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Podcast Transcription

Implementing Lean Marketing Systems

Behind every Decision to Buy..

Guest was Kevin Allen

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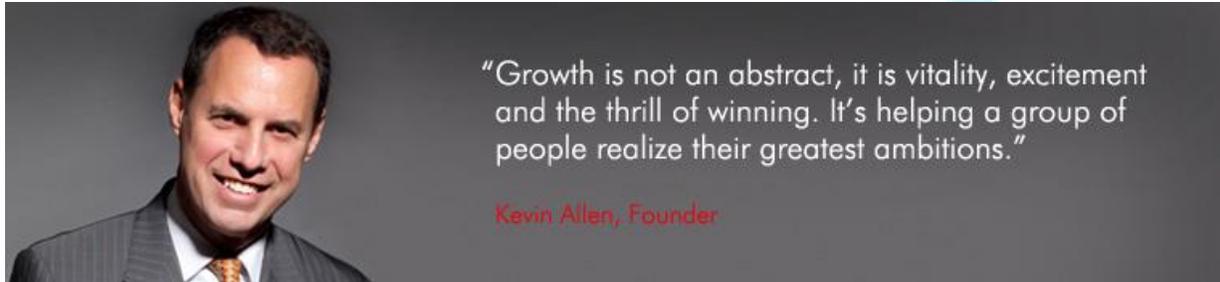
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Kevin Allen is an expert in business development and in leading companies and individuals to achieve their ambitions. Kevin is the author of [The Hidden Agenda: A Proven Way to Win Business and Create a Following](#). He spent two decades on the front lines of business development at the top of advertising giants McCann-WorldGroup, the Interpublic Group and Lowe Worldwide and is recognized as one of the advertising industry's most accomplished growth professionals.

A much loved and respected new business guru, one of his close colleagues coined him the Billion Dollar Man! A veteran of the Interpublic Group and a "Mad Man" of agency McCann Erickson, Kevin worked with such brands as MasterCard, developing the globally famous "Priceless" campaign, Microsoft, Marriott, Smith Barney, Nestle, L'Oreal, Lufthansa and Johnson & Johnson. At McCann, he created what is arguably one of the industry's most envied new business programs, which named McCann Worldgroup the number one agency in new business and Global Agency of the Year, two years in a row.

Transcription of Podcast

Joe Dager: Welcome, everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Kevin Allen. Kevin has worked with advertising giants; the McCann World Group, the Interpublic Group, and Lowe Worldwide, where he helped gain Ad Age's recognition as "Turnaround Agency of the Year" in 2009. Kevin has spent 25 years in advertising and was a key in the development of the now iconic Priceless campaign for MasterCard.

Kevin, I'd like to welcome you. Could you update my intro and tell me what you're doing right now?

Kevin Allen: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really delighted. After 25 years of being I guess a mad man of McCann Erickson and other places like that, I decided it was time to strike out on my own and put together 25 years of pitching for my supper to help companies grow, and individuals, too, for that matter.

Joe: You just wrote the book, "The Hidden Agenda." Can you start out by disclosing the hidden agenda?

Kevin: It all goes back to when I was first at McCann Erickson. You can, imagine a fairly sensitive kid, not exactly the toughest kid in the world, in what was arguably... In fact, someone described when I asked him, "What's the culture of McCann Erickson?" He said, "Well, think of a barroom brawl. That about sizes it up." We'd got to these meetings to meet with our prospects, and while everybody was asking a question, "OK, what about the market share, and what about this, and financials that," I'd be looking at the prospect. I guess maybe I have more of a sense for people than most, I suppose.

I'd come back from the meeting, and they'd say, "Well, let's show them more market share," and I'd say, "I think he's scared." The

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whole table would turn to look at me and go, "What?"

The whole idea, I guess, is I began to realize that behind every decision of every kind, no matter what it is, is an unspoken, visceral, emotional desire. The trick, though, is not only just to understand it and recognize it, but it's to connect yourself to it.

