

Strategic Marketing Services with Christy Ryken and Cole Wetzel transcribed

Patrick: Welcome to the Building a Better Iowa Podcast.

Intro Music

Katie: Hello and welcome to the Building a Better Iowa Podcast. Today we're talking with Christy and Cole from Strategic Marketing Services or SMS, which we'll probably call it later about how they're working to build a better Iowa through intelligence, insights and influence across the state. Welcome Christy and Cole. As we start off today, will you give a broad overview of what SMS is and how it was founded?

Christy: Of course, and thanks for having us on. Always happy to participate in efforts for Business and Community Services and promoting all of our programs services throughout the state. SMS or Strategic Marketing Services actually was not called SMS in the beginning. Were-known fact it used to be called the Market Development Program-MDP. Not quite rolling off the tongue as SMS. But it was founded in 1990 right alongside the Institute for Decision Making-IDM kind of was a spinoff from that group's efforts and economic developments, they saw that they really needed some assistance with marketing and marketing research was our primary focus. It began through some funding through the USDA. And so the initial scope of work for the program was really to help agricultural based manufacturers in the state, develop products, find markets, customers in doing research all around that and helping them. Initially those services were all provided free of charge. Can you imagine that?

Katie: Wild!

Christy: Yeah. So that lasted for about six years, and kind of got folks through kind of that agricultural crisis, economic downturn, and um- my predecessors kind of started looking at the market and saying, "Man, this money is probably not going to last forever, maybe we should consider an alternate plan." And so they-we like to say they correctly forecasted or research their own organization.

Katie: That's very on brand.

Christy: Right, we gathered our own intelligence to make informed decisions. Yeah, so they transition to a fee based service. And while we do to this day still offer some funding through the state, there is a charge for what we do. We like to call it "skin in the game", we find out our clients are more helpful, more engaged, use information after the fact if they have some monetary investment. So since 1996, it has kind of become Strategic Marketing Services. I began working here in 1998, so I've been here-that's all I've ever known. I don't know, those amazing big fat grant days of amazing Christmas parties, or any of that. My whole career has been, you know, we-we got and we develop business, we market our services and to attract clients. So that's our history, I would say.

Katie: So with that history, what is it that you do now or I guess maybe what are some of the projects that you've worked on that represent best, you know, your services as a whole?

Christy: Well, what we do, I would say is we're a customer market research firm at a university, which makes us quite unique. We have all the resources available at the university, such as really amazing faculty that specialize in really niche areas of academic research that we can pull in. We have great resources at our library where we can tap into a lot of databases and informational resources. But what we do is we're a custom–custom market research firm. So that means we're taking more of a consultative approach, we really work with a client a lot on the front end to really understand what their needs are, what decisions are trying to make, what information they need to gather from what types of respondents so we really customize everything that we do to suit their particular needs. So by research that's kind of a big question, right? Lots of things can be researched. We focus mostly on what we call in the academic world, primary research. Which is collecting information that has not been previously collected by any other organization from that group of respondents, big fancy term.

Katie: That's awesome. So people could use this research for their businesses or theoretically like a paper or like academia, could they be using the things that you found to inform their—I'm going off the cuff here to—inform their studies?

Christy: Actually, we have had some requests in the last several years for some of the studies we've done for the state of Iowa, especially the ones that were done here during the pandemic, from other academic institutions like grad students, doctoral students that want to use some of our datasets. And now Cole has a little bit of experience in this area, too, as an undergraduate at UNI, he's kind of unique. He worked for SMS as a student, and then transitioned to a full time staff member. And so he comes to us with more of a data, economic background. Do you want to talk about a little bit using datasets? Like, would that have been of interest to you when you were in college, using some of our big datasets?

Cole: Yeah, so hi everybody, I'm Cole. And I'm just sitting over here being quiet. So as Christy mentioned, I was a student employee for her during my undergraduate career. And I'd actually say some of the projects we worked on most recently, during the pandemic, were probably some of the most interesting ones I've worked on. So to have access to those as a student probably would have been really awesome. I guess, if you're into data, it'd be really awesome. Some people find that less interesting than I do.

Christy: You kind of have to be what I affectionately call a “data nerd” to want to work in market research. You have to love numbers and data and analysis.

Katie: God bless you because I couldn't do it. Well, very cool. That's awesome.

