

00:04 Opening: Broadcasting live from the Pro Business Channel Studios in Atlanta, Georgia. It's time for Capital Club Radio. Brought to you by FLOCK Specialty Finance. Please welcome your host, Chairman and CEO, Michael Flock.

00:20 Michael Flock: Thank you and good morning. We're absolutely delighted today to welcome Andrew Dietz who's the co-founder and partner of Creative Influence, a sales-enabled, public relations and content firm that works especially with business-to-business clients. He's also the founder and managing partner of Creative Growth, a B2B marketing strategy and business development firm. He's also author of dozens of articles, a blog about creativity and innovation called IdeaMonger, and two books including "The Opening Playbook: A Professional's Guide to Building Relationships that Grow Revenue."

00:53 MF: Andrew is a graduate of the University of Michigan's School of Business and Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. He's lived in Atlanta for over 30 years; though his clients span across the United States and globally. Andrew joins us today to talk about intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship, creating revenue generating relationships through content and about building a creative life.

01:14 MF: A quick disclaimer before we start. Andrew has been working with my team at FLOCK Specialty Finance to help us better tell our own story to the marketplace. So, we know Andrew well, we love working with Andrew and his team. Andrew, how did you get this motivation to do startups when you were with companies like Ziff Davis and BellSouth? Huge companies that people don't think are really terribly, necessarily creative. Now, Ziff Davis was publishing, but BellSouth, my god! What a monstrous conglomerate. How did you get this spark to do these kinds of things in big companies?

01:48 Andrew Dietz: Well, first of all Michael, thanks for having me. And I love your theme music. I know our audience couldn't see, but I was dancing. And since you couldn't see, then I am a fantastic dancer.

01:58 MF: Okay.

02:00 AD: But I think we all are creative and entrepreneurial, but not all of us allow that natural instinct to come to the surface. I was born to parents who were very creative. My dad was trained as an artist and did start his own business when I was still in high school. Ink Magazine published its first issue and I probably was the youngest reader of it at that time. So, there was something about creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship that had caught my attention early on. And I think in part it's because I kind of came from that heritage of a father who had those instincts.

02:36 AD: I never thought I'd work for a larger corporation. I always had interest in the smaller more entrepreneurial startups; something of my own. So, it was a surprise to me when I entered a company like BellSouth. And you're right about Ziff Davis. Ziff Davis was an incredibly entrepreneurial organization, as they had to be. They had publications focused on special interests. Ultimately, when I joined, they were focused on building a computer magazine division. So these are all areas that change constantly. Meaning that the organization had to be constantly thinking about what was next, how to grow and sometimes end and sometimes restart or start new publications.

03:14 AD: The environment was inherently entrepreneurial. At BellSouth you might not think so. You worked at AT&T for a while. So you know. I was fortunate in joining BellSouth after I left the publishing industry. I left because I was here in Atlanta and I wanted to stay, but I was from New York, and that's where the magazine publishing industry was. But I met the woman who became my wife, and she is from here and that made it hard to leave. I ended up doing something that was a mistake. And I'll come back to your question in a minute.

03:44 MF: You made a mistake?

03:45 AD: Yes, occasionally. But I'll come back around to your question about big companies innovating. But let me start with the sort of diversion that led me to BellSouth. And it was that I convinced myself that a business could be just a business. I didn't have to do what I was passionate about or what I was interested in. And so, to stay in here in Atlanta in the late '80s when there really wasn't... There was certainly no magazine publishing business here and very little media of substance, short of CNN, where you could work if you wanted to get \$10,000 a year.

04:19 AD: I ended up joining my wife and my father-in-law in a family manufacturing business in Cartersville, Georgia. And so here I am, a little preppy kid from Connecticut and New York, driving my Saab up to Cartersville over the railroad tracks, and managing two manufacturing plants. I had absolutely no business doing that. I learned a lot the hard way. And ultimately, we, not because of me necessarily or completely, but we did end up shutting that business down. And that was quite a lesson to me about following a path that fits one's natural skills and abilities, at least for me. A business isn't just a business. I have to do what I'm passionate about.

