

Lenox: Welcome to Outperform, the Acceleration Partners podcast. On today's episode, we are thrilled to have Emily Tetto and Angela Hughes here with us to discuss an important challenge facing the affiliate marketing industry: a lack of people with the right skills, experience, and know-how to properly manage an affiliate program. They'll also discuss what Acceleration Partners is doing to try and solve this issue.

As you may recall to listening to past Outperform episodes, Emily Tetto is the Director of Talent and Culture here at Acceleration Partner, and Angela Hughes is our Associate Director of Affiliate Training and Quality. Welcome, Emily and Angela.

Angela: Thank you.

Emily: Thank you, Lenox.

Lenox: Let's start off by talking about what we mean when we say that there's a "lack of talent and expertise in the affiliate marketing industry." Emily, I'll [punt 00:00:59] that question to you.

Emily: Well, for us when we think about the industry and the talent that resides in the industry, it's not a very big industry to begin with. It is a very specific niche where there are some people that are heavily trained in affiliate program management, and they might be currently working at networks, or they currently might be working on the client side, or they might just have a piece of affiliate. There are some of those people out there, but then there are a lot of folks out there that have a lot of great general, digital knowledge and might know what affiliate is, but they're not really, truly managing the program. The talent pool and the people that have been trained in affiliate program management has been fairly consistent over the past couple of years, but then on the flip side, there are more and more companies and brands that are trying to integrate affiliate marketing into their plans, and the need and the growth has just grown exponentially, and the talent pool has not been able to keep pace with that.

I think that's where the issue is residing.

Lenox: Angela, any thoughts on that as well? That lack of talent and expertise and...?

Angela: Yeah, I think to Emily's point, I think that we're just growing at a pace faster than the industry can really cultivate the talent. I think that in terms of the space, too, I don't think affiliate marketing is something that people necessarily learn about either. It's not something that's taught in college or something that the average marketer out there is necessarily coming across, so I think that it's a lot harder to get people who have knowledge and sort of a focus in this space.

Lenox: So Angela, you've had a lot of experience managing affiliate programs. From your perspective and your personal experience, what kinds of skills and expertise does a good affiliate manager need to have?

Angela: Sure. I'd say one of the top things is exceptional client service skills. The ability to really build strong relationships, have good judgment, knowing how to effectively prioritize and push back with clients. I think that that's one of the pieces of hiring that is challenging because it's something that's harder to teach people. It's something that if they have that experience that they can bring into AP from the get-go, it makes the job much easier. I'd say strong analytical skills and the ability to tell a story through data. The other is strategic thinking, so the ability to think creatively and always really keeping the client's goals in mind. The ability to pivot on a dime. Things change so fast and so often in our industry and just in our day-to-day with clients, and somebody who's okay with things shifting and not going according to plan is critical.

I'd say the last thing, and I think this just touches in so many areas of our business is just the keen attention to detail. There's so many moving pieces at all times, it's important to stay focused and just be mindful of details while not losing sight of the big picture. We're constantly executing new campaigns and there's so many different touchpoints across our team and with clients that it's really critical to have that attention to detail.

Lenox: So the skills that Angela just addressed, why are those skills so difficult to find? Is it specifically because they don't have knowledge of the ins and outs of affiliate marketing, or they don't have the skills of good client service? What is that gap?

Emily: Yes, I think what it is, it's all of those skills together. In any one individual, we can find a lot of those skills. It's finding the people that hold all of those skills, and specifically hold all those skills plus have the in-depth affiliate program knowledge. Being able to come in and run an affiliate program, day-to-day management, and also just be able to drive strategy and understand all the opportunities that are out there, that person needs to have been immersed in this world for quite some time, or at least a couple of years to have some of that knowledge.

Lenox: Angela, you have been in the industry for quite a long time and you've managed programs. You've also managed people. How did you get involved in the affiliate marketing industry?

Angela: So, my experience is actually in the cable and entertainment world. I previously worked at Showtime Networks and Lifetime Networks. I was in a role that we considered affiliate marketing, but it was a little bit different. In the cable world, it's a totally different role. I kind of came across it accidentally. When discovered the role at AP, it was at a time

when we were really just looking for smart marketers. AP didn't necessarily want somebody to have affiliate experience. I was in a place where I was really fortunate to have that marketing background and was able to learn really just through trial and error and managing account.

