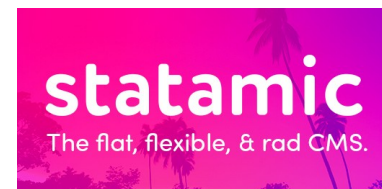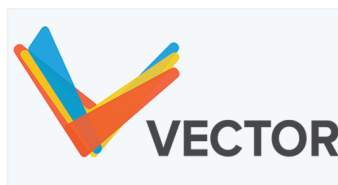**Emily Lewis**: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Alex Mejias: So the proposal that we send is a branded document that looks clean and has been spellchecked, which is also important. But sometimes if we do have a client that has a lot of requirements that they already know in advance and/or a set of user stories, we might try to open up a Google Doc or something, some type of collaborative documents that we can work on together, particularly if it's a client that is an existing client. For those clients, we really want to make sure that we understand so that there can be some value in sort of having a collaborative space for us to craft the project together.

So it kind of depends if you're sort of a newer client or if you're an existing. For existing clients, we would either do that kind of collaborative Google Doc or just draft a statement of work. But I will say this, I usually will only do a statement of work after a proposal. It does add an extra step, but a statement of work tends to be more involved. It has a lot more specifics, so there's just a lot of more thinking and time that needs to go into that document, and I think it's important not to spend too much time figuring out all of the nitty-gritty details when you're in sort of that proposal stage and really try to communicate in that document that you understand what their project is and what your plan is and ultimately I think that clients really want to see what the numbers are, and that's really kind of what's most important.

So being able to just present those numbers in a way that makes sense I think is the primary purpose of the proposal. It's just laying out the "here's how much it's going to cost and why" I'm trying to communicate in a proposal, but for something small, we might not do that.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, because there are some who say proposals are a waste of time. It's certainly proven to be a waste of our time.

Alex Mejias: Really.

Emily Lewis: I mean, yeah. And Lea, would you agree? I don't know if our leads were the best to start though.

Lea Alcantara: Well, I think though you're talking about two different things, the proposal for cold RFPs…

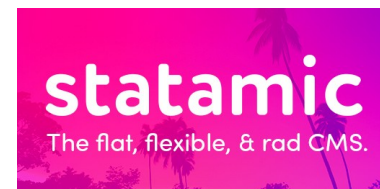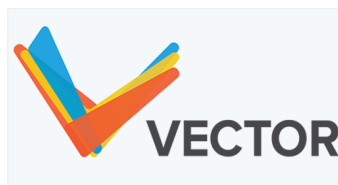**Alex Mejias**: Oh yeah, that's a waste.

Lea Alcantara: Versus proposal to a hot or warm lead where all they want is a formalized document to take back to their stakeholders. I think those are two different things. I think where Emily and I have been experimenting is kind of figuring out which lead needs like a more thorough, complete and by formal, I mean, like you need to have an abstract at the front and then breakdown of the entire step by step by step kind of stuff versus like, "Here's what you ask for. Here's who we are. Here's how much it's going to cost."

Because those are two different types of proposals, and it takes different types of effort to put it together, and right now, we're kind of figuring out which is more successful and which will resonate. We had feedback where sometimes we go all in for a thorough proposal and then it becomes confusing or it's just too much. So Alex, like how do you guys approach something like that?

Alex Mejias: Yeah, it's not formal. There's no abstract table of contents or anything like that.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Alex Mejias: I think it depends on what the client knows about us or what the potential client knows about us and how we understand the project. I think we want to make sure that we're on the same page. I think it's a way of communicating, "This is what we've heard you say, and this is what we think we can do to meet that need." But it's usually an introduction that kind of captures what we heard so

that they can see, and we've shown that we've listened to them and that we know they are and what they need.
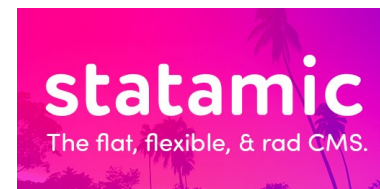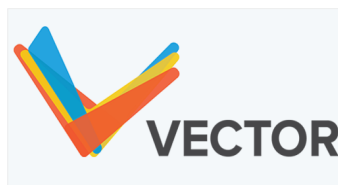
So that can be an introduction, just like one page. It could be a couple of slides. Sometimes we break it out if we feel like they have a few different things going on, and then our approach, our plan, so what we understood, what we heard about you and how we are going to sort of meet that need. There are some clients that want to see some case studies. We might throw in some case studies if we feel like that would help or they've asked for it.

