

Matt: Welcome to Cooler than Me, a First Ascent Design Series, showcasing the people that are, without a doubt, cooler than we are. We are so lucky to work with and surround ourselves with amazing members of the local community that are trying to make the world better in their own way. We're hoping to bring their stories to you, so let's jump in. Hey everyone, our next guest on the Cooler than Me series is Zach Phillips from Short Order Production House. Short order is a dedicated team of filmmakers who specialize in translating their client's objectives into stories worth sitting down for and watching. They have a huge amount of pre, post and production stage capabilities that allow them to create such great content. This interview is actually conducted in a Short Order studio with Zach's help. We hope you enjoy listening to Zack's interview as much as we enjoyed recording it. And don't forget to check out the Instagram Hashtag cooler than me to listen to more episodes.

John: What is something that most people don't know about you?

Zach: Mm. So you wouldn't know it by looking at me. But, um, my favorite thing to do probably is to play basketball.

John: Really?

Zach: It's probably my favorite thing to do. It doesn't mean that I get to do it ever, but, um, we have studios now and so I'm actually really excited because there are 20 foot ceilings, which is high enough to put a full size basketball hoop in. Um, the team is very scared about, um, breaking equipment with a basketball, but we think we can, it's sort of a dream to have an indoor basketball court at work. So we're going to be setting that up soon.

John: Absolutely. How is the new building treating you?

Zach: Um, it's, I mean, it's a dream. It's amazing. I mean, it looks pretty crappy inside. Um, but we're about to change all that. Um, in terms of functionality, it's incredibly functional. Two full-size studios that are completely sound isolated. Plus, you know, 10,000 square feet of office space and edit suites and it's a fantastic, it's a, it's been a transformative thing for us.

John: Yeah. That's one of those interesting tidbits about Wilmington is that you're able to sneak in and find a space that's almost exactly set up the way you need it. So what was the story about the building before you moved in?

Zach: So it was the, it was the WHY? TV station in Delaware. And they were, you know, they were running a couple shows out of there, but they were downsizing their you know, most of their production at this point is out in the field in Delaware. So they, they didn't need the big studios and the big overhead anymore. So they were getting out. And, um, lucky for us, you know, they, they found us and reached out to us about it.

John: Fantastic. So when we met, it was about four or five years ago at the Coin Loft down on market across across [inaudible] had that little area and I knew you as the kitchen company,

kitchen.co uh, and start-- talk to me about growing that shop, that video shop. What did you guys do? And I believe you grew from yourself to a, a decent crew before changing over to Short Order Production House.

Zach: Yeah. So we're, um, we're 15 people now. Um, to give you a little bit of the background, um, I started off, uh, living in the residences at Rodney Square. Uh, my wife was a clerk in bankruptcy court. Um, and so that's why I moved here and I was a developer, like yourself and designer, like your wife at the time. And, um, and that was how I made my money and I could do that with a laptop. But what it didn't require me to do, um, was change out of my bathrobe at any point during the day. So I would be, uh, basically just in our apartment in Rodney Square, working on client websites all day and into the night and never kind of seeing other humans. So my friend told me about this place called the coin loft, which was two blocks away at ninth and ninth, and Tatnall and I went over there. And, um, you know, it was a reasonable price to get a desk and it was just like, yes, I need this now. And I, and I joined and um, the rest is history. Um, the, uh, met some really great people over there including, uh, first first employee, uh, who was a Greg Toronto who's now in, in Brooklyn. Um, and I met Brad Wasson who became kind of the, the patron saint of my company because he, when he grew out of the Coin Loft, he got a space down on market street. And then when, uh, he then subsequently sold his agency and had this lease and it was like a space ready, exactly what I needed to move into. And so at that point, moved in there maybe were three or four people. Jason Present joined the team. Um, and then Katrina High, Steve. Uh, uh, I don't know if you know Steve High, but Katrina, uh, joined the team for awhile and uh, we were there on, in Loma until it flooded. And then when the space flooded, uh, we went looking for new space and ended up in the Wilmington train station, which we're in right now talking right now. I still have an office here. It's my favorite place. Uh, it's my happy place. I would like to work here for the rest of my life. Um, but we also have studios now and we needed a lot more space than the train station could provide us. Um, and a lot more quiet than the train station could provide us. So, um, I have just this little tiny office left in the train station that, um, I use for quiet analog work, uh, which is where I get the highest value out of myself. So I try to set aside mornings for that and I go over to the studios and have a deluge of meetings, nonstop meeting, meeting, meeting until the end of the day. So that, that, that's where I'm at right now. Sorry for the long winded explanation, but you did ask a long, it was a long winded question.

