

IntegratePro Show: Robin Heppell



Here are the episode's highlights:

- 00:00:08 - Introduction of Robin Heppell from Funeral Results Marketing
- 00:01:23 - Talk about the business and how it works
- 00:02:18 - The humble beginnings of the business
- 00:03:54 - How easy WordPress is
- 00:05:23 - Talking to business leaders
- 00:07:30 - Talk about WordPress management
- 00:09:37 - Gravity Forms and data gathering
- 00:11:25 - Customizations for needed features
- 00:13:13 - Rob's target client and the business market
- 00:15:58 - Data gathering suggestion
- 00:18:58 - Services offered

DAVE: This is Dave Wooding from the integratepro show and I've got Rob Heppell. He's from Canada and he runs funeral results marketing. Rob how are you doing?

ROB: Great Dave. How are you doing?

DAVE: Good! Enjoying winter time down here we're finally getting some snow. So I'm looking outside I see the FedEx guy delivering packages. It's snowing and it's white and I can hear the Dog (both laughs). I imagine you're probably getting the same type of weather now?

ROB: Well, just, you know, we're, we live on the West Coast and I live in Victoria B.C (British Columbia). So this is the first time in three years that we've had snow and we only got a dusting. So right now I can still see the grass. Little bit of ice on the grass but I think, I think our first storm is coming tomorrow night. So, although, stay off the roads in Victoria because it gets, it gets freezing.

DAVE: So it's kind of like rookie night when you get a bunch of snow on the road.

ROB: Yeah. Well and to, just in the Pacific Northwest it, it's damp right so the the snow turns to ice pretty quick it's not that nice kind of dry crunchy snow that you get. And you actually get a little traction on.

DAVE: Right.

ROB: So it can be, it can be a little crazy.

DAVE: OK. So Rob you know the reason I think would be great for you to kind of explain what you do. Mainly, I think so people can see what you're doing, you know, in your business that you run, and how it ties to the online world because just based on the name, you know funeral. I don't think of that as online but what are, what exactly are you doing?

ROB: Sure. Well I have a marketing agency and we provide funeral homes through North America with, mainly, with website development and Google Adwords. We also, well, look after SEO, social media marketing. But the main focus is web development and then coupled with Google Adwords management and since, well, like 2005, I kind of branched out on my own working as a funeral director, started my own consultancy called Funeral Futurist, and to kind of get my name up there.

ROB: I got a WordPress blog and started with, you know, all the social media and really push the limits on some things to the point where when Facebook was starting, I was really pushing it. And you know my, my buddies who I play hockey with, I get into the dressing room like, "dude you know on Facebook you got to laid off all the funeral stuff man". So anyway over time I've really kind of, you know, I found the the right mix of, you know, sort of the social side with a slight promotion here and there, but not to, not as crazy as it was.

ROB: And what I found as I was doing the consulting was the, a lot of, a lot of funeral home owners didn't, you know, paying for consulting services was tough and yet, you know, great proposals and stuff and I had a look.

ROB: Some were quite a bit of background with websites that we created a website for the funeral home I was working for in 1996 and was kind of self-taught on like the old SEO and like the, even pre-Google like AltaVista and that stuff.

ROB: And then when I, when I went off on my own with Funeral Futurist built on WordPress, you know, I was noticing how easy it was compared to all these other funeral home websites that I had experience with and I thought you know this platform would be great for a funeral home because one unique thing Dave about funeral home website is they get, like crazy amounts of traffic, because people go there to read the obituaries and leave condolences. And so, you know, I've got clients that have, you know, and these are small businesses.

ROB: And they get, five hundred thousand, a million visitors per year.

DAVE: Wow.

ROB: So, it's just, it's crazy. And so, you know, we've seen some of the, you know, breaking things at the seams just because of, like, having sitemaps, like sitemap plug-ins, start to like you know rerun and they're trying to index twenty thousand pages and it's just, you know, it freezes up the whole server. So yeah lots of nightmare stories of all of that. But, so basically, what we do, what we did, and this was right about the time that folks were taking WordPress and kind of using it more as this Content Management System. So you're starting to see more sites that look more like websites than just like a blog roll. And at that time too, I was, you know, in communications with some of the leaders at that time, like Cory Miller from iThemes, and he was working, kind of, with Brian Gardner. And at that time Brian had his company which became StudioPress and then, you know, Genesis. And, you know, now he's with Copyblogger, and I think, Rainmaker Digital, they call it now, but, Yeah. You know, it used to be where I could, you know, I could actually talk to these guys on the phone, right? And they look, they really liked it, because, they, like, I said "hey", like, "I want to you like editing the menu and changing like instead of just having these obituaries under like, blog, you know, I wanted to call them, you know, different things, and I wanted it to say, you know, send condolence instead of leave a comment and little things like that. So they really helped me with that. And so it was kind of like custom post types before, that was even before custom post types. So, you know, then over time the whole CMS. And you know things like you know StudioPress and we still use Genesis on all of our, all of our websites.