Rarely will we include references in there for some of our larger clients, largely we really value the time of our existing clients so we don't want to be giving their numbers out to everyone. They're doing us a favor by asking for a reference. I would say if you are trying to win larger projects or projects that are a little bit of a stretch. I think having references is actually a really good thing to do. It just demonstrates that you stand behind your work and that you have people that will vouch for you.

Emily Lewis: One of the things that occurs to me because Lea was saying we're trying to experiment because I feel we have not found success with those longer-form proposals, even when they are a warm lead, we've not won them, so they don't seem like a success to me. At Foster Made or even when you were doing business development support for other companies when you were working at the law firm, how do you know when to stop doing something or when to change something? Are there like really easy identify flags that you should be paying attention to within a process with a lead that you know what, this isn't going to go anywhere.

Alex Mejias: It's a combination of not winning deals. If you find that you are consistently losing deals that you think you should be winning, I think that there could be a process. Also, if you are not getting very deep into the conversation to the point where you really have a good understanding of their budget, they understand what you do, and you are getting sort of an initial point of contact and you just never hear from people again.

They've emailed you, you emailed back, but nothing, silence, and if that happens over and over again, then that would be something that I would kind of pay attention to us.
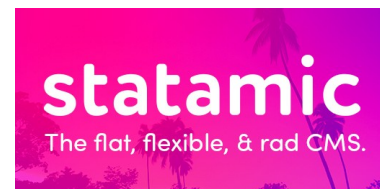
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I think for us, the only point in time where we've really kind of felt like we needed to do something different was we lost a couple of sales in a row to other shops, and part of it was really it came down to sort of upper level management at these potential leads sort of making a call that our point of contact was sort of like out of their hands, and that's really challenging. It's really difficult to know how to handle that. I think you want to understand kind of where you sit with against sort of the competition. I think it's really important to keep in mind like you are competing with other firms for this job, and oftentimes, price is the determining factor, and I think it's really important to understand if that is why you've lost the sale or not and the business challenge is that you need to find out, but if there's any other reason why you're not winning, if it's not price, I think that that is really vital and I think that we found we weren't getting beat on price.

But we were still not winning a couple of these deals that we thought we should and that's sort of caused us to take a look at our process, and even just to look at our company and just make sure that there was an alignment. But asking for a feedback if you've lost the sale is really important, if you can, and I'll be open to doing that. I would always ask so that you can find out why someone didn't make that choice to go with you. It is really important to do.

Emily Lewis: You mentioned this situation where your point of contact, the decision went where they can't undo. Does that make you just really try and get in front of those decision makers? Is that even possible to get their time in a sales process?

Alex Mejias: It can be really difficult, but I think what's important is to understand if they're not the decision maker and then sort of act accordingly and really keep in mind that if it's going to need to go
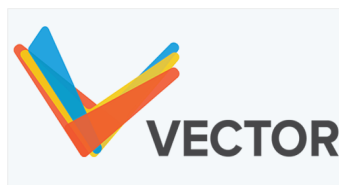
through a higher level of review, that you understand that that's happening and that you do as much as you can to talk to your contact about what their boss is looking for and what are the drivers and the motivations that they have so that you can kind of present a proposal that will make the most sense to them. I think it's just important to understand, and I'm not sure if there's anything you can do about it, but you don't want to go into it thinking that this person loves you and they might love you, but they're not decider.
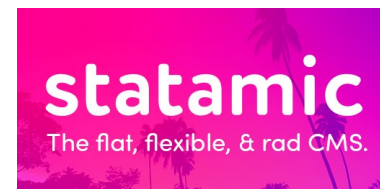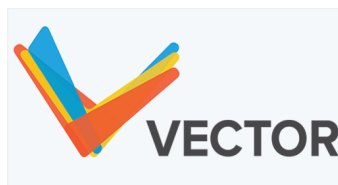
Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: I think it's really important to understand where they fall in the decision making process, and people will usually tell you.