Joe: I think that's really interesting from the standpoint of an ad guy. You have to be a great ad guy, when you can synthesize a pitch and empathy. I was just amazed at that in reading the book. How do you do that?

Kevin: Well, it's funny you say that because when I was coming up in the business, there was this notion that business was all about the facts, all about the figures, all about "the business side of things," when, in fact, emotion has a place, too. In fact, if you think about it, the business world, particularly if you have your own company or you've started your own group or you're growing inside a firm, there's probably no more passionate or emotional place than the workplace. Well, then, why would it not be smart for someone to understand, to be empathetic about where the heart of a prospect then in the business environment?

Joe: Would you term the book as one of these feel-good books? Or is it a practical, how-to book?

Kevin: I'm glad to hear you say that. I think it is a practical way of winning what you seek. While it's true that we understood the emotional desire of the MasterCard team and that win resulted in a billion dollars in income over 15 years. This is practical stuff. The difference, though, is putting a slightly different hat on when we're thinking about pursuing the business we seek or the following we want to create.

Joe: You brought a thing in there that I just have to ask you about because I think people identify with the MasterCard "Priceless" campaign that you were part of. Can you share with

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everyone how that campaign and the idea originated? It's such an iconic campaign.

Kevin: Sure, I'd be happy to. There're two parts to it because there's the part of the campaign development, which was a hidden agenda in and of itself, by the way, as well as the hidden agenda of the prospect we were pursuing. But, let me talk first about the campaign. Well, let me tell you, it was not easy. It was months upon months that we were up and down blind alleys, and a brilliant strategic team, which included people like Nat Puchio and Eric Einhorne and others, developed simple piece of understanding, that for the first time in a very, very long time, American values had been turning inner-directed.

What I mean by that is from the values that were associated with success or the go-go '80s and status and so forth.

One of the reasons for that is boomers had kids for the first time. This began to create a value system in people that was no longer all about show, but more about values of substance. When we looked at the MasterCard value system as a brand, the MasterCard DNA was much more about buying good things for good reasons for good people, and that led to a very simple insight, which led to a great line written by a guy named Jonathon Crane and called, "There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard."

Jonathon wrote that incredible line. When I saw it, I fell down. I thought, "Oh my God! We won the business." Well, not so fast. We needed a campaign to go with it. We briefed several creative teams, gave them that line and said, "Develop a campaign off of that line."

Two brilliant people wrote the priceless idea. If my memory serves me, it was an 11 year old boy and the fact that he hadn't seen him in a while, and he went to a baseball game with him that gave those two the idea that, "Well, wait a minute. You can't

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put a price on the few hours spent with that kid. Priceless."

Joe: I thought that was a brilliant campaign because I can still remember the ballparks that were visited. I don't know how that rates as the top campaign compared to plop-plop fizz-fizz and others like that, but it has to be right up there.

Kevin: Well, it's probably one of the longest running campaigns. It still runs in well over 100 markets, and it is cherished by countries all over the world. What was also going on was a very interesting thing because, from the point of view of the hidden agenda, the client during the pitch, we got down from 50 agencies down to five down to two. Then, they said, "Right, here's the deal. The agency whose campaign wins in consumer testing... We're going to take the campaigns from each agency, we're going to test it with consumers, and whichever one wins the consumer test, that's the agency we're going to hire."

Of course, "Priceless" plus a campaign from our competing agency goes into test. Well, guess what the result was? It bombed! It didn't do well.

The consumer testing was not strong for priceless because of the nature of the testing at the time. To his eternal credit, Larry Flanagan, who went on to be a celebrated CMO of MasterCard, and now he's the dean of a university I'm happy to say, went to his board and said, "Irrespective of these test scores, we believe this is a group of people who can help us win. By the way, this campaign has promise." If I, step back a little bit, we realized that after 15 years of loss to Visa, that this was the most important thing in the hearts of the MasterCard team. For once to register a victory against Visa, that was a hidden agenda, and that's how we positioned ourselves to win that business.