05:01 AD: And for me, that was, again, where entrepreneurship and creativity intersected, and at the time where, for me, media intersect. And that was in the then early '90s, the world of interactive media. Back then it was pre-World Wide Web. So interactive media meant CD-ROMs and online services. It was through that, going back to business school and then paying my way through, in part, through consulting gigs at interactive media companies that led me to BellSouth. They were starting at the time, one of the early incarnations of interactive television. And I joined out of business school as a Director of Content. And then when they started Bellsouth.net, I became Director of Marketing and then ultimately VP of Marketing for that.

05:40 AD: So I had the good fortune of being in the entrepreneurial or the intrapreneurial, as you put it, area of a big company and they pretty much left us alone. Because most of the executives who had grown up in the phone business, they didn't really know a lot about what was emerging in the realm of interactive media. It was new and different, and they felt...

06:00 MF: So you were different. You maybe didn't fit into that.

06:03 AD: I was different. I'm a subversive in Brooks Brothers clothing, so I didn't think that I would be accepted at BellSouth. But that was a really great environment for me. I say, especially early in your career, you want three things, network, name and knowledge. I was able to gain all of those things while helping Bell South build and launch what became BellSouth.net and then the DSL or the broadband. Now it's regular speed. But back then broadband over ADSL technology was the advance. So big companies may not be inherently entrepreneurial. The bigger you get, the harder it is. That said increasingly, those kinds of organizations are trying harder than ever to bring entrepreneurship into their businesses, both enhancing their culture, sometimes trying to drive that

level of creative thinking throughout the whole organization, sometimes trying just skunk works operations, sometimes, especially here in Atlanta, creating innovation centers. We've got to be one of the leaders now of hosting innovation centers in the country and they're big companies. AT&T has one here. For example.

07:11 MF: Right. Right. What I'm hearing, Andrew, is that creativity in business can also be very, very strategic. It is really kind of the power behind innovation. So I'm kind of thinking out loud with you here. What did you see differently about management in let's say the manufacturing environment where you were for a brief time and then management at BellSouth, both in their core business but then what was different about management in the unit that you were that was launching as the new internet service?

07:42 AD: One thing that is common across both environments and is more important now than ever is the ability to solve problems creatively. That may be different from the bigger strategic creativity and innovation that we typically think of, such as how do we position this company differently? How do we change our business model to compete? But it starts with inculcating in your people, whether they're factory workers or whether they're white collar executives at a big phone company, the ability to ask, not just how, but how else. How else could we get this done?

08:16 AD: Well, the machine's done not tore up, or we can't do that because our traditional systems won't handle such things. Well, how else could you do it? What could we do? So that's creative problem solving. Beginning to wrestle with or challenge oneself and the organization to ask, what if we did it this way or that way? What if we took this immovable obstacle and went under it or over it or around it or maybe that isn't really an obstacle? Maybe it's an opportunity. It's that kind of thinking that from a management standpoint, ultimately, I learned both engaged the teams that I led and energized me. And at first though, of course, as I said, I've learned that the hard way because that's certainly wasn't my approach. When people would say to me early in my career, "Well, it can't be done", that would get a kind of hostile rise out of me and I would push back hard. Then with time and experience, and I may still do it. But with time and experience, I've been able to ask people to play along with me and engage with them and collaborate with them in that kind of how else thinking rather than pushing back.

09:22 MF: So creativity then in terms of management, it's a different way of problem solving and also decision making then?

09:30 AD: Sure. Creativity is usually thought of as... Or innovation, as just the top of the funnel, meaning, let's come up with a lot of ideas. But innovation is applied creativity and innovation requires decision making. It means prioritizing. In today's world of course, priorities change minute by minute. So we live these days in our business world in improvisation, not in a linear, sort of static realm. So both coming up with ideas and making decisions about them is an ongoing process.