Emily Lewis: And you've mentioned like you're able to get a sense of budget parameters, do you have any tricks for getting them to tell you where they're working? That's still something that's hard for us.

Alex Mejias: Yeah. I mean, you can kind of go one way or the other. You can throw numbers at them and just see how they react and just say, "Here are some typical budgets from our projects, and they might say, "Oh, well, no, no, no, we're nowhere near that," and I think that can be a really good way to qualify a lead is to just throw some numbers at them and see how they respond. The other way is depending on the circumstance, I would just ask them.

I don't really have any tricks other than to ask every other question, except that. You can also try to look at if they've worked with someone else in the past, and if you're a web designer, you can see who built their current website, and then you can just kind of gauge what type of budget that shop might have had and what they might be willing to spend.
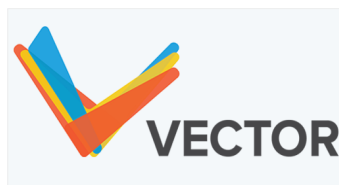
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The other thing, and actually, this is a little bit of a trick, if it's a nonprofit, nonprofits typically file 990s and you can usually search for them, and in those documents, they have their budgets, and you can sometimes see what they've spent on operations. Sometimes you can even see what they've spent on things like their website. So I would certainly do that if it's a nonprofit just as a matter of due diligences go, and at the very least, look at their 990s so you can see their operating budget, and if it's a nonprofit with a total operating budget of $100,000 a year, they probably can't afford a $200,000 project, unless they have some type of grant.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Alex Mejias: So if I encounter a small nonprofit and they had what I consider to be a really large project, I would ask them, "How are you all thinking about funding this? Would this be coming from your operating budget or do you have some grant money?" Because if they said, "Oh, it's operating," then pretty much no, that they might not have the budget. So I think it just depends on like the type of project size you're aiming to land and then just trying to do everything you can to determine if they could meet that budget.

Emily Lewis: All right, well, we're getting close on time, and I want to make sure we cover a lot. Let's take a step back to before this person lands in front of you and it's a lead that you've qualified. Let's talk about that sales pipeline and/or lead generation. We've got a question from Marcus Neto and he asked specifically about lead generation, "What are your favorite activities, and where do most of your leads come from?"

Alex Mejias: Cool. So in general, warm leads are the best. They can be a little bit difficult depending on what type of shop you have. So for us, most of our leads actually come from Google AdWords, and I think that Shawn, even before I arrived, had really kind of invested in that and understood it to the point where when I came to work at Foster Made, we had a sort of steady stream of leads coming
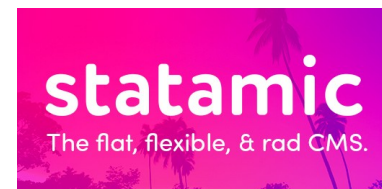
in every month, and I think it's really important to have some type of stream of leads so that you're not just dependent on word of mouth, and Google AdWords I think is a really great platform for that.

There are obviously others. It has worked for us, and we've brought in small deals and very, very large deals through Google AdWords, so I would say there is an investment of time in it, and obviously, of money, but for us, it has really worked, and particularly, if you have any type of specialization, it can be a really good fit.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. I think about that and that feels like so hard to do. [Laughs]
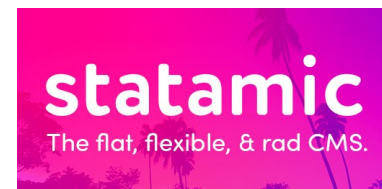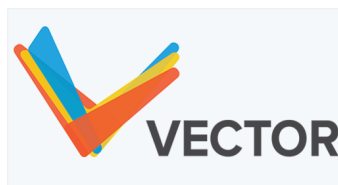
Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: And does Shawn do it himself or do you guys outsource like a digital marketing agency?