Joe: I talk a lot about for an ad group or a marketing group, to get a job, they have to come up with the idea first and many times not really understand what the problem is or they have to

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come up with a solution without really defining the problem well enough. You're saying using the hidden agenda is really the essence of how to define that problem.

Kevin: Well, that's interesting you say, and, first of all, I completely agree. What I say to folks is it's really important to understand the business problem, of course, by all means. But the point is the business problem is always viewed in the context of the emotional desire of the decision maker. If someone is ambitious and forward leaning, then the decision they're going to make is going to be on the basis of that emotional state. Or if they're concerned and maybe they feel as if they lack something, there, again, is something that I'm going to tie into and link my professional solution to that problem.

The point is, when a group sits down to create a pitch or to understand their prospect, you're going to think about both the rational stuff, but you're going to step back and ask yourself a few questions about your buyer, too.

Who are they? How are they feeling? What do they value? What keeps them up at night? What do they dream about from an ambition point of view? That's what I want to tie myself to.

Joe: It was interesting to me, because today we talk about all this inbound marketing and how social media's changed everything, and the word "pitch" is not a good word anymore to most of us. It's that old, mad man type thinking... Pitch is a bad thing to come out with, but you use it throughout this book. Is that going against modern trends, or is there still a place for it?

Kevin: Well, I'm glad you focused on it because I wrestled with the idea. At one point, in one of the manuscripts, I had taken the word pitch out altogether. Then, I went back through and I thought, "You know what? The notion pitch has got a little teeth in it," but the reason I put it back is for this reason. If we look at what I call the supply economy -- this was way back when,

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during the heydays of the mad men and all that business -- where demand was assumed, and the job of businesses was to make sure that the products that were created simply found their way to the marketplace. If you did that successfully, products simply flew off the shelf.

Even when I was a kid coming up in the business, we used to focus on things like "out of stock" in this business. The tools that we used to use were "share of voice." Imagine that. That's he who could shout the loudest would win in the marketplace.

Well, in a demand economy, which is made up of communities of people, none of that stuff works anymore. But you still have to come across. You still have to figure out a way to reach these people and to connect with them. In fact, it's even more important than ever to work hard to understand what is in the heart of the community that you are trying to reach.

In the digital age, figuring out who your audience is, developing an emotional definition of them and then connecting yourself to them is wildly important.

Joe: If you find your target audience, a pitch is effective, you connect, you know that right away. How do you find that target audience to pitch to?

Kevin: That's a great question. I think that over the years, a number of ways that we would define our targets. Still today, I work with a number of companies who still look at functional and descriptive measures to describe the people they're talking to, sort of women, 25 to 54, in certain counties with certain incomes and so on. But the fact is that community formation, now more than ever, not only, say, within the U.S. but around the world, community formation is on the basis of belief and value system. It pushes us further to try to figure out a way to develop a definition of our target audience that runs more deeply.

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In a way, if you remember from the book, I take a page out of politics, whereby the notion of the conceptual target is a way by which you can develop a powerful emotional definition of your audience. Soccer mom, for example, was a great one.

In the pursuit of the Marriott business, no matter whether the person was staying at the JW, their topflight property, and spending several hundred dollars a night, or they were staying at Fairfield, the emotional composition of that audience were called road warriors, people who are out there selling for their companies.

It's a terrific way because at the end of the day people come together because of what they believe and how they feel.

Joe: When you're talking, it seems that you attach that nice conceptual name, that name that just grabs you right away, soccer mom. You identify and you know exactly who that is, who your target audience is, in two words.

Kevin: Well the company that I work with, a dear friend of mine actually, it's a fantastic company that she runs. She was trying to figure out, "How do I better define the kind of companies that I work with," says this friend of mine. After a weekend of work, we realized that the one of the things that's common to the people that they really can help are frustrated visionaries. That was the term, because they are brilliant at being able to crystallize the pathway for someone with a vision.