10:00 MF: Well the other word that kind of stands out in your history and your bio and in your work and frankly in the book that you wrote, *The Opening Playbook, The Guide To Building Relationships that Grow Revenue*, you do so much work in the online world and interactive media, are relationships, are personal relationships today, just as important as they were?

10:21 AD: What is that?

10:24 MF: Yes, exactly. Because we're all online now and we're doing a lot in the Fintech space with online lenders and we're funding folks that buy their debt. But so much of those relationships are online and it's not personal relationships. So has the industry and the, I call it the electronic world of creativity, has that changed the definition and meaning and value of personal relationships?

10:48 AD: Well, I hope not.

10:49 MF: Do you have to rewrite this book?

10:49 AD: I hope not. My fear, it is. But again, it's a how else question. Even if that is the case, what are the opportunities? And what I see happening is, and really almost has to happen, look, digital doesn't replace human interaction. I hope it never will. And what I see businesses doing now is focusing more than ever actually on building great customer or client experiences and using digital capabilities not to replace but to support and enhance those relationships and new technology, whether it's artificial, the Cloud, artificial intelligence, AR, VR and a whole bunch of other acronyms, which I really don't know what they mean. No, I do. But these things are coming together to not displace interpersonal live interactions but to supplement them in a way that is warmer and more personal than they've been before.

11:44 MF: Okay.

11:45 AD: So, you may go online and interact with a chat bot. And it seems like it's real. And it may even know things about you personally. And that's good and interesting, but it's not instead of. Those tools are now being implemented in conjunction with better equipped live customer care representatives online, or better equipped retail store staff, or better equipped executives who are talking to their clients where we can quickly remember with digital support, the names of the children or the names of... Whereas we might be stuck without that sort of enhancement. So, does that answer your question?

12:26 MF: Yes, I think so. So to summarize, what I'm hearing is that the e-commerce world relationships or the online technology that supports that is meant to enhance relationships, not eliminate them.

12:41 AD: Ideally, that's right. And so, LinkedIn is an example. Those who dismiss or misuse LinkedIn think that it is in some way, if I build a list of people, of connections, then I've done my relationship building, or if I've liked something somebody's written. The ideal way to use LinkedIn or any tools like that is to, again, as an enhancement, as a supplement, as a way to give yourself leverage to stay connected to more people than you could have before in a more intimate way. Ultimately, though, those relationships fade, unless there is some human interaction. I've now got about 3,000 LinkedIn contacts, and I am about to challenge myself to see if I can cut that in half.

13:26 MF: Why would you want to cut it in half?

13:27 AD: Well, because over time...

13:33 MF: It's not possible to have those personal interactions with 3,000 people?

13:37 AD: Right, and so I have people on there that I don't even know. So you may say, "Andrew, it looks like you know Greg, could you make a connection?" And I'm like, "Well, not, really. I haven't talked to Greg in 20 years." It's not that I want to end my relationship with Greg, but to have a smaller number of people that I have a higher quality of relationship with, in that online environment changes the value of LinkedIn for me. And it changes the value of my interaction with LinkedIn for those who are asking me for help.

14:05 MF: So, would you say this applies, these rules, these principles apply to the debt buying industry that we're in?

14:12 AD: Yes. Debt buying industry... Well, there are a couple of aspects to it. There's the buying, and there's the collecting. I think historically, there's been a reputation transactional rather than relational business dealings in this field. Although, without question, as I look at you and your business, you've built tremendous relationships as your team with people in the market. So it does exist, but there is a reputation you're dealing with. And that reputation certainly is translated to consumer relationships when it comes to collections. And it could be that that's just the way the market has to be because you're dealing with a tough situation, you're dealing with debt that needs to be collected and is past due, etcetera.