Alex Mejias: We have a partner help us, but Shawn and our marketing person help manage it on a day-to-day level. I go in there every once in a while and take a look at what's going on or I might create an ad as well, but yeah, from a day-to-day basis, we're managing it internally, but we sort of had it set up by a partner, but I would recommend going that route or recommend actually engaging someone and not trying to do it yourself. It is voodoo magic, I think.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: And it's ever changing. I mean, even just the user interface changes every five minutes, so you really want to have someone who has spent a lot of time in it and that really understands it,

because even though it's pretty easy to get it set up, you want someone just to maximize your investment there.
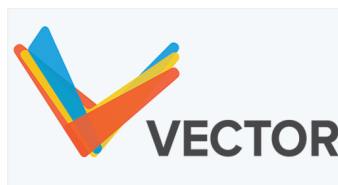
Emily Lewis: And what about, maybe not with Foster Made, that you've seen other people in the digital space do for lead gen?

Alex Mejias: Yeah, I mean, I think that – I don't know, it's a good question. I would say some networking is really good thing. I think trying to find those people who are sort of complementary businesses, and one other thing that I'll say about us along those lines is that for us early on, Shawn really identified design shops as the primary target for our sales efforts because we knew that we were providing the development talent, and so when you sort of made that first sale with a design shop, that would actually lead to many, many more sales, so we really turn it into a relationship.

So finding other shops that are doing other things that you don't do and building a relationship with them so that if you don't do SEO, finding an SEO shop or a freelancer who you can sort of refer work to and then they can refer work back to you, I think is the other thing that we've done and that I've seen work. So it just depends on kind of what you do, and it can be sometimes difficult to find non-competitive shops if you're serving all in one or you're doing design and development, but that's also worked for us in the past.

Emily Lewis: Lea, you've been doing a lot with our sales. Has anything come on your radar that you've been curious about or even you were like "no way are we doing that" that you've seen about lead generation?

Lea Alcantara: Well, I think the one that's most controversial and the thing that we're most reluctant to do is outbound kind of sales. Does Foster Made do any sort of outbound cold outreach or those types of things?
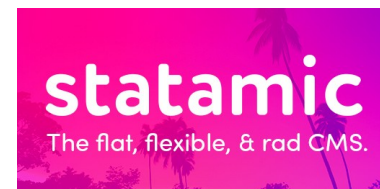
Alex Mejias: Very, very rarely. There's usually a reason that we're reaching out to someone if we see something, but I think that for the most part, for me, what outbound looks like is really more about establishing those relationships, and trying to let businesses in Richmond know that we're here. We do a lot. Most of our work is with people outside of Richmond who just find us online, so I think there is work to be done sort of in our local market, just making sure that businesses are aware of who we are.

So it's not really a sales pitch, it's more just an introduction of, "Hi, I'm Alex. I work at Foster Made. We're here in the same town. I just wanted to get to know you," and I think that can happen in different ways through in-person events, networking events, and LinkedIn can, and I don't really know how to do that on LinkedIn. I don't know what the etiquette is like, what the rules are there, so I've been weary to kind of just send a cold message on LinkedIn. I'd love to learn about that if that is a thing, but I would say it's more about kind of like building relationships is how I see outbound versus sending a thousand cold emails.
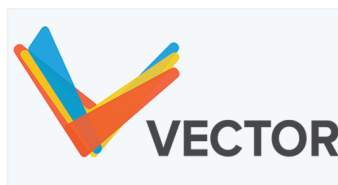
I have worked at businesses before where they've just done sort of cold outbound sales, and I think for the most part the understanding is that it's a straight numbers game, and it's really just one percent of people will respond, so if you need ten sales, then you've got to reach out to a thousand people. It's that type of thing.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

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Alex Mejias: And you just have to be sort of relentless about it, but it really is just a numbers game.

Lea Alcantara: So before we wrap up, we do have a couple of final questions, like the practical questions. What tools do you rely on managing the biz dev side and sales for Foster Made?
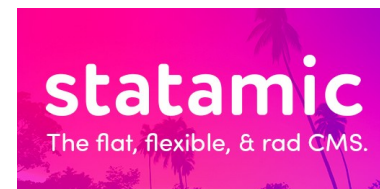
Alex Mejias: Sure. I think it's important to have a CRM. We have our own proprietary, I guess. We built our own CRM. That's what I use on a daily basis, but there are a lot of other great products out there. I think it's really important to kind of have one place that you go to that you can kind of see everything and understand your sales pipeline. So we use a lot of the Adobe products because our sales materials are a little more designed, so I've gotten familiar with InDesign and that type of thing to kind of really make sure everything looks really great. But other than that, it's just, yeah, just calling and emailing.

