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COVER OF THE WEEK



Martin Ryf with his children, Jonas and Valentina

AN INTERVIEW WITH
Martin Ryf

Why ***PERSONAL CONNECTIONS*** matter more than ever in an increasingly ***DIGITAL WORLD***

How his business model brings ***PEOPLE*** and ***TECHNOLOGY*** together

Where trust builds *business*

Credits: Rainer Häckl

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Where trust builds business

Martin Ryf on bringing people and technology together

Informing people and building trust are key to referral marketing. But can AI take over these tasks in the future? Anyone who thinks so underestimates the importance of personal relationships, says Martin Ryf. The Swiss entrepreneur has been shaping the industry for 30 years and has seen many trends come and go. In our interview, we spoke with him about why personal connections matter more than ever in an increasingly digital world – and how his business model brings people and technology together.

Mr. Ryf, referral marketing seems to be more popular than ever. What aspects of this business model convinced you of its potential?
Before entering the industry, I worked as an insolvency officer. My job was to take everything away from people who had become insolvent in order to satisfy their creditors. It was an incredibly difficult time because I was constantly dealing with people going through hardship. I witnessed so many personal tragedies, and that left a lasting impression on me.

Relationship marketing offered the complete opposite experience. Instead of taking things away from people, I could give them something: a new perspective and a business opportunity that could help them build a stable, sustainable future. That fascinated me. Today, advertising budgets have become enormous. Companies have to spend vast amounts of money just to reach customers and stay afloat. It's quite astonishing how much businesses have to invest in advertising. In referral marketing, trust is the advertising budget. Genuine recommendations are worth their weight in gold, especially today. By building relationships and developing a network of recommendations, you can create a substantial business. The model also offers considerable potential for growth without requiring significant upfront capital. Simply put, you can start with very little money and still build something of your own. Having witnessed how much suffering financial difficulties can cause, I believe that is an extraordinary opportunity.

How does referral marketing actually work, and how has the approach evolved throughout your career?
It always starts with the product experience. Ideally, someone uses a product that genuinely adds value to their life. Many companies in referral marketing operate in areas such as health, beauty and wellness, where customers use products themselves. When people have a positive experience with a product, they naturally want to talk about it. They might share their experience with others or be asked about it. That's often how a business opportunity develops: people start building a business around something they genuinely believe in. That's the typical process, although some people are initially attracted by the business opportunity itself.

For decades, you've been active in the industry. What personal qualities have been key to your long-term success?
One thing that has helped me enormously is my ability to put myself in other people's shoes, which I developed during my time as an insolvency officer. I know how to listen, pick up on what people are feeling, show empathy and meet them where they are. These skills are essential for building a business over the long term. In principle, though, they apply to every business, not just relationship marketing.

> »If you want to achieve something, you need discipline, consistency and perseverance.«
>
> – Martin Ryf

If you want to achieve something, you need discipline, consistency and perseverance. That's particularly true in an industry that attracts many newcomers who may never have worked in business or run a company before. You also have to learn to accept rejection. When someone says no, you shouldn't take it personally. You simply have to tell yourself, »Okay, that's part of the game.« ▸

Credits: Rainer Häckl



This isn't about making money overnight. Building a referral marketing business takes years. Many people focus solely on the high incomes they hear are possible. I hear stories about extraordinary earnings all the time, but that's the wrong mindset. The goal should be to build a stable, sustainable business over the long term – potentially one that can be passed down through generations.

Choosing the right company is another important factor in understanding why so many people fail. The product needs to be genuinely outstanding, ideally unique. And you need a system that works. Structured, step-by-step programmes can be a real advantage.

How far ahead do people in this industry typically plan?
You don't necessarily have to think in terms of decades. You can enter relationship marketing and decide to give it a year, two years or even just three months. But generally speaking, when people start a business, they don't open a boutique and plan to run it for only six months. They tend to have a long-term outlook.

At the very least, I would recommend giving yourself a year to see whether the business works for you. That's the other side of the equation: Not everyone will succeed automatically, even with a great system and a number-one product. Your own commitment matters, too. Personality plays a major role.

What kind of person would you say referral marketing isn't suited to? And have you seen people develop the qualities they need over time?
For me, one major red flag is a purely transactional mindset – seeing other people simply as a means to an end. You have to be genuinely willing to help others succeed, whether that's by helping them find the right products or supporting them as business partners. Anyone who doesn't share that mindset will struggle. Another deal-breaker is being unwilling to learn from a coach.

I always say that newcomers need to be coachable. Some entrepreneurs might think, »I don't need anyone to explain this to me. I've been in business for 20 years, and I know how to build a company.« But referral marketing follows its own rules, so even experienced business owners can run into difficulties.

These are crucial points. There's no need to reinvent the wheel in referral marketing. The industry has been around for decades, and you can learn from established approaches that have already proven successful.

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You mentioned that relationship marketing follows its own rules. What sets it apart from traditional sales?
There are several differences. For example, we don't have a physical shop or a conventional sales operation. We build our business through recommendations. That means we don't need to bombard customers with advertising messages.

Another crucial point is that we don't have employees. An entrepreneur who wants to build a business by treating their partners like employees won't succeed. We're all independent business owners. No one gets to dictate what someone else has to do. That's probably the biggest difference: We're not employees.