John: I liked when we came in here and started setting up, you mentioned that there was no Wifi here, that you do keep this as your analog workspace and, and that's been super helpful to you?

Zach: Yeah. So I, the, the funny thing is I was never an analog person since I was seven because my mom had a Mac 512. And so I've been on computers. I didn't write by hand anything. Um, but in, in recent years, um, I, I just noticed just how distracted and how, how difficult it was for me to do the hard work, like the, the, the focused work that I need to do, um, which is the stuff that I'm best at, but I just was never finding the time to do it. And so days would pass, weeks would pass where I'm like, I feel like I didn't get anything done this week. I was working constantly, but I don't feel like anything important was accomplished. And so...

John: I think that'll resonate with quite a few people.

Zach: Yeah. So, so I, I actually moved to, to analog. And now here's, here's the thing, if you put yourself in a room with a sheet of paper or typewriter, if you're, if you're so inclined, but if you put yourself in a room with a sheet of paper and nothing else, meaning nothing else, meaning you don't have a phone with you, you don't have access to your email, you don't have access to your email. Okay.

John: No self-discipline required

Zach: Um, no. If you have none of that, well I'm going to get back to self discipline. But, and you're like, I've got this hard problem and this sheet of paper. By the time that sheet of paper is full of marks, you'll probably have solved the problem. And that's what I've noticed since I, since I started doing this maybe six months ago, productivity, 10X'd and in less time because, because I have that boundary there. And, and you talked about self-discipline. I just want to, I just want to say that I think, um, if someone was trying to diet, uh, and someone was trying to lose weight and they had a pocket full of jelly beans at all times, um, and they happen to like eat those jelly beans occasionally you wouldn't say that they had no self-discipline. You would say get the jelly beans out of your pocket. Cause that's a dumb thing to do to carry around jelly beans. So if you're somebody who has difficult, important work to do and your email, which is a quick way to like reply to something and feel like you've been productive is always right at arm's length. And not only at arms length for many of us, it's actually buzzing you when it happens, which I canceled years ago, but it still, it doesn't work even to have it in the same room. But having that with you in your pocket literally is not, that's not a self-discipline. This is a dumb way to live. Like I, I'm at this point, I'm just 100% to be reachable at all times, you're, you're giving up the ability to do anything that requires deep thought. So that's that. That's, that's the way that, uh, that I've been trying to...

John: The analog room sounds great to me. That's something we should try out. We recently started saying that I'll only check email twice a day and it's in the signature for all of our emails now. And if you need something urgently, give us a call. The business number rings multiple people. So if you give a call, someone's probably going to pick up. And we found that we were initially scared that clients would hate it. You know that you're not available, that I only check email twice a day, but if there's actually an issue they call, we resolve it as fantastic for those that, and then they have the expectation that if it's not that emergency issue, then you know, we were up front that we only check it twice a day. So knock on wood so far...

Zach: You did that as a whole team?. Yeah, that's really good. That's really good. And I tried, I tried to check email twice a day. So like I do the morning, I do, I try to have the morning open for blocks of, you know, hard work or I should say deep work. And then as soon as that block is over, I check my email. Once I kinda catch up on everything, get everything zeroed out, and then I'm in meetings all day. And then at the very end of the day, I do it one more time. But I do

not look at email until I'm done with an important thing for the day that, oh, not that done. I'm sorry that's wrong until I have worked on an important thing. Yeah.

John: That's the self-discipline part in my mind. But so many agencies that we, we get to know people and I consider the video work that you do to be somewhat of an agency model. You're in that, that bucket. They tend to have a big break story in the beginning. A big client that took a risk on you or something like that. Do you have a big break story?