Lea Alcantara: All right, so then what resources do you recommend for an agency or even a freelancer who wants to grow their business through biz dev and sales?

**Alex Mejias**: Sure. There's a site that I really like called Win Without Pitching.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, yeah, Blair Enns.

Alex Mejias: Yeah. That's just a really, really good site to just ingest as much of that as you can. Other than that, that's really been like the main resource in terms of like how I've been thinking about sales.

Emily Lewis: If you don't mind, I was actually curious. I was trying to ask a question, if we could go back to your proprietary CRM, Alex.

Alex Mejias: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about some of what you use it for, like what are the features that it provides for you, because we have a CRM, and I'm not sure if we're using it to its best capacity. What does a CRM provide to the sales process?
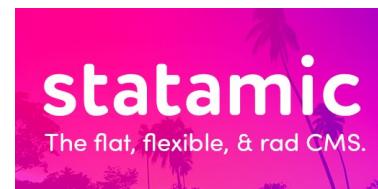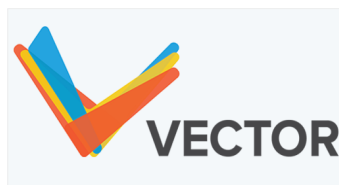
Alex Mejias: Sure. Hopefully, if it's working well, it's telling you what you need to do next, but also keeping the most important leads top of mind. Ours kind of combine that. It give me an overall sense of like our numbers, so we have like a dashboard, and it kind of does like some comparative numbers, just a look on sort of our general lead health to make sure that we're still getting the same number of leads.

One thing I will say is that by tracking every month the number of leads that comes in, we have like a 6-week period where our leads just drop and we're like, "What is going on?" And we didn't know, we didn't know, and finally, someone emailed us and said, "Hey, I emailed you guys. I submitted a contact form a while back. No one ever responded. I thought I would email or I would try to email." And we said, "We didn't get it. We didn't see that." And it turned out our contact form was broken.
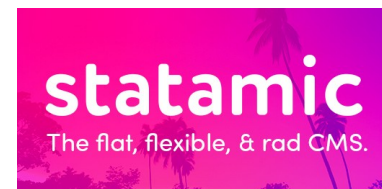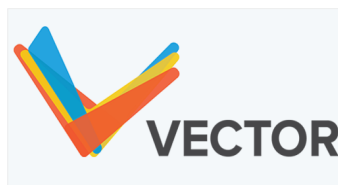
Emily Lewis: Oh.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, no.

Alex Mejias: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Alex Mejias: Well, I should say the form itself was collecting the data, but the email relay wasn't actually letting us know.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Alex Mejias: So all of those submissions were sitting in ExpressionEngine just waiting for us to go back.

Emily Lewis: Oh, no.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, no.

Alex Mejias: And so I opened it back up and just saw just like 30 leads just sitting there.
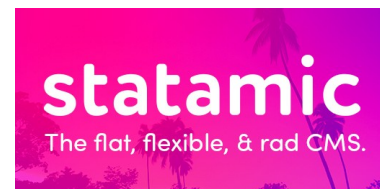
Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Alex Mejias: And I tried contacting them, but it had been way too long since we had missed them. So I think it is helpful like for us, at least to know that like if the stream is still flowing and that everything is like normal.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Alex Mejias: So we have that, and we kind of from there really try to focus on, at least for me the way that I use it is I try to really identify what are the most important leads I need to make sure that I'm not forgetting about and where should I focus my time and energy.

Emily Lewis: Well, that's actually a really good point, how do you decide where your priority should be? Let's say you have – I don't know what a large amount of leads for a week would be, but let's just say you're juggling ten. How do you know which ones to focus your energy on? How do you prioritize your leads?

Alex Mejias: So it's a good question. I mean, I think a lead that has a really large budget probably has like a longer sales cycle, so there's never really anything urgent going on with them typically, they just move slower, but I think starting there and just making sure that you've kind of delivered everything that you've said you'll deliver for your largest lead, either for your largest lead or the one that you feel like is the best fit for your company, and hopefully those are in alignment.