15:00 AD: But I would ask what would happen if there was a bit more relationship thinking applied to the industry, both on the part of an organization like yours and the debt buyers, as well as the relationship between collectors and consumers. What would that look like and could it happen? And if so, what? So again, ask how else could we do that? And it could be that, you know what? It's just the way it is. And it could be that there is an angle or an approach that could change the game. Now, what I like about what you guys are doing is really looking at continuously how to kind of upgrade the professionalism and the relational aspect of the business that you're in.

15:37 MF: Well, interestingly, what we're seeing is that technology is creating new solutions for collection companies to actually talk to the consumer with more focus because they have more information about that consumer and the debt that that consumer owes. So ironically, it's the technology that may even deepen the relationship with the consumer and add more value to create more successful transactions, more successful calls, because of the data that's being collected and how that data is shared in databases with multiple collection agencies. So, it's an interesting irony that technology may actually enhance the communication with the consumers.

16:18 AD: Absolutely. I think you're right. That was what I was trying to say earlier. One of my clients is a major technology consulting and implementation firm that's affiliated with some of the big software companies and so on. And we do a lot of writing articles and blog posts and content creation for them. I literally last night just finished an article about exactly this. What's the infrastructure for building more intelligent customer experiences? In the case of the article, the demonstration I was using was one of retail banking, but your example is even better because you've got... Your industry has a tougher situation.

16:56 AD: It is inherently more antagonistic on the surface than friendly. Although if you've dealt with some banks as much as they want to be friendly, it feels antagonistic. But that aside, personal issues aside, I think your example is a terrific one, and I really think that's what increasingly companies are looking to do. The buyers of this technology, and I can guarantee you, because they're my clients, that the sellers of these technologies are interested in enabling that

transformation through better customer experience, meaning better relationships with customers. So, I may be an optimist or Pollyanna in this, but I see the positive aspects, not the automaton distancing that could occur.

17:37 MF: Now, you mentioned content and you've got a couple companies. One is called Creative Influence, which you say is a sales enabled PR and content firm. What does that mean?

17:50 AD: First of all, let me describe content. This is a little bit different perhaps than some... It's a broader definition than typically people might think of. Content is often viewed as well, what we're doing now, we're creating content by having a discussion that will be available online, or we could write articles or white papers. That's typically what's viewed as content. A different approach to that is what is valuable to the people you're trying to build a relationship with? And that could be something written. It could be information, but it could be ideas. It could be introductions, let me introduce you to Greg, let me... Information of a different kind. You... The data that could help change the way somebody runs or one of your clients runs their business is content. So, content is in person experiences. It's all kinds of things, much more broadly defined than just a white paper that I download online. Let's go back to the traditional definition, article in a magazine or something like that that gets written.

18:51 AD: Typically, or historically, those kinds of activities are quote, "branding activities". "Boy, it's nice... Hey, we got an article in this publication. Isn't that great?" Yes. What good is that doing you? It's great for your ego and maybe it lifts recognition of the brand. But the World of Business doesn't have much patience for just branding anymore. They want to say, "Well, not just what the link is between content and branding, but what's the link between content and business development?" My background is... As much as it's been marketing, it's really been from the perspective of Sales and Business development. And that's how I started my company, Creative Growth, to focus especially on those that don't have professional sales staff and those organizations that, typically business or professional services firms that have experts, and they don't want to sell, and they don't even want to market, but they have to.

19:44 AD: So how do we help them? That's how I started Creative Growth. I joined forces with a colleague, Natalie Springfield, who has a PR firm called INfluencePR. She was dealing with a similar audience. And we decided that she had chocolate and I had peanut butter, and we should put them together and make a Reese's cup. We took Creative Growth and INfluencePR, and came up with Creative Influence, which is using content, using ways to add value to our client's customers. And building that from the beginning, so that it links to more conversations; conversations that drive business. The book I wrote, *Opening is...* *The Opening Playbook* is really sort of at the core of that idea of sales enablement. What we're trying to do is not just lift the brand but create more of the right conversations with more of the right people in the right way with the right context, more often.