You can see that no matter whether their prospect was a small company or a Fortune 500 CEO, they were able to define their audience in an emotional need state term and then connect their product, what they do, to that need state. It's terrific.

Joe: Is that something along the leveragable assets that you talk about?

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Kevin: Yes. Well, it's important because it's starting to talk about the emotional need of a prospect, what I call that hidden agenda. But that's only half the issue. In some ways, the most important thing to be doing, apart and away from understanding that very important and often unspoken need, is to dig deep to understand yourself. What is your real ambition? What is your credo? What is your core? We can chat about those individually. How do you connect yourself?

For example, in MasterCard, our core, as McCann Erickson was a history of it being highly, highly competitive and winners for the clients that we worked for. That's a fact. Coke versus Pepsi, AT&T versus MCA, MCI rather, and we were a highly, highly competitive culture.

When MasterCard met us that first day, they walked into the room for the final presentation several months later, they saw on the screen the following words: carpe diem. My good friend Ness, my strategy colleague, stood up there and said, "We have found the answer that's going to allow you to beat Visa for the first time in 10 years. I'm going to show you how."

That competitive stance was part of living out the core, one of the leverageable assets of McCann.

Joe: Do you need a public enemy?

Kevin: It's interesting. Storytelling is something I chat about later in the book. Once you've developed the understanding of the hidden agenda, and you've found one of your leverageable assets to connect to it, and you've made that connection, you can put it then in the form of an argument. What I call the advocate's approach. Then, you still have to tell it in a compelling way. Elements of storytelling are a wonderful way to do that. In the case of MasterCard, in particular, the enemy can be a variety of things. In this case, in storytelling terms, the villain can be a competitor, but it can also be a circumstance, like apathy, or a

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lack of a recognized opportunity. Having something to fire at is not such a bad thing.

Joe: I like that description of it, because it does help, doesn't it?

Kevin: It does. I remember this wonderful film called Zulu, and a guy said, "What's the matter?" "They have nothing to fire at," he says.

Joe: Something that you said in the book that I've seen, that I've started using more, is thinking like a designer and architect-type style. I found it interesting that in your book you discuss how to create a design brief. Can you talk about what you mean by that?

Kevin: One of the things that are interesting about this experience is, when I set out to do this, it was a question of sitting down and trying to figure out, "I don't know exactly how I do this, I just do it." It then sort of deconstructs. What are the elements, and how do you put them together? What dawned on me is there may be a model, a way, where all the piece parts fit together, and it's a hit, kind of a handy brief, as you say. I call it the Allen Key. Why? Because well, it certainly helps that my name is Allen.

The Allen Key is an interesting little thing because it only unlocks certain very special kinds of screens. In that regard, it allows you to take the three possible hidden agendas: a hidden agenda of want, the hidden agenda of the need, and the hidden agenda of values. At the same time, select from the corresponding leverageable assets. You connect to the want through real ambition.

"What is that incredible thing that you're looking to create with your prospect that didn't exist before?" To connect to the need, as I mentioned with MasterCard, you connect with the core. "I have something that can help the thing that you feel you lack."

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Then the third is to connect by the credo. In the case of Marriott, that was a connection of credo to values, because that entire decision would be based upon the value system that they held close.

It's a handy little model. I guess tools are like, you can hang a picture with the other end of a screwdriver, so tools are there to help you, not to be a slave, but I thought it would be useful to create something like that.

Joe: I think you did a nice job in the book, you separated it in three parts: the who, the what and the how. Just when you enter that section, you know it's all about the who. That helps, it puts the context around what you're reading.

Do you have to connect with every hidden agenda that a client has?

Kevin: That's a wonderful question. I think it's fair to say that there are times when there are certainly more than one of these things going on at any given time. Certainly, if you believe that the hidden agenda is based upon ambition. Let's say, the former head of Citigroup has built an empire, and he wanted everybody to know it. That doesn't mean he doesn't have any values, of course, I'm sure he does.

