



## MBA Student for a Day with Steven Schragis of One Day U

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 283

Steven Schragis (00:00):

When all of us read the statistics of people who start these things and then drop out, and they're enormously high, a key reason is it's not fun.

Jeff Cobb (00:15):

Hi, I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:16):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 283 of the Leading Learning Podcast, part of our seven-episode series on the learning business MBA. This episode features a conversation with Steven Schragis, and it covers knowing your audience and what they value, partnerships, hiring staff, subscription models, and the importance of keeping fun and entertainment in mind when developing at least certain kinds of learning products. Steven Schragis is founder and director of One Day University. Every university has a few professors who are wildly popular. One Day U works closely with those professors to develop the most engaging talks that inform and inspire adult "students-for-a-day." Jeff spoke with Steven in September 2021.

Jeff Cobb (01:17):

Well, I want you to tell us about One Day University. Just the name, in and of itself, I think should spark some curiosity among the audience, but can you tell us a little bit about what that is, what it does, and then what your role has been with it?

Steven Schragis (01:30):

One Day University is 15 years old now, and, for the first 13 and a half years, we were a live-event company with the general concept, "Don't you wish you could go back to college? Wasn't it great? Wasn't it fun? Don't you miss it? But just the learning part, not the homework part, not the exams or studying or anything like that." And most people said, "Yes," so we ran these events around the country, where we'd invite star professors—and we define a "star professor" as the one students love to learn from—and a mostly 50-and-older audience would come and enjoy it.

Steven Schragis (02:07):

Last year and a half, obviously things changed. We don't run live events right now—or very few of them. But we pivoted to a membership system, an online system, and people around the country have joined. Five days a week, they get a new 50-minute lecture from some professor somewhere, either in their office on campus or near, in their home, in their kitchen, in their

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dining room, on some different subject. Monday it could be the Civil War, and Tuesday it's psychology of happiness, and Wednesday it's the history of pizza. Could be almost anything.

Jeff Cobb (02:41):

Now, how did you decide to get into of this business in the first place?

Steven Schragis (02:47):

Well, I was running a company called Learning Annex, which was a pretty big continuing education group. I was the national director. It wasn't my company, and I wanted to try something else and do something on my own. I brought my daughter up to college 16 years ago, and that school had different professors spread around campus giving a 15-, 20-minute talk about what they teach. Clearly the school had chosen the most interesting professors to give these speeches. It was for the parents, and the parents all said the same thing, and I said the same thing, "This is great. I wish I wasn't going back to the office tomorrow. I like it up here." And essentially that's where the idea for One Day University came from, that day. Bought the URL when I got home a few hours later.

Jeff Cobb (03:36):

And as you grew—and this is before we get to the past couple of years or so, where obviously there've been some momentous shifts—but in the earlier days, think back a decade or so or however far you want to go, what did you find challenging, particularly from a business standpoint about building a learning business? Reaching your audience, making the right decisions about whether it's the content, the pricing, all of those things you have to think about?

Steven Schragis (04:05):

Running live events is somewhat challenging because people have to leave and go to the event, so we really didn't know what the pricing should be and how to present it. The only thing we were sure of is this idea of learning from the best professors appealed to people, the idea that college can be fun. And we were unabashedly saying, "Do this for fun because you're past having to learn for any reason." Went back and forth on how to do that exactly. We eventually ended up partnering with media companies around the country, almost all of them newspapers, where they would do the marketing for us. We'd put on the show, so to speak, and it just took off from there.

Jeff Cobb (04:48):

You've already mentioned a couple of times that it's really about finding the great professors, the people who are really good at delivering, facilitating the learning experiences. Did you develop specific criteria or approaches to being able to identify those people, to be able to source your talent basically?

Steven Schragis (05:07):

Well, I'll say, right up front, it's not that hard. It's not secret information. If I told you, "Let's talk tomorrow, you tell me who the most popular professor at Duke University is or the University of Michigan or Florida or UCLA," you'd turn on a computer, and you'd find out. It's not that hard. They're the ones students are all talking about. Every school has two or three, usually not more. So locating those people by asking questions. In the beginning, we went to the campuses a lot, asking other people. There are Web sites where people talk about professors. The schools post this information. They run articles about their most popular professors. They give them

teaching awards. And so locating them wasn't that hard. Then contacting them was pretty easy because their e-mail addresses are all on their Web sites.