ROB: And so that's really helped out from the, from the CMS model and our clients love it because they can, you know, there's some things that they can easily update and then we, you know, we do have some, some customized customization in there and, you know, we host all of our client sites on WPENGINE just because of the, you know, we need high performance and, you know, people that we can talk to when, you know, because again these, these sites are busy and they're busy 24 hours a day. Not constant, but, you know, people are, you know, reading obituaries and leaving condolences throughout the, you know, throughout the day and even into the evening and so.

DAVE: Wow.

ROB: Yeah so it's been a pretty neat journey.

DAVE: So, you've seen a lot of history. Let's call it WordPress history for now, where they, you know, it worked but they didn't have really all the functionality you needed but you tweaked it and you made it fit to your needs. Would you agree that WordPress has evolved and become easier to use or is it kind of stayed stagnant. I'm going to say it's not going backwards but is it still suiting your needs. And is it easier to use than it was before?

ROB: Oh yeah. Like before. You know, like the whole menu thing you'd have to create a tree, like a page tree, to kind of set your menu. Now you have this, you know, so I, and I forget the company that kind of had a menu plug-in and then it was absorbed by or by automatic or WordPress. And so those things just have made life so much easier because, you know, that was difficult. There's also times where you know it would break often and. And that was you know because I think the plug-ins weren't as sophisticated. So, you know, the, you know, the typical thing you do is go into your FTP account, move all of your plug-ins into like create a new directory, drag them over until like...

DAVE: A temporary directory, yeah.

ROB: We used to call it the infirmary (both laughs) and then slowly drag one back, one after you use the site when you come back up again.

DAVE: Oh gosh.

ROB: Oh yeah. So, yeah, and then, yeah I think, you know, I think they're continually making it better. Now, where, you know, where we see our opportunities is more with where some of them are core plug-ins that we use just keep getting better and better. And I, you know, I love it. I can wake up in the morning, my team doesn't have to develop new code. That's being done all the time. We just kind of connect the dots and say, "hey can't, how can this stuff apply to, you know, to clientèle?"

DAVE: Right.

ROB: So we're, you know, now we're heavy users of Gravity Forms, like we've, some of the stuff that we can do with gravity forms is amazing.

DAVE: Right.

ROB: And in, so we have one type of site that we create is a, for people who, you know, maybe they just want a simple cremation, and, so someone can go online, go to one of our websites, pick the types of, you know, the different nuances for that. And these are like limited services that a funeral would provide, they're basic services. And then we take them through a process of making their selections kind of in a multi-step process. And instead of like just the basic e-commerce like shopping cart, we've, we take Gravity forms and I, like, my guys do this. I don't know how to do this. We merge gravity forms and WooCommerce together. And so as they go through they're kind

of adding to their cart and then they end up at the checkout page. And then we take them through the, after that, then they fill out kind of the statistical information that we would need for death certificates. And what my clients think it's great like, hey, you know, they, all of a sudden, you know, their e-mail goes off, there's an e-mail from Pay-Pal you just received two thousand dollars.

DAVE: Right!

ROB: Everything's done now they just have to kind of oversee make sure that all the information is correct and they've got the appropriate forms signed. But yeah, the power of those two systems for our application is just amazing.

DAVE: So you're taking something that's now off the shelf and tweaking it to get the results where previously, you'd probably have to bill almost all of that or most of it custom, right?

ROB: Yeah, exactly, or it would look really clunky. You know, it would kind of look like a shopping cart but you're kind of trying to explain to people, you know, maybe in a description of another product with a square image.

DAVE: Got it.

ROB: You know, how to take the next step, right? So. And now it's, yeah, it just looks like it kind of follows the, how they would be doing that if they were talking to the funeral director at the funeral home.

DAVE: Oh, cool. So it's basically prompting with questions and getting some kind of conditional logic if they answer one way or the other it sends them down maybe a different path.

ROB: Exactly. People choose if they want, you know, if they want cremation or burial or if this is for if the death has occurred or is this preplanning like for the future. And then even little things like we're tweaking at now where, you know, what are you going to do with the cremated remains or are you going to like bury them or keep them or scattering them when, in whatever one they choose then they choose that, then the next page will show kind of specific appropriate urns. So scattering there are going to be like a scattering tube or other scattering receptacles or if it was for a permanent burial then they would see, they wouldn't see those, they would see other ones, so yeah, it's great to, you know, where it can go and we can and we still haven't pushed it to its limits yet, we're using all of that it can do for us.

DAVE: Interesting. So Rob, I'm kind of curious about your market, the funeral market. And I say this respectfully. You know, to me it's not necessarily a repeat business but do your clients use any type of like e-mail marketing? Do they have a list of, I guess, this is horrible, clients so to speak? You know what I mean?