There's no question that there is one that glows more deeply, and is held more passionately than others. That's the one, I think, you've got to target for. Consequently, selecting the thing to connect to it follows in kind.

Joe: You're saying that there's one that I really have to be exceptional at, and go at it, and the other ones can, maybe, I don't have to show as much strength in.

Kevin: I think so, because ultimately, there is one particular desire that overarches the other, that is more urgent, if you will,

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to the prospect. While it's true that the MasterCard people had a real ambition to create a wonderful brand, the really, really urgent, hidden agenda was, "I've got to beat Visa. It's time. I can't let another year go by. I'm not sure I can do it." That was what was on the table, and that's what we connected to.

Joe: Most decisions nowadays are being made by committee or by group. You talk about identifying that particular need and particularly in an individual. Can this apply to a group or to an organization?

Kevin: I love this, your questions are wonderful. I use the term when I'm talking with colleagues, particularly if they're talking to already identified groups. Even if they don't, you're right, you may chat with one person, but they're going to get a bunch of other people involved. I call it the jury room. If you know ahead of time, say, who's coming to your meeting, and then I profile everyone who's going to be in that room. I ask myself, "Who are they?" I go through the same exercise. I even got to the point where I used to do a little dossier, like the CIA, the pictures of each person on the panel.

Good news now, with what's available to us; we can put together a profile about a person we're going to see pretty easily these days, by virtue of the Internet. Even if I can't identify them, I might know that there are a few other people that that person works with. I'm going to do my homework.

In doing so, two important things can come as a result. One, is I can gauge, particularly if I'm able to meet these people, which often one can, to get a sense of the unanimity of the hidden agenda that may be at work.

In the case of MasterCard or some of these other things that I pitched, I could begin to see a pattern that validated that this hidden agenda was held in common.

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Obviously when you present, you've got to be mindful of how people consume information. Some people are more analytic, some people are more emotional. Finding a common thread among that group is really important.

Joe: What makes "The Hidden Agenda" different than thousands and thousands of books out there telling you how do to sales and marketing? What makes it different?

Kevin: I think it's different because it places two things at the very spear point of the process. First, it is about human emotion, when we say those two words in a business context, we go "No, no, no, not here. Not appropriate. Personal life, that's OK, but not here." The first thing is it causes us to reframe how we look at how decisions are made. That's number one. The second thing is while it's absolutely true that all the good, good, good judges of the last several years always remind us you must keep the consumer first, and obviously "The Hidden Agenda" calls for that.

What makes this special is it calls for a deep examination of you and who you are, and what you believe, and what you think is your very special gift, and what ambitions you have. Very often, we're so fixated on the prospect we have and what they think we need, we forget about ourselves.

At the end of the day, when I asked all these people who I was so lucky to pitch to win why they gave us the business, they would have a similar reply: "Because you get it." What's "it?" I believe that it understands that deep emotional need and desire they have, and how, by digging deep in our own hearts, we found the ways and means to connect to it.

Joe: When we look at the world today, so much of it is the interaction on the Internet or in Social Media. Does "The Hidden Agenda" apply to that arena?

Kevin: I think actually more, perhaps than at any other time. I

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was just reading the paper today, yet again, about what's happening in places like the Middle East and so on, and we realize that these passions of how young people have come together to stand up for what they believe was fueled by the Internet. No one told them to do that, and now that's spread from country to country. The point of that is communities form quickly and naturally, and without barrier, across the Internet, in ways that could never have been thought possible when I was a young account guy working on brands in the 1990s.

The thing that connects these people, no matter where they live, is the passions of their beliefs and what they hold in their heart. You can see that in how people intersect with brands.

If a brand, let's say Johnson & Johnson or Nike, is found doing something that perhaps the community doesn't approve of... remember that whole thing where, I forget, one of the coffee companies or trainers, the sneakers were being made in India by 11 year old kids. You may remember that whole thing. People went crazy.