Jeff Cobb (06:03):

Did you find that and do you still find that most of the faculty you approach are receptive to doing this? And how has that changed over time? Were they always receptive? Have they become more receptive to doing this type of thing?

Steven Schragis (06:19):

As we got better known, it really became even easier, frankly. Most professors have sort of heard of One Day University, even if they're not quite sure what we do. Everybody likes being identified as one of the most popular professors at their school. We often say these people are like rock stars on their campus. They're not necessarily known off their campus. I could rattle off names to you, and most people will not have heard of them. They're not famous. They probably didn't write a number-one bestseller, but, on their campus, everybody knows they're a great teacher. It turns out some are old, and some are young, and some are men, or some are women. There's no one way to be a great teacher, but, the ones that are, they know it, and the students know it, and we find out pretty quickly.

Jeff Cobb (07:13):

Now let's go to that pivot that you had to make, obviously, as the pandemic came along. You were traditionally live, face-to-face, as you've said, but, like most learning businesses, I assume if you were going to survive, you had to make that kind of pivot. But what sort of considerations went into making that transition? When did you realize, "We've got to do this, and here's how we're going to do it, here's what it looks like"?

Steven Schragis (07:39):

Second week in March, we had just finished a weekend of running two or three events. We all know what went on that week. Everything started closing down. I remember thinking, "Well Broadway's open," then the next day that was closed. And "It's not like the NBA isn't running games." Well, the day after that, the NBA closed down. So we knew we had to also. Everyone left the office, and I said, "I will see you all in a number of weeks." That's where we were.

Jeff Cobb (08:08):

Did you at that point have to go out and figure out what the technology platform was going to be? Did you have to hire different people?

Steven Schragis (08:16):

Well, at that point we were not thinking of doing anything. But then the government announced its PPP loans, and all you had to do was promise, keep paying everybody, and we'll pick up the bill. You can't say no to that deal, so we applied and got one in just two or three days, and now we had employees saying, "What should I do? Do you need me to do anything?" And all we did at that point was run live events. So literally we came up with this idea of soliciting people who had been to One Day University live all over the country—we had their names and their e-mail addresses—and asking if they would like to join this membership program. What we offered evolved a bit over two or three months, and many thousands that first week said, "Sure."

Steven Schragis (09:03):

The technology, because of this thing called Zoom, which we all know now, but we really didn't know two years ago, it wasn't that hard. We recorded people on Zoom. There are systems that are more professional—one's called Brightcove, which is what we used. I'm not the tech person in our company; we had people who knew more about this. Luckily, one of our top people, her husband was very knowledgeable about video production. He couldn't leave the house either, so he helped us build this thing. Within about a week, we were able to do what just you and I are doing and then record it and then send it out to members. There's software that's turnkey, and people in the company figured out how to do it, and it just built from there.

Celisa Steele (09:54):

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Cristyn Johnson (10:02):

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Celisa Steele (10:45):

Now, back to Jeff and Steven.

Jeff Cobb (10:50):

How did you decide that what you were going to do was a membership model, as opposed to selling courses one by one?

Steven Schragis (10:59):

The membership model, the subscription, software as a service, and all these things. I read journals and papers just like anyone else. It just seemed this is the time for that; this is a workable model. If you have to sell over and over and over, it's a lot harder than just getting members and promising them something, so we tried to price it pretty low. What we offered them, as I said, evolved after a while, but it just seemed a natural thing to do. We're obviously not the only membership company out there. There's plenty of them. Only recently did we—now have more intensive, longer courses that do cost some money. We call them premiums, and about 10 percent of our members tend to buy some of those as well.

Jeff Cobb (11:43):

Tell me a bit more about the premium model, how that works, and how you decided to add that into your offerings.

Steven Schragis (11:50):

Our story is the lectures are 50 minutes, 5-0, and the question-and-answer period is 10 minutes on a chat roll so that people who have questions type them in. People's attention span is

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somewhat limited. You can't run a seven-hour course, so we came up with this one-hour, five-days-a-week concept, and you pick the ones you want. But then we found, sometimes people said, "We were just getting started, and the professor said, 'Okay, that's all the time I have,'" or 40 people had questions, and only four or five of them got answered. So we decided, two or three times a month, let's go into more depth.