How important are individuality and authenticity? And what does someone need to be coachable in when aiming to succeed in relationship marketing? Are there standard phrases they can learn and use?
I believe you need both structure and authenticity. Following an established framework provides guidance and confidence. Having a proven system to work with can be particularly reassuring for newcomers.

But I always say: Stay authentic! At the end of the day, everything comes down to trust. Standard phrases are a bit like the foundation of a house. They help beginners overcome their initial hesitation and give them a clear framework to work with. But people can tell immediately whether a conversation is genuine or whether someone is simply reading from a script.

You absolutely have to bring your own personality into the conversation. In my view, the ideal balance is to have a repeatable system in the background that anyone can adopt, while remaining completely authentic and honest in every interaction. The goal is to replicate what works without losing your individuality.

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How has relationship marketing changed since you first entered the industry? Have new opportunities emerged, and does success require a different skill set today?
The technology we have today simply didn't exist ten or twenty years ago. Back then, everything revolved around building personal relationships.

Products have also evolved considerably. Many now deliver tangible benefits almost immediately and are far more advanced technologically. That wasn't necessarily the case in the past. Today, however, this is very important: the sooner customers are impressed by a product, the sooner they naturally become advocates for it.

The technological possibilities are fascinating. Today, presentations can be made available through dedicated platforms, and onboarding systems guide new members through the process step by step. Software and AI support these processes.

All of this is now available in multiple languages, too. Our systems, for example, currently support 21 ▸



Credits: Rainer Häckl



languages. The progress has been enormous, and it has fundamentally changed how the business operates.

Have there also been trends that initially looked promising but failed to stand the test of time? What do you think went wrong?
Yes, there are plenty cases. Some products offered no real value at all. There were even training programmes distributed on CDs. In my view, physical products that people can actually hold in their hands are particularly well suited to relationship marketing. That's the ideal scenario for me.

Then there were the get-rich-quick schemes that promised a lot but delivered very little. Many relied on automated systems and lacked genuine relationship-building. But relationship marketing is fundamentally about human connection, and trust is the decisive factor. If you rely exclusively on automated systems, you're setting yourself up for failure. That's why the model I use in my own sales organisation keeps people at the centre. It's a person-to-person business supported by technology.

Does person-to-person communication today also include social media and phone calls?
The first contact should be personal, but that doesn't mean you have to knock on someone's front door. You could certainly do that, and perhaps it wouldn't even be a bad idea. But hardly anyone does it these days.

Instead, people talk on the phone. And there are opportunities to meet people everywhere. You encounter new people in everyday life, strike up conversations and share recommendations. If you have a great meal at a restaurant, for example, you might tell someone else about it.

That's exactly what I mean by making that initial connection: You should start a conversation with someone in a natural, genuine way.

How do you see digitalisation evolving over the next few years? Where do you see the biggest opportunities – and what are the risks?
Anything involving information, documentation, training and initial introductions can be handled digitally. I expect these systems to become even more widely used in the future. Digital processes can save a great deal of time and, above all, make it possible to scale a business. Tasks that used to take days can now be completed by AI in minutes – creating a presentation, for example.



Martin Ryf is a Swiss entrepreneur with 30 years of experience in referral marketing. A former public official, he helps people build sustainable business models.

The risk, however, is that sales partners become so dependent on these tools that they lose the ability to build genuine relationships. And that is the very essence of relationship marketing. I always say: if you use AI as a substitute for human reliability, you'll lose. If you use it to become more efficient, you'll win.

There are several areas in which these tools are particularly valuable. Every sales partner, for example, needs to present information to others on a regular basis, and that process can be automated. Software can also provide a step-by-step onboarding programme. Finally, you need a support platform that gives every sales partner round-the-clock access to all the information they need, including training tools, instructional videos and much more.

Over the past three and a half years, my team and I have built a platform of this kind. So far, we've invested more than 4,500 hours of work in it. Why did I do that? Because I know how much it helps my sales organisation.

What needs to be in place for digitalisation and personal relationship-building to complement each other as effectively as possible?
Digitalisation and AI can take care of many of the routine tasks. They're excellent tools for creating presentations, training materials, videos and learning programmes – resources that every member needs time and again.

But software cannot replace a personal conversation or build trust between people. That's what we focus on. Training systems can teach you a great deal, but actually speaking to people and making recommendations is a different matter.

Without product innovation and a well-functioning system in the background, businesses can quickly disappear from the market. You need professional digital infrastructure alongside a relationship-based business model. That's how you succeed.

Having spent 30 years in relationship marketing after working as an insolvency officer, I believe the market offers enormous opportunities today. It's a modern, highly professional business model – no longer the »housewife business« that people used to dismiss for so many years.

To me, it's an entrepreneur's dream. It offers many of the advantages business owners are looking for without some of the drawbacks of running a traditional business. You don't need your own premises or employees. In principle, you can adopt an established, proven system without any start-up costs. And with the right infrastructure, you can scale the business into new regions, including markets where different languages are spoken.

> »Many people worry that AI will take their jobs. But anyone who believes AI can do everything will eventually disappear from the market.«
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> – Martin Ryf

Essentially, you're handed a ready-made system on a silver platter. I can't imagine anything better than finding something that truly feels like your calling.

Many people worry that AI will take their jobs. But anyone who believes AI can do everything will eventually disappear from the market. Plenty of people have tried that approach and failed. At the same time, human-to-human business is becoming increasingly valued again. It's a countertrend, and one that continues to gain momentum. ◆ *(L)*

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