Guess what? The companies changed, and they changed because people, communities across the Internet, were able to share their passions and what was in their heart, and make that known. I think it's fantastic, and makes this process of connecting with communities even more important than ever before.

Joe: What stops this book from being just another pitch?

Kevin: What I set out to do, because I'm the kind of guy that when I would be traveling on business, they roll that cart down the aisle, and they have the newspapers, Financial Times, and then they'd have OK Magazine. Like, "I'll read OK, I'll read the Financial Times later." I don't mean I love Financial Times. What's the point? Very many people tell me that I would love, and I need to read good business books and learn from these things. It's just they're tough. They're hard to get through. I really wanted to

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create something that was fun to read, filled with stories of myself as a kid and all the stuff I messed up and what a goofball I was.

More importantly, to share with everybody all these wonderful mentors that I've had; these amazing, quirky but brilliant people who shared with me so much of this stuff that I now know. To make it something that you would just really want to sit down and say, "You know, I'm so glad I read that. I had fun, I enjoyed it, and I learned a few things too."

Joe: I think you did a nice job, Kevin. Is there something that you would like to add, that maybe I didn't ask?

Kevin: I suppose what I would say is this. Often when you say salesmen or pitch, right away you go, "Oh boy, here we go, someone's going to twist my arm. They're going to sell me something I don't want, and all this jazz." I'm reminded by a wonderful woman who my mother told me about. When I asked her, I said, "Mom, do you know anybody who sold anything door-to-door?"

"Yeah, Edith Merritt," she said. I spoke to Edith, and this woman reminded me of what selling, no matter what it is, whether you're selling to a board of directors on the top of a Fortune 500 company, or you're selling a loan officer to give you the loan, or the person to give you the job, it all comes down to the same thing.

Coming across is an act of human empathy and generosity. If you can understand what's in the heart of a person that you want to sell to, and you connect yourself, not like, "Here's this thing I'm going to force you to buy." Instead, it's, "Wow, I've identified what it is you need, and here's the good news: I'm it."

I think that's pretty cool, and I would feel pretty good about doing that day after day. As Edith said, "Kevin, remember this.

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People don't want to buy a set of encyclopedias," which is what she was selling. "They want to be president, right? That's the dream they have. If you can be part of that what a wonderful way to earn a living."

Joe: That's very true. How can someone contact you?

Kevin: My website is www.kevinallenpartners.com. On the site is everything you need to know about myself and the company that I run. Also, you can click on the book, you get everything you'd like to know about the book. There's a sample chapter, and numbers and emails to get in touch with us.

Joe: That sounds excellent. I would like to thank you very much, Kevin. I appreciate all the insight and the opening up of "The Hidden Agenda" to the audience. I hope to talk to you some more. I want to thank you.

Kevin: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it, had a great time.

Joe: This podcast will be available in the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site.

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What others say: *In the past 20 years, Joe and I have collaborated on many difficult issues. Joe's ability to combine his expertise with "out of the box" thinking is unsurpassed. He has always delivered quickly, cost effectively and with ingenuity. A brilliant mind that is always a pleasure to work with."*
James R.

Joe Dager is President of Business901, a progressive company providing direction in areas **such as Lean Marketing, Product Marketing, Product Launches and Re-Launches. As a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt**, Business901 provides and implements marketing, project and performance planning methodologies in small businesses. The simplicity of a single flexible model will create clarity for your staff and, as a result, better execution. My goal is to allow you spend your time on the **need versus the plan.**

An example of how we may work: Business901 could start with a consulting style utilizing an individual from your organization or a virtual assistance that is well-versed in our principles. We have **capabilities to plug virtually any marketing function** into your process immediately. As proficiencies develop, Business901 moves into a coach's role supporting the process as needed. The goal of implementing a system is that the processes will become a habit and not an event.

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