Zach: We've had a lot of big breaks. Um, I mean, even getting this space was a huge break. Um, uh, Delaware's been incredibly good to us. Um, I mean look, I consider anybody who gave us a chance early on, uh, that was a big, that was a big break. And the people, I'm, I'm, you know, I'm most grateful to at this point, you know, our, uh, that early network of people from the Coin Loft and, you know, they referred me places, uh, joining. Um, when I came to Delaware, one of the first things I decided to do was, um, to make some contacts, was to volunteer, uh, somewhere to give something away to a nonprofit. That was cool. So I asked my friend, what's The coolest nonprofit in town? And, um, he said the challenge program was the coolest nonprofit in town.

John: That's a great program

Zach: And I don't know that it's actually the coolest, but it's pretty, pretty cool. And so I went over there and, um, I said, oh, actually I called, I just cold called and I said, hey, I'm new in town. I can do websites, I can do videos, sort of. I don't really have the equipment right now, but, um, do you guys need anything? And, uh, the woman who answered the phone since became a friend of my mine and my wife's was Lisa Van Dyke who was working at the challenge program and she said, actually, we're redoing the website right now. Can you come over like right now? So I ended up meeting the challenge program and the, the people who were helping them with that website was house industries. And so all of a sudden I'm working with Rich Roat from House Industries. Yeah. And, uh, and so it was like first, you know, first chance to reach out and work on something and I'm working with the actual coolest people in the state. And so that was great. Um, uh, it was just a small thing and it was, you know, a free thing. But since then, I've joined the board of challenge program. Um, my company has done a number of videos for challenge program. Um, so that was a big break. Uh, obviously we've gotten some big clients in town. I don't necessarily want to talk about them in too much detail, but uh, plenty of breaks. It's been all breaks, John, every, every, every step of the way

John: That that's how we feel most days also. Yeah. Good. So one of the reasons why we want to do this podcast and get people to get to know each other as we have the pleasure of working with so many awesome, cool people that are across the state and out-of-state lines too, of course, but in the community that don't necessarily know each other. So a question we like to pose is what help do you need? What are you looking for? If there's someone who is listening to this or someone we run into, what can help Zach Phillips?

Zach: Well, this may already be answered that we may already have a solution to this, but I can talk about it. Our business card is a 35 millimeter slide. Okay. And they're, they're very laborious to manufacture and we've done them by hand a couple of times and we made a video about making them by hand because it was because everybody loved it so much. Meaning they didn't love it so much. Um, uh, we were looking for a printer who can help us do it. We've got a couple, we've got a couple of leads on that. So that's probably not a good, not a good one. But seriously, like if you know, go get a manufacturer or printer, who wants to take on a challenge, here's a challenge. Um, make 35 millimeter slides that don't cost \$1 million each. Okay. Um, and that are well-constructed and look nice and tasteful and feel good because, so for a business card it's like, oh, who cares the business card, except in our case as a creative house, you know, that's a chance. Like our card people love our card and the first time you hand it to somebody it tells them so much about you. First of all, it's related. It's 35 millimeter film, but it immediately lets them know, oh, like these people are clever, which is all we really have to sell at the end of the day is that we're, we have better ideas than, than most. We have better ideas than you, right? Like, we have better ideas than the client. And so when they see that, they're like, okay, these guys have good ideas, we should hire them. So, uh, what else do I need help with? Help? Uh, you know, um, let's, we're trying to move, um, all of our customers. I mean, our whole thing is about making things that are actually worth watching. So everybody who is thinking about everybody who runs a business or a nonprofit, um, rather than just thinking about a narrow need for some type of video that you need for one narrow purpose, we're trying to move everybody into thinking about what could I actually put into the world that the world and in this case, the world of my target audience would like, not what do I need to do to get my audience to give me something, think about what could I do for my audience to build my audience, to establish my, uh, authority and credibility in, in what I do. What could I do that would actually be worth a lot of people's time to watch? And, um, we can absolutely help you think through that. But, um, but that's where the, we think the industry needs to go in order to actually provide the value that it, that it, that it's supposed to and in, in, in, in many cases as you know, also in your field, you know, people are spending a lot of money on things that may not be helping them.

John: Absolutely.

Zach: And so we want to, we want to actually be moving the thing toward, you know, let's make stuff that, that works.