Steven Schragis (12:27):

We used to do this when it was live. We called them intensives, and the lecture was usually a full two hours, and the question-and-answer period was longer. It was for people who were very interested in this subject. They weren't going to take all of them, but they picked what they wanted, and we found a percentage of our students like to do that. But, again, this just started a couple months ago.

Jeff Cobb (12:51):

When you look out in the future at this point—I know nobody has a crystal ball, but hopefully someday COVID, all of the travel restrictions, and everything else are behind us. Let's assume they are. Do you think you will revert to the same level of face to face? Or what does the mix look like in the future for you?

Steven Schragis (13:11):

We're trying a few live events here and there, and an awful lot of people are not comfortable coming yet, even with vaccination rules and mask rules, so we're not going at this very hard right now. When it is safe, and I don't know if that's another two weeks or two months or two years. I don't know, obviously. When it is, we may try some very large events with lots going on, lots of professors in certain major cities so that the events are really carnival-like and learning festivals, so to speak. It's an idea we have always toyed with, never really had the time to think through. Now we've had the time to think through. So we think that's in our future, but, if you ask me when, when is when Dr. Fauci gets up there and says, "Remember the virus? Seems like so long ago," when he says that, that's our signal to move forward.

Jeff Cobb (14:08):

A lot of organizations, a lot of learning businesses, have not realized the potential of partnerships. I know you've already mentioned that partnerships are important for you. Can you talk a little bit about (a) how that came about, and then (b) is there any guidance you would offer to anyone who wants to leverage partnerships to grow their learning business?

Steven Schragis (14:31):

You have to be unique. You have to be able to talk about your product—and I hate to call education or learning a product, but we're a business. We're a for-profit business. That's why we're doing this. We don't have an educational mission except we like education, obviously. We're not NYU. We're not Columbia. So you really need to learn to say how are you different, in fact better than a thousand other people. If you could do that, then doors will open. We perfect that a lot and keep changing it. Don't always hit a home run, but I find that only when I'm successful at convincing people that there's no alternative to One Day University—either work with us or don't work with anybody—only when I can convince people of that, does the partnership fall into place. But many, many of them have, I'm glad to say.

Jeff Cobb (15:21):

Well, two questions. One is how do you typically articulate your value proposition right now when you're going to a partner? What do you say about One Day University to make them realize that they need to work with you?

Steven Schragis (15:32):

There are a million people offering educational talks. Maybe not a million, but an awful lot. Every school, every church, every temple, every group everywhere. There's so much out there. You could do this all day for 24 hours, for years. People's time is valuable, and, unless they're trying to get ahead in work or a degree that qualifies them for something (which is a whole different business than ours), if they're just doing this for the same reason they would go to a Broadway show or a museum, then you have to entertain them. You have to say right up front to your instructor, "You got to be fun." You have to get people to say, "That was great! I hope the next guy's as good as you." And I don't think anyone else is really doing that.

Steven Schragis (16:23):

We obsess about titles. We will try out four or five different titles, and we run little online focus groups because the same course called one thing or another thing can triple the enrollment. Most actual schools don't obsess about the title of the course, but we really do obsess. I think that's why, when people look at our offerings, a reasonable amount say, "Oh, these look pretty interesting," because you need that, or they'll just turn off. I think that's what distinguishes us from others.

Steven Schragis (16:55):

Then finally we get compared to MasterClass a lot, and I think we're one and two in this area—they're up there bigger than we are. I try and distinguish by saying, "We don't look for celebrities. We look for the best possible professor." The example I sometimes give is they have Aaron Sorkin teaching screenwriting. There's no better screenwriter in the world than Aaron Sorkin, so, if you're making a movie, get him. He's fantastic. Is he a great teacher? Different question. We work with someone who is sort of a star on his campus, and everybody wants to take his classes to learn about screenwriting. His name is Marc Lapadula, but most people don't know that name. At Yale, all the film students know the name, though, and that's who we want. That's the difference.

Jeff Cobb (17:54):

Two great points there. One about often the people who have the most expertise, the most experience, may not know a thing about teaching, as you're indicating, and we run into that all the time. I think that focus on what you call things, how you name them, testing out those titles, not enough of that happens. So I think that is definitely a great practice.