ROB: Yeah. And you're right it, they are. It is very kind of sensitive how we kind of dance around that because you could you know, and just imagine, they're getting thousands and thousands of people coming to their websites all the time, so that you could be, you know, hammering them with remarketing you could be, you know, offering to do, you know, different offers which is not appropriate because, the bulk of the traffic, the obituary traffic, is not business traffic, right? They're not looking to do business with funeral home, they're just looking to find out when their friends service is. So yeah. So we need to kind of be careful with that. The other thing that we're currently working on and we're looking to integrate through WordPress itself and probably, maybe, using gravity forms or through, like, ActiveCampaign, is giving people like, so, they can have up to you know 20 or 40 or even 100 condolences per obituary and your, and so the funeral homes actually receiving the name and the e-mail address from these people and, you know, as of right now, they don't have permission to use it.

DAVE: Right.

ROB: But you know we're going to we want to integrate something where they can maybe check a box off and say hey sign up for, you know, if you want to sign up for the funeral homes newsletter. You know check the box off and then that will actually, we could pull that information into a, into ActiveCampaign and slowly build that because they're, they've been really slow to adopt online marketing.

ROB: And then now that they see especially like big Facebook's, like, oh we're going to be on Facebook and, as you know, with what James Schramko has talked to us about the, Own The Racecourse, you know, I'm letting you know, hey don't, you know, sure, be up there, be there, build your network, but, what you want to do is, let's try to get people back onto you know saving their information and then using that information legitimately and ethically to nurture that communication.

DAVE: Interesting. I just came to me and I don't know if this is something you know for a funeral home director. I can think of a real legit reason to maybe get somebody's e-mail address is then just to educate them on about "indiv" (individual) life subjects, you know, how to prepare well or if you've got a parent that's sick and, you know, to me that seems like that would be a really useful reason to sign up for funeral homes newsletter to get that kind of information, because...

ROB: Absolutely!

DAVE: We have parents and they're all going to die and so are we. But you know there's a lot of questions, I didn't go to school and learn, what I have to do with my parents as they get older and older, you know, that kind of stuff gets passed down or you figure out as you go along. But man it would be nice to have something that educates me on you know what's involved. So I can see that being useful.

ROB: It is. And we, so, we do when we're setting up like a newsletter campaign and they're looking for. What kind of content or what kind of content should they be sharing in social media. And that's exactly right, Dave. Things that can be, you know, we try to, you know, kind of the target range would be. And because it is somewhat predictable, you know, almost like pre-retirement to retirement, your retirement years, and then, you know, once they're, Once the individual is like looking towards like a nursing home or hospice, you know, now it's almost too late for that, you know, to kind of foster that.

DAVE: Sure.

ROB: Because we're not going to say if you're going into hospice your next steps of the funeral were you know obviously...

DAVE: Right.

ROB: We're not going to work like that, but then we then focus it on the children or the people who would be looking after those people so, you know, we've shared like that is a great topic the, how to have a conversation with your parents before putting them into a nursing home, like we, is, you know, is a good way to build goodwill and you're building that connection and that rapport with people who are going to need your services in, you know, couple of years or five years or whenever. So yeah, that's, and the thing is, it just, you can kind of share that stuff almost on an annual basis. Like I find similar content and, you know, make sure that it's fresh but that can be done kind of over and over again.

DAVE: So Rob, so are those the type of service you offer or does that include, I know you mentioned you doing web development, pay per click and do you do stuff like the email management, content? Do you provide that also? Or is it everything inclusive with funerals?

ROB: Yeah it will. We would, we strictly deal with funeral homes and funeral related companies but mainly funeral homes, you know, I ventured into other local businesses because you know when learning about marketing these local businesses you know use, "oh I know that you know that could work for a restaurant or that could work for a storage facility", but you know what, I really lose my competitive advantage when I add a step, like, sure there's lots of opportunity...

DAVE: Yup.

ROB: But, there's, I could go way deeper in my small niche. But, yeah, we were expanding too. Right? So it, and it's just funny how it's like even in this past year, things have flipped from trying to convince them that they should look at SEO or they should look at Adwords or look at social media management not just like, you know, building likes and stuff like that. And now, they're kind of like, hey, you know, we've been spending \$800 a month with this company and we're not doing them like, woah, we could, you know, sure, we could do lots of things for you, for that, and actually get your return. And that's why we've actually changed the name from Funeral Futurists, which was

my consultancy helping people kind of see the future of funeral service, to Funeral Results Marketing, I think it kind of says what it is, we're going to get, if you're in the funeral industry, we're going to get the results through your marketing.

ROB: So we're, you know, we're, we want to be a, you know, digital marketing agency that looks after their, you know, for them to build their list and their platform which is their website and then different things that they can add-on as needed for their social media, for their SEO, for their pay per click, or, you know, even Facebook Ads and...

DAVE: Excellent. Okay. And then, the name your, or you the URL for your website is what?

ROB: It is Funeral Results Marketing.

DAVE: Excellent. OK. Hey Rob thank you very much for this call today, I appreciate it. Definitely a unique perspective and it sounds like you've got some history with using WordPress and going forward with that and it looks like it's becoming easier and you've also got a very comprehensive business wrapped around the funeral markets so thanks a lot Rob!

ROB: You're welcome Dave thanks for the opportunity.

DAVE: Yeah my pleasure. OK!

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