20:35 MF: Right. So this ties to the six Cs that you talk about a lot, the connections, curiosity, conversations, creativity, context, and consequences. That's a lot to remember, but...

20:45 AD: It is. In that song "The ABC", I never got past the C.

20:50 AD: And don't make me sing it now because that wouldn't... Yes. First of all, back to the idea of relationships, it all starts and ends with who we know, and how well we know them, and what kind of willingness and ability we have to help each other. And the more of those kinds of

relationships, high willingness, and high ability to help that we have in our inventory, the better. The conversations... Well, relationships are built, we could say one conversation at a time. Great conversations start with curiosity, genuine curiosity. What do you... What's interesting about you to me that I want to ask you about, right? And content is another one; that may be seven Cs, I don't know. Sale of seven Cs. There you go. See I'm a marketing guy, so we have to have things that...

21:34 MF: Oh, boy.

21:36 AD: Never mind. I won't go on.

21:38 MF: Okay. A lot of our listeners are entrepreneurs, and we've talked a lot about strategic concepts and the importance of creativity and innovation. But let's get down to some brass tacks, Andrew, and you work for some big companies, but then you started your own companies. With your own companies, did you ever have a moment where you felt like you were failing, and that your company wasn't going to succeed, and that you were a failure yourself? Were there any life changing moments throughout your journey, or was it pretty smooth sailing all along?

22:10 AD: Well, it's... Michael, to answer that question accurately, it's a matter of degree. I may have that feeling every day, but to different degrees. And so, to some degree, that level of fear is a motivator. Sometimes it can reach a pinnacle and be a stopping point or a point of revelation and direction change. For me, it happened... Well, it's happened a couple of times, but the one that probably is most notable was, after leaving BellSouth, I helped to start a venture capital fund. I was the junior partner to a mentor of mine.

22:44 MF: Is that Mellon Ventures?

22:44 AD: Well, it became a part of Mellon Ventures. Yes. We used their money, their people, and their office space. This was Net Worth Ventures, but we were essentially their technology and new media investing arm. I ended up going in and joining one of the operating companies, one of our portfolio companies, as the CEO. It would have been a huge success now. It was probably an early social media company, but this was way before its time in 2000. We had a great technology in search of a marketplace, and that does not make a business necessarily. So as the bubble started to burst, our runway shortened. We ended up selling the business, and it was a reasonable exit, I can't retire. And it may even have been somewhat of a sideways deal, but our investors got money back, and almost all the employees were placed with a new company, and they had a great experience.

23:38 AD: For me, it was a failure. And I took it very hard and very personally. And it led me to look back again and say, "What am I doing here?" I mentioned earlier, my manufacturing industry experience where a business is just a business, not for me. Again, I had gone off track. My skill sets are relationship management, marketing, creativity, and innovation, writing, things like that. But I had gone off course and gone into the realm of technology and finance. I'm neither a technologist nor a financier.

24:14 AD: I can appreciate technology and understand its implications. And I can describe it and stuff, but don't ask me what's under the hood, and I'm certainly not a financier. So, I moved out of my comfort zone significantly. And that's when I turned back to what I think I do best. And what ultimately led me to Creative Growth and Creative Influence.

24:35 MF: So the lesson learned was stay in your comfort zone, is that it? Because that kind of conflicts with your notion of creativity and engineering.

24:46 AD: Comfort zones, I would describe it differently because I certainly place myself constantly outside of my comfort zone. But the tools I used to move through the discomfort zone are the skills first that I'm best at. Was it Marcus Buckingham who had that... What was the name of his book? First use your strengths or something like that. And that's really what I've tried to do, rather than shore up my weakness, is really play on and bring to the world some value through what I do the best. And using those tools, those are the best for me to solve problems. So when I get stuck, when I get out of my comfort zone, my first order of business is, what do I have? What assets do I have that I'm best at and enjoy that might allow me to reinvent this situation?