Jeff Cobb (18:22):

Have you had partnerships that have not panned out, and, to the extent that you have, why? What do you want to try to avoid in a partner to keep it from falling apart?

Steven Schragis (18:34):

I like talking about successes more than failures, but I will say our audience is not under 30. Our audience is not people who are totally busy bringing up their kids or people who are really working to get ahead at work—that's a younger group. There's no benefit to One Day University except it's good for your brain. When we've partnered with groups that had objectives different than ours, it wasn't so successful. When we partner with groups that tend to

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cater to the very people we're looking for, it's been more effective. As I say, our group is bigger than niche. I don't think it's mass market. It's certainly in the many millions. And one of the publishers we worked with pointed out, "There's a new, vibrant, healthy, intellectually curious 65-year-old, born every eighth of a second in this country," and so that's a pretty big market to go after.

Jeff Cobb (19:39):

Well, speaking of markets, you and I are talking as part of a series we're doing on what we're calling the learning business MBA—so what it takes for a learning business to succeed as a business. When you think about that, think about what it takes for a learning business to succeed, what kinds of skills, knowledge, behavior come to mind, based on your own experience?

Steven Schragis (20:04):

If you're in the business that we're in—for people who are truly educators, to provide information so that people can do their job better, can be a better coder or computer programmer or gardener or physicist or whatever, it's different. And I understand. That's not the business I've ever had much to do with. But if people are doing this and don't have to, then you better not forget that people need to enjoy themselves. It has to be fun, and it can't go on too long. It has to sound interesting, and then it has to deliver on being interesting, and it has to seem sort of unique. People's time are valuable so that if you... When we sell One Day University, we sometimes say, "Have you ever been to an event where an incredibly well credentialed speaker is incredibly boring?" And everyone shakes their head and said, "Yeah, I've been to some of those," then you know what our mission is. Our mission is to never let that happen. Not saying it doesn't happen sometimes, but we really try not to.

Jeff Cobb (21:14):

It is interesting because you're drawing a distinction between those who might be working to advance themselves and their career and their work, that sort of thing, versus people who don't have to. I think there probably is a lot of overlap at this point, though, because, even if you're trying to serve people who maybe need to earn some continuing education credit, who are trying to advance, if you're serving them boring stuff that they were not really all that interested in participating in, you're not going to get them. They have other options, basically.

Steven Schragis (21:40):

Right. When all of us read the statistics of people who start these things and then drop out, and they're enormously high, a key reason is it's not fun. It's not interesting, so, unless you have to do it, you'll drop out. If it's something you thought would be good for you, probably would be good for you, but this is like pulling teeth, you're going to lose those people. So we really try to work to make it enjoyable. And, again, you can usually tell 30 seconds into a professor's talk whether they're into it, and they're going to be fun and entertaining and interesting or not. It's not hard to figure it out pretty quickly.

Jeff Cobb (22:24):

Out of what I've been hearing from you in terms of those sort of business skills, knowledge, behavior, whatever, it sounds like—I don't know if you've studied it or if it comes to you naturally, you've just developed the abilities over the years, but certainly sounds like marketing is very important and probably just an attention to details or just production values, getting the

right content in the right way. Is what I'm saying resonating, that sort of marketing and production side of things?

Steven Schragis (22:53):

I would say yes. I'll also say that the phrase "Every company is only as good as their technology" really is true. If I were in charge of the technology of our company, we would be out of business, no two ways about it, but I work with some people who are very good at that. You need that because that's the world we live in now. Don't neglect that part. If the sound isn't good, if it comes across crackly, you lose people. And just everything, keeping track of your data, using it to evaluate things. Doing business by the seat of your pants the way people did once before, just doesn't work. I'm not saying I understand all this stuff, but get people who do.

Jeff Cobb (23:33):

Actually two lines of follow-up I wanted to have there because it sounds like... I was going to ask you about the relationship between technology and a successful learning business. I think probably any business has to have the right people with the right understanding of technology, but the learning business has its own specific types of technology. It sounds like getting that right, in your mind, is very important, so you have to have the right people there to do that.

Jeff Cobb (23:59):

Related to that is that idea of getting the right people. We've talked about marketing. We've talked about the production, attention to detail and producing the right things. We've talked about technology some. But you have to have the right people there to do all of that. How have you managed to build the team you need, to find the people and to help, to the extent you needed to, cultivate and develop those people over time?