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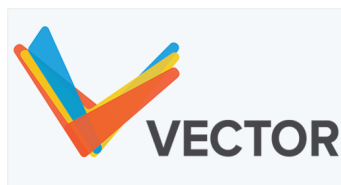
So I try to focus in on what's the type of work that we want to be doing and what is the size of project that we want to be doing, and then I focus all of my energy on those things. If someone else comes in that doesn't really meet those criteria, I'll be responsive, but maybe a little bit less, but really I try to be responsive to everyone, but I may not put as much time and energy into a project where I feel like it's not one that we're not going to do a really great job on and they don't really have the right budget.
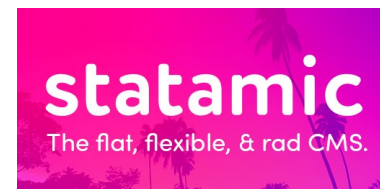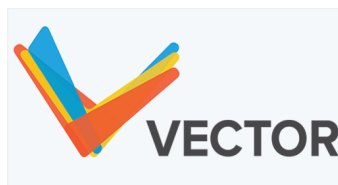
So really, just trying to identify those key leads, but anyone who we feel like is not a good fit, I actually try to determine that within the first call and just get them completely off of my plate.

Emily Lewis: I feel like I have two dozen more questions. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: But our intention is for this to be like the beginning of this conversation about business development, so we will be revisiting this again in another future episode and getting into some more details, but I think it's really useful. I think the thing that stood out most to me in this conversation is just that it's really so different for everybody, like even the lead gen is going to be different, like I'm like, "Oh, maybe that could work for us." I'm like, "I don't even know if that's feasible for us." And it's kind of like picking what's going to work for you and not feeling like you have to do it X amount of way.

Alex Mejias: Absolutely, and I think depending on the type of work that you want and the size of your company, that would or should also like inform your lead gen. I think if you are a developer and you are an expert and you love to troubleshoot and you just can fix things, I think Good AdWords is actually a really good place to kind of get started because people are searching for help with Laravel or with Python and you can be that person. If you are really trying to be the association software champion of the world, like you might need a different strategy.

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You might need to be going to events and you might need to be really networking and creating a portfolio that shows that experience or doing some networking with nonprofits. Maybe do a project for free or at a deep discount that is the type of work that you want to be doing that then you can get a quote and a referral and have that portfolio but you're right, it is a little bit of a different strategy.

I think it has worked for us because we have traditionally focused on technology, and so people are out there searching for Laravel developers and we want to make sure that they find us. I think as our business changes, well, the way that we gather leads will need to change as well, and we are changing and we are growing, and so that is a new challenge and we're not going to just kind of keep doing it the way that we've always done it just because that's how we do it. I think we really want to get out there, and what I'm seeing, because we are starting to do more projects sort of like end-to-end is that people really want to see what you've done. They want to see that you've done a project like theirs before. So I think that's a really important thing.

It kind of goes back to the idea of showing or being able to show that you can do the work, and so that's caused us to step back and think, "Can we show this type of client that we can meet their need? If you're trying to go after enterprise work, can you show that you can do an enterprise project? How would you go about showing that?" And that's something that you really need to think through, and answering that question will likely help you determine how to go out and find those leads.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, and probably save you time.

Alex Mejias: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Wow. As Emily said, we could talk about this forever.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

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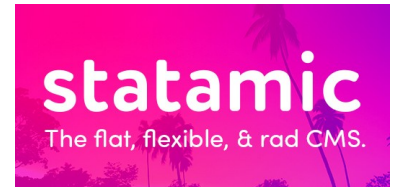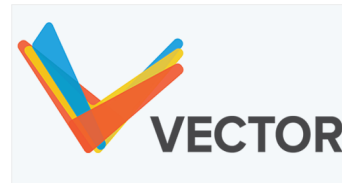
Lea Alcantara: But we don't have that much time, but before we finish up, we've got our rapid fire ten questions so our listeners can get to you know you a bit better.

Alex Mejias: Cool.

Lea Alcantara: Are you ready?