Christy: Yeah. You know, in most instances, if it's a project we're doing for a public institution, we can usually work it out that we can provide data, or at least aggregated data to other folks.

Katie: Okay, so we talked to Christy and Cole, can you tell us who else is on your team and maybe what their roles are?

Christy: Sure, we have another full time staff member, her name is Chelsea Morrison. She's been with SMS for almost five years now and she is a project manager, like Cole is and you know, their main role is to work with clients to develop the project, develop questions that we're going to ask, figure out who we're going to ask him to, and you know, what format we're going to use—is a mail survey, which isn't quite as popular anymore, but we still use those fun fact! Or more often is it some sort of online survey? Or is it something more detailed and in depth, like a telephone interview or a focus group? You know, those are great ways to get more anecdotal information and work really well with what we call quantitative information, which is a large numeric base kind of studies where you're answering questions about your rating stuff, or ranking questions and giving us demographic information. Qualitative is much more exploratory. It's where we're asking questions, or going off script asking follow up questions. Sometimes those are like the best things, you get those unscripted, unplanned for questions, or those little tangents as I like to call them. So yeah, you know, it's—it's a really fun field, there's always something new.

Patrick: Well, and speaking of those tangents, so our center in the past has worked with you guys to do different projects of the qualitative variety. And the comments that we got, were probably some of the most important pieces of the data that we got back. I mean, the surveys were excellent and doing those projects was awesome, but we opened it up to a lot of open ended questions. If you remember some of those, Christy?

Christy: Unfortunately I do.

Patrick: Yeah, I mean, it was—we get all sorts of answers from, you know, throwing the blame for their business issues at others to some fascinating ideas. What we were doing at the time was to just looking at insight into how Iowa businesses—really just like the state of small business in Iowa, and really trying to understand their, their challenges and struggles and using SMS as services to be able to talk to them directly and get get that feedback, especially in an open ended way. You know, it was really valuable for us to be able to spot a variety of different programs that we still offer today—came out of those surveys. Even one of them we—we tried to launch a whole website around just taking comments from their survey to have that lowans have a sounding board. We may be a little bit before our time, it wasn't quite the Reddit that we were hoping it would be. But it's still an awesome—

Christy: Did you have a fun name and trademark it? That may have been your mistake.

Patrick: It was called Speakout Small Business. We did it for a year. Don't Google it now. But if you—if you did, we really are just trying to get a lot of those firsthand accounts from small businesses. And it spawned directly out of the work that SMS did for us with being able to work with them that way. And so having worked with you, you know, some too Cole did you get the pleasure of doing some of those telephone interviews that Christy's has mentioned?

Cole: Maybe not as many telephone interviews right now but we're actually working on a project for a local high school. I do a lot of—I did a lot of qualitative interviews with teachers and staff there. And we're going to be rolling out some projects for parents and students and alumni to kind of help them with a kind of reimagining of high school culture and curriculum. And so that's definitely where I've had a lot of those experiences. And I can kind of attest to some things you said about things like, really interesting, insights, maybe not so good things, but some great things as well. And so it's kind of, it's great to see how it paints a picture of the person you're talking to. You don't really get that from online surveys.

Patrick: Absolutely and Christy over your experience with SMS like you've been working with these human subjects for primary research projects, you know, for a long time, how has that sort of evolved over the years from you mentioned mail surveys, into email surveys, telephone interviews, and really anything in between. What are some of the things that you've noticed working with just the general person as your research subject?

Christy: Well, people always make it interesting, right? You know, there are stories we can tell, but we won't, but people keep it real. You know, that's the thing. I think, as you were talking about, when you have a third party, like we would be for most of our clients, reaching out on behalf of the client to collect information or intelligence about them, people feel a lot more comfortable sharing their real thoughts and opinions than they would you know, to the actual client, perhaps. Because maybe there's a relationship over the years that has built up and it's more difficult to say hard things. So we definitely get our fair share of feedback to comb through that as negative. Sometimes it is challenging to find a way to articulate that in a meaningful way to our client, but they need to hear those things, right? You need to hear the good things, you need to hear the bad things so you can learn where to utilize your resources for improvements. And so that's really what all market research is about is collecting good information and intelligence and using that to help you make better decisions. That where you're reducing your risk, you are reducing your investment, saving yourself money, time and heartache, basically. But yes, over the years, as you mentioned, I've been around a while. Technology, as they all laugh haha, technology's changed a lot over the years. I mean, when I first started, we were still—we were doing mail surveys for almost everything and people were using pens and pencils to fill them out and send them back. Then we felt really advanced when we started using scanned—scannable surveys, you know?