John: And it's good to have that as a stated goal for the company to be that trusted advisor because there's certainly opportunities to ask clients to spend money in places that might not work the best for them, but they might want it. They might think that that's the right idea, but to be able to say, hey, this is where we think the right way to go is even if it's something that might be a smaller billable in the end. I think that's a very valuable relationship to have with the people that you work with.

Zach: Absolutely.

John: Fantastic. So what's, what's next? What's a couple year vision? I know you're still decking out the new studio, a 15 person team now, but what's the next two, five years look like for Short Order?

Zach: Uh, the next two, five years? I mean, we've been around years a little more. So man, that seems like a long time. It feels like it's been about 35 years. Um, but uh, in the next five years, in the next two years, um, you should see a, you should actually see some original stuff coming from us. Um, uh, just stuff from us that we're going to try to monetize in different ways than our current model. So we're trying to, you know, the whole vision for Short Order from the beginning was, you know, we want to provide, we want to make stuff worth watching for clients and, but ultimately we just want to make great stuff that's worth watching and if there are ways to do that and then have it sponsored or ways to do that and actually sell it, um, we're open to all of the above. But, um, soon you will start to see some original stuff from us on the small scale and then hopefully following soon after that stuff on a bigger, bigger scale.

John: Excellent. Even the small things, I know you dipped your toe in a podcast about the city, you know, a year or so ago. Maybe if it's been that long. Uh, and even those little things are just fantastic to, to listen to and get engaged in because you're so good at what you do that when you get to do it for yourself or for something that's more for fun. It really shows.

Zach: Thank you. Yeah, no, I'm, I, uh, I do hope to, um, and that was, you know, the controversial podcast that we made, but it's actually in terms of a piece of artwork, um, and again, it was for a client, so it still wasn't really like original, but, um, it's, it's probably the thing I'm most proud of even though it's controversial and some people didn't like what it was called, which I get it. But, um, I'm really proud of that thing. I mean as proud as I get of things, which is not very proud. I'm a, I'm, I, I generally don't, the way I look at it, um, the vast majority of jobs we've done, the client's been very happy and I have been not happy.

John: A creative curse, maybe?

Zach: I just, it's not good enough, we're going to make it better where, well, and we're working on that. We're actually, I feel better right now about everything than I have since the beginning of the company in terms of we're making huge progress in several areas as, as you know, as your company has grown, um, it's a totally different job to run a company of this size versus that. And you have to think completely differently about processes and people and this is all stuff that I didn't, I, I totally signed up for it, but I didn't know I was signing up for when I started the company. I didn't think once that I would someday have to do a performance review of someone. Like that's not a thing that was...

John: On your wish list.

Zach: No, exactly. Or, or even frankly, and this is a little embarrassing, but like the business-y part, like, like figuring out how a business runs and, um, MBA stuff, but, had to learn on the fly just like everything else that I've done. So we're, we're, we're making huge progress and we have really good people. Um, we've made some really good hires recently.

John: So that ties into the, the last thing I wanted to ask you was, is this the job that you imagined yourself doing when you started, you know, five or six years ago?

Zach: Of course not. But I do think that, um, uh, well it hasn't been from the beginning. Um, but the funny thing is I think I'm starting to move toward that job. That was the, the ultimate goal. Um, and, uh, and, and, and I do see there's light at the end of the tunnel. Not that I'm in a tunnel that I don't like. I'm actually enjoying what I'm doing right now. But there's the, the, the vision of the company of being able to make great stuff that we are proud of. Like, we're moving toward that. And I think, um, I think, sooner than later, um, I'll be really in a position where I'm doing the stuff that, um, and not just the stuff that I want to do, but the stuff that I think I can contribute. Like, like I, I'm doing my, my best work that's coming, that's going to happen. That, that's my feeling right now.

John: Good. Well, thank you very much. Not just for setting up the time for letting me borrow this amazing space and the amazing equipment. This is going to be the best sounding of a first few of our podcasts coming out. So thank you very much for all that. And, uh, once again, guys, it's Zach Phillips from Short Order Production Company. Reach out if, uh, if anything on the list of things that could help is something that you could help with or if you just want to learn more about him, he's a wonderful guy that's always willing to talk. So thank you very much.

Zach: Thank you, John.