25:31 MF: Do you apply these same lessons then to some of your consulting with big firms and smaller firms? And what are some of the other common denominators you see with entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs in terms of success or failure?

25:44 AD: Michael, the starting point is, I think maybe even how we started the conversation earlier, the idea of creativity and innovation as a strategic step first. I start almost every engagement by asking, what is this client famous for? What do they want to be famous for? What's their positioning? To use a marketing buzzword. Meaning, what do they do well? What do they enjoy doing well? And who cares? Not that like, "Who cares, nobody cares." But, who cares most? Which clients are going to be most receptive to those strengths, and how do we help that client get in front of more of those people? That theme is consistent no matter what.

26:21 AD: It's essentially strategy before tactics. Sun Tzu wrote *The Art of War*. He said, "Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." There was Steven Ross, who was an executive, who owned parking lots in New York in the 1970s, and then he ended up buying Time Warner. My father was fascinated by him, as my father worked in New York in the media business and cut out an article for me. It was about Steve Ross, and his path to success. And Steve Ross said 10% thinking, 90% doing. Strategy before tactics doesn't mean you over think, but you have got to put a little time in, aiming before firing. That's stuck with me.

27:00 MF: Yes. I'm a believer of that, too. Andrew, as we wrap it up here, what's next for you and Creative Influence and Creative Growth? And do you have any more books that you're working on?

27:09 AD: Yes, I do. I've found a lot of joy and success with clients in helping them create content that build conversations, meaning content that builds relationships, and those relationships ultimately drive business. We do that in all kinds of different ways from a strategic level to a very hands-on tactical level. I don't want to stop doing that anytime soon, I really like that. Personally, I've tried to blend personal interests with business interests, especially in professional services, but I think this is true anywhere. It's harder and harder to separate the two, or it's a false duality to separate work from life. The more you can integrate those two things, the better.

27:47 AD: And that is, in some ways, a creative life when you can do that. For me, and again, it's why I'm spending more time doing content creation because that's what I like to do in my spare time. My wife says, "Why you're writing the book, how are you going to make money off of that?" I'm like, "Honey, you know, some people go play golf, this is the crazy stuff I do. What can I tell you?" In addition to writing a book about business, my first book was... *The Last Folk Hero* was a

book about creativity actually. It's a book about outsider folk artists who create, despite incredibly difficult circumstances. Why? Because they have this innate urge and they let it out.

28:20 AD: The book I'm working on is similarly themed. It's about living a creative life. It's about balancing doing and thinking, getting quiet, and letting things come to you, and conversely getting active and driving towards things. So, what's the balance? Early in my career, I spent more time acting and grasping and reaching for things without enough quiet time and allowing things to step forward. I still haven't perfected the balance, but I'm better at it. So life is better.

28:50 MF: But you're bringing creativity to life essentially?

28:53 AD: Right. And that's where I think I can add value in that. That's what the next book is about.

28:57 MF: Right. You're doing that for you personally and for your clients. It's a wonderful story.

29:01 AD: Yes. Again, I'm really doing it for me personally. But what I've found is that by indulging or expressing those personal interests, it allowed me to build great business relationships, because people say, "Really? That's weird. Wait, tell me more about that? Wait a minute, you're not just a marketing geek who is out to sell stuff? No, I'm actually human being." Right. [chuckle] Well, don't ask my wife about that.

29:24 MF: Well, Andrew, thank you so much for sharing this wonderful creative snapshot of how you built your career, your advice about sales-enabled relationship marketing, PR content. And thanks, too, for your stories about yourself and your clients, and we look forward to your next book and your next entrepreneurial adventure. Thanks again.

29:44 AD: Yes. Thanks for having me, Michael.

29:44 Closing: Thank you for joining Michael Flock and his guests on the Capital Club Radio show. For more information on future interviews, please visit us at FlockFinance.com. This program is brought to you by FLOCK Specialty Finance, where clients are provided knowledge and insights to help them grow their business in complex and risky market. FLOCK is more than a transaction.