Katie: oh, like a Scantron?

Christy: Yes, you said the word, Scantron. We felt very technologically advanced. From there, we started, you know, the trend to do online surveys was becoming, you know, more feasible. And so we were, that was back before you could just, you know, do a Google form or any of the other kinds of online survey tools that anybody can just use today, you had to custom build everything. So we had to hire MIS students to come in and write lines and lines of code to program customer surveys.

Katie: Wow!

Christy: Imagine that, right? I know, you all are too young to like, even fathom the depth of what that involves. And then eventually, you know, we get to a place where we have online providers where you know, anybody—my 11 year old could program a survey easily. And so things have changed so much over time. But the one thing that doesn't change is having someone with experience that helps you ask the right question in the right way, and knows how to analyze—interpret that. So that's really where the expertise lies. Anybody can go and ask questions and collect information, but it's making sure you're asking them in a way that is meaningful, and has a real impact on what you're trying to accomplish.

Katie: So then at the end of this process, do you often make a recommendation to your clients? Or do you provide the insights and then they decide what they do with that information?

Christy: It really varies client to client. I would say most often, our role is not to recommend, it would be more advisory. You know, kind of provided, these are some really important things, key learnings that came out of this project. And we might hint at it, but we're not experts in their industry and in their organization. So we really try not to overstep that.

Katie: Yeah, that makes sense. Kind of switching gears here, you talked a little bit about a COVID survey and working with a local high school. How does SMS support economic development across Iowa, in different communities?

Christy: Cole, you want to take this one? I'm just kidding. Cole, is just getting his feet wet on the whole kind of business development part of, you know, SMS and getting work in the door. Initially, you know, we came out of IDM, which is an economic development organization. And so I think our two departments or programs have always been really linked in that way. Where we have always kind of partnered with them and when they have a client, or a project that requires some sort of information gathering and analysis, they come to us. And so by association, we've become active in economic development from the aspect of collecting data and analyzing and providing it back to them again to help them make better decisions.

Katie: Awesome.

Christy: We play a supportive role, shall we say?

Katie: Excellent, and very important roles.

Christy: Well, you know, information is so key to like, even just our common everyday decisions that we make. I mean, my husband once teased me—I spent like eight hours doing research on a crock pot. It's kind of an occupational hazard. He's like, it's just a crock pot. I said, Yes, I had my last crock pot for like 15 years. And not that I could go out and buy a second crock pot but like, that seems wasteful to me, why would I not research it and get the exact one that will meet my needs for a long time.

Katie: The next 15 years.

Christy: Right!

Katie: Are you a bigger researcher just by nature?

Christy: Yes, probably too much. I go down the rabbit hole. I would say Cole is probably the same, wouldn't you?

Cole: Yeah, I'd agree.

Katie: The data collector definitely, yes.

Christy: Chelsea as well. I think you have to like to be in this profession. As we said, you have to really like data and information and analysis. But you also have to be curious. And, you know, kind of understand how can we ask a question and get the right response we need not that there's a right answer, but ask it in the right way. And you also really have to enjoy people, because a lot of our job is talking to people. So you know, people think of like data scientists or data nerds is like these people with their little computers in a dark room. I mean, that's not exactly us. At least it's not me, is it you Cole?

Cole: I don't know, I guess after hearing—since I'm just sitting back here, just analyzing what you all are saying is that I come from more of a data background than maybe a market, marketing background. And so something that I'm really curious about going forward is like bridging the gap between market research and data science. They're basically—they're almost the same thing. You could almost argue that maybe data science stems from early market research. So Christy alluded to market research being, you know, the gathering of primary data going out and doing surveys, talking to people. Whereas in data analytics, it's, here's some data, here's a lot of data, what can we do with it? How can we derive insights from it? And so how can we pull some of those more data heavy elements into the work that we do? And also, like Christy said, like, data analytics and data science is probably never going to replace our jobs because of the whole human element to it. But can we pull in things to make that easier? You know, is that data visualization techniques, is that you know, doing text analytics, stuff like that. So that's where I'm really excited because we're finally kind of getting to that point where those two are starting to intersect. And I think that'll be kind of the future of how that all goes. We'll see. That's what I'm hoping anyway.