Steven Schragis (24:22):

My business partner is a little younger than me but roughly my age, and we had worked together for The Learning Annex when I was there, and he had a graphic design background, and we needed that, and he had a real good business mind. So he was a great partner, and we still work together. Beyond that, almost everyone we have hired was hired right out of college, and I'm actually not a huge believer in finding people who've developed skills over the years, and now you need them. Looking for people who can learn really fast and have the right attitude and can communicate well. The people we've interviewed and brought in, they still laugh at what they had to go through. I talk to them. I ask them if they like movies. Everyone, of course, says, "Yes." I say, "Why don't you tell me about a movie you saw that you loved and make me want to see the movie?"

Steven Schragis (25:19):

Then they start to answer, and I say, "No, no. Think about it a minute because this is the first and maybe the most important question of the interview." They think about it, and some of them come back, and they just do a great job, and some of them just fumble and don't communicate it well, and I don't know what they're talking about. That often is the indicator right there. Look for people who can communicate well, with a sense of humor, who look like they'll work well with others. You can just tell, and they may know nothing on day one, but by day 60 they'll know a lot.

Jeff Cobb (25:54):

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I love that question. I might have to use that myself. It's amazing how revealing something like that can be.

Steven Schragis (26:05):

They're so shocked when I say, "No, no, no. Think about it a little because it's a very important question." I also should say I often say, "Take a minute to tell me." Some people answer, and they just ramble, seven or eight minutes, and that tells you something. And some people just say, "*Wizard of Oz*. It was great." That tells me nothing, and I'm like, "Well, you had 55 more seconds. Use them." It's that sort of thing. It's a little quirk of mine, I guess. You let them organize their thoughts. The ability to know how to handle something after two seconds instead of 30 seconds is not an ability one has to test.

Jeff Cobb (26:49):

Yeah, definitely. I love that too in the context of your learning business, the movie question, and other questions could serve this purpose. But you've said unabashedly that you're as much in the entertainment business as you are in the learning business, so I think asking somebody to riff off of a piece of entertainment...

Steven Schragis (27:10):

You know what? In fact, if they don't know, if they're like... because that could happen. I say, "Okay, forget the movie. Tell me about a book. Tell me about a Broadway show. Tell me about a golf course." I don't care what they talk about. I just want to hear them talk about it, and that usually opens them up.

Jeff Cobb (27:28):

Well, great. As we're starting to wind up here, when you think about others out there who are listening, who are in the learning business in one way or the other, some of them may be serving an audience similar to yours, some of them are much more focused on that professional audience who're trying to get ahead in work, in the world and that sort of thing, but, regardless, what other advice might you have for anybody who wants to take their business to the next level? Because you've obviously taken One Day University from an idea into all sorts of directions over time.

Steven Schragis (27:57):

Get lucky. That's the first thing. But second thing also is most of the growth we had has come through partnerships, and there's almost... But any two businesses—not every time but many, many times—there's a way to structure things so that both sides will be glad they went into this deal. We eventually had working relationships with 59 different media companies, newspapers mostly. And, when people say, "Why those 59?" I say, "Well, those are the 59 that answered my e-mail." Why weren't we in Georgia? Because I must have tried 30 times to get in touch with media companies there, and they would never answer my calls.

Steven Schragis (28:44):

So if someone reaches out to you, answer it, it's only, especially with Zoom now, it's only five minutes. Even if you're not sure up front what the arrangement can be, after you talk to someone, usually it's there. We're working now, we had a really successful promotion with *The Sacramento Bee*. Now we're working with *Boston* magazine and *Philadelphia* magazine. We've worked with temples, churches, JCCs, libraries, women's clubs, men's club. We had a really

good promotion with a Volvo dealer in New Jersey. The opportunities are there if you communicate, and, really, Zoom has made it a lot easier to communicate.

Celisa Steele (29:30):

Steven Schragis is founder and director of One Day University. You can learn more about One Day U at [onedayu.com](http://onedayu.com). Steven also invites you to contact him directly at [steven@onedayu.com](mailto:steven@onedayu.com). He's happy to talk about his experience making learning entertaining and appealing.

Jeff Cobb (29:50):

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Celisa Steele (29:57):

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Jeff Cobb (30:09):

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Celisa Steele (30:26):

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Jeff Cobb (30:36):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*