Alex Mejias: Yeah. Let's do it.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: He's so enthusiastic. First question, what's your go-to karaoke song?

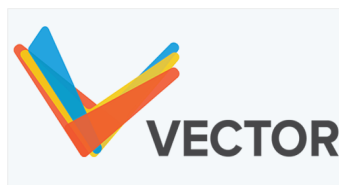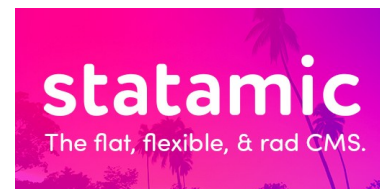**Alex Mejias**: I don't have one. I don't do karaoke. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: Sorry.

Lea Alcantara: That's fair.

Alex Mejias: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: What advice would you give your younger self?

Alex Mejias: Slow down.

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite PG-rated curse word?

Alex Mejias: Hmm, jipsnap.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Who is your favorite superhero?

Alex Mejias: Oh, who's my favorite superhero? Batman.

Lea Alcantara: What is your favorite time of the year?
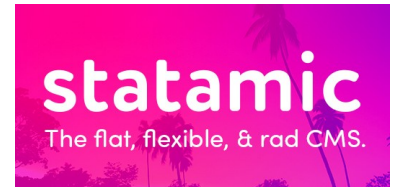
Alex Mejias: Spring.

Emily Lewis: Even with your allergies?

Alex Mejias: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] If you could change one thing about the web, what would it be?

Alex Mejias: Hmm, more privacy.

Lea Alcantara: What are three words that describe you?

Alex Mejias: Let's see, ahh, it's a tough one. Energetic, truthful [laughs], I hope, and thoughtful.

Emily Lewis: How about three words that describe your work?

Alex Mejias: Oh, yeah, diverse, analytical, relational.

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite meal of the day?

Alex Mejias: Hmm, breakfast.

Emily Lewis: All right, last question, coffee or tea?

Alex Mejias: Tea, always tea.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]
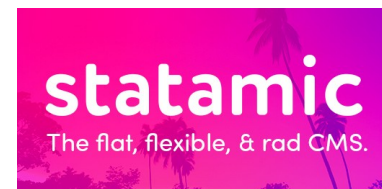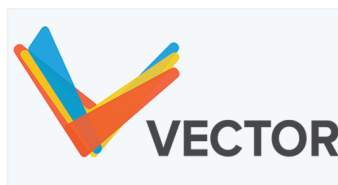
Lea Alcantara: Nice.

Alex Mejias: Three times a day.

Lea Alcantara: Definitive. And so that's all the time we have for today. Thanks for joining the show.

Alex Mejias: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Emily Lewis: In case our listeners want to follow up with you, where can they find you online?

Alex Mejias: Sure. I am on LinkedIn, just Alex Mejias. They can also reach me by email, alex.mejias@fostermade.co.

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[Music starts]

Emily Lewis: Awesome. Thanks again. I think this was a really good conversation. I'm really appreciative of some of the insights you shared. I think Lea and I might send you some emails later with some follow-up questions. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Alex Mejias: Sure. It would be great.

Emily Lewis: All right.

Lea Alcantara: CTRL+CLICK is produced by Bright Umbrella, a web services agency invested in education and social good. Today's podcast would not be possible without the support of this episode's sponsors! Many thanks to Vector Media Group and Statamic!

Emily Lewis: We'd also like to thank our hosting partner: Arcustech.

Lea Alcantara: And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter @ctrlclickcast or visit our website ctrlclickcast.com. And if you liked this episode, consider donating to the show — then give us a review on Stitcheror Apple Podcasts or both! Links are in our show notes and on our site!

Emily Lewis: Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when Kitt Hodsden gives us a rundown on the state of web images. Be sure to check out ctrlclickcast.com/schedule for more upcoming topics.

Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara …
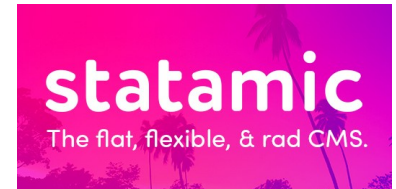
Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis …

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

Emily Lewis: Cheers!

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