Christy: Yes, and I'm really excited to have Cole on board, because that's—that's the new thing that he brings to our toolbox is he comes from that perspective and can look at the data and see trends or ways to analyze or visualize data that are beyond me. So yeah, it's an exciting blend of skill sets that we have on our core team.

Katie: Wow. Who does SMS serve in terms of clientele? Or do you have a major type of sect that you serve? Who do you serve?

Christy: Interesting question, Katie. Anyone? Everyone? How about that. So since this is Building a Better Iowa podcast, I want to make sure that we mentioned we do have some funding that we receive from the state every year for the last many, many years. It's called Region's Innovation Fund. And we actually because I come from a marketing background wanted to give it a name, so we can market it better. So we call it Market Solve. And it's a program where we help reduce the cost of market research projects for Iowa companies. And that doesn't mean can be nonprofit organizations doesn't have to be a for profit-profit entity, by 50%. So if you know there's a project that is maybe \$20,000, we will find half of that up to \$10,000. So it's a really great monetary incentive for Iowa companies who maybe are thinking about market research. And we understand it is an investment of financial resources. But the whole goal of market research is to take that investment and get a return on it, whether it's getting into a new market more confidently and successfully, whether it's not making a large investment in something that may not have been successful. So market research is an investment and I like people to think of it that way. Sometimes it keeps you from doing something you shouldn't, or helps you do something you should more successfully.

Katie: Absolutely, and sounds like it keeps you from wasting time doing something that's maybe not necessarily harmful, but just not what you should be doing or what your clients want.

Christy: Well it's not gonna make you money or for a nonprofit, it's maybe you could move in a different direction that would have more impact. Other than that, we really don't have any limits on the type of organization we work with. Everybody from small, medium sized companies to like fortune 500 companies, we have one company that I just learned earlier this week that we've done work for them now for 20 years.

Katie: Wow.

Christy: They're an international fortune 500 company. I'm not gonna say their name, because we do a lot of things anonymously for them. But that was really cool to be able to say to them, "Hey, this is our 20 year anniversary!" Yeah so you know it runs the gamut of who we work with. And one nice thing is our program, as part of university, we're not limited to working with only Iowa companies so we can work with anyone in the United States and beyond.

Katie: So for the people listening to this podcast, how can Iowa businesses or whoever's listening, connect with SMS to work with a market solve program or the other services you provide?

Christy: Probably the easiest way to go to our website, sms.uni.edu, and just search on the "Contact Us" and you can reach out to Cole or I and we would love to talk with anybody. Iowa companies especially and see how we can be of assistance to them.

Katie: Great, and then and then what are you excited for moving forward? Like what do you think the future of SMS looks like here at UNI? Well, maybe not even at UNI just in the world.

Christy: Oh I think at UNI. I think in the past, they're actually—they did explore spinning off of UNI but never did it. It's not something I think makes sense for us. I love working on projects with our programs with NBCS that always gets me excited, working with some of our really talented colleagues in different areas, and I'm excited to have Cole on our team. I think the—the new energy he brings and the new areas of expertise and more data science data driven visualizations is going to be something as we kind of get that figured out. What that looks like on some of our typical projects, our clients are gonna get some really cool stuff. A few already have, but it's just gonna get better and better.

Katie: Very cool.

Christy: No pressure, Cole.

Katie: No pressure at all. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we start wrapping up here about SMS and how you work with maybe other departments in the Business and Community Services building or how you serve your clients across Iowa?

Christy: Well, I will plug just since we have a statewide survey coming out, it'll be coming out later this month, with the Iowa Economic Development Authority. This will be our fourth survey to help assess—kind of a post pandemic assessment of how businesses and nonprofit organizations are doing across the state. And so that should be coming out in about two, three weeks, so stay tuned for—for communications about that. And any organization in the state we'd love to have you participate. It's not industry specific or you know, size specific. It's really we want to help hear from you to help us understand what the current economic conditions are doing, or the impact they're having on your business and what kinds of assistance from state or other programs could be helpful to you.

Katie: Grea, thank you. And thank you Christy and Cole so much for being here today. Again, if anybody listening wants to learn more or reach out to the SMS team you can visit sms.uni.edu and check back in with us next week as we talk to other UNI Business and Community Services programs about Building a Better Iowa.

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