Lenox: That sounds to be, and correct me if I'm wrong Emily, but that sounds to be a bit of a pattern in this specific industry, is a lot of people who come on board, their experience is just a lot of on-the-job training. They were in some other kind of marketing niche, and then all of a sudden, the company said, "Hey, we're going to start with this affiliate marketing thing. Go ahead and take care of it and manage it." Is that what you've experienced in your conversations with people?

Emily: Yes, absolutely. A lot of people have sort of stumbled upon the industry in one way or another, and a lot of those folks are out there. It's definitely something that I find people do stumble into. To Angela's point earlier, it's not something that's being taught in college programs right now. They're probably starting to talk about it now, but historically, it hasn't been. They might talk about the PPC channel or they might talk about SEO, email marketing, display, all of these other channels out there that have been really actively focused on creating talent and training them in these different channels, but affiliate just hasn't quite caught up there yet.

Lenox: Why is that no longer enough? Having somebody with maybe six months of experience or no experience at all starting to manage a program? Why is that not okay anymore?

Emily: I'll give my point of view, but I would love to hear Angela's because she does have so much more on-the-job experience. In my point of view, just having that limited knowledge, so if somebody did stumble upon it because an employer just asked them to figure it out, or maybe they'd only have a couple months' experience, they're just limited in what they've been able to get exposed to. Any smart person can read articles and podcasts, and they can probably get themselves maybe 80% of the way there, but there are so many intricacies to affiliate marketing and so much more to learn. On our end, when we're looking at candidates, we're also looking at people that have been exposed to different [articles 00:07:58], different types of clients, different challenges, worked with different publishers. We're looking for people that also have a little bit more of a well-rounded background. Angela, I'd love to hear what you think.

Angela: Yeah. I'd say that a lot of it has to do with the state of our business and what the need is. If we are in need of talent immediately and we need them to hit the ground running, then we absolutely need those folks that have the experience and they don't need a lot of handholding, but I think that as we start to take a look at the industry as a whole and realize this lack of talent, we're in a position where we can find those

people that may not necessarily have the experience and we can cultivate that talent. I think it just depends on what the need is that we're trying to fill. There's sort of both of them; it's that plug-and-play, but then also the need to continue to grow the talent.

Lenox: Let's talk about that. What is Acceleration Partners doing? What are you two doing to help resolve this lack of talent, this "talent crisis" if you will, in the affiliate marketing industry?

Angela: So we're decided to grow our own talent. We're looking for smart people with client services and account-based experience who are digital marketers that we can really teach about affiliate marketing. We're doing this by way of what we are calling our "Affiliate Academy."

Lenox: Okay, I'm a person who has digital marketing experience. I have managed accounts, I might know about search-and-paid, retargeting, and all these different types of digital marketing channels, and I've managed accounts but I know little to nothing about affiliate marketing. Is that really who the Affiliate Academy is targeting out there?

Angela: Yeah, absolutely. I say that anybody who has that client service and account management experience has some sense of the digital marketing landscape, and somebody that really has the desire and aptitude to learn about a brand new industry in an accelerated time period. I'd say someone who is willing to work outside their comfort zone and show confidence during less comfortable times; there's going to be this period of trial and error, and someone who's okay learning through their mistakes. Someone who's really good at connecting the dots, too. I'd say that there's a lot of things that we could sort of teach individually: different individual topics and processes, challenges in the industry, but somebody that can really proactively and independently tie everything together through application, and I'd say someone who's really comfortable asking questions too. Someone who's willing to ask questions but someone who also is willing to trust the process and know that eventually click and it will eventually provide clarity, and I think that's a really tough balance for some people that just want to know everything right away.

Lenox: Emily, from your experience talking with candidates, digital marketing professionals, they have that experience in search-and-paid and all these other digital marketing expertise but not affiliate. What's in it for them? Why should they or would they want to consider learning about affiliate marketing and getting into this world of being an affiliate marketing account manager, and starting kind of in this new career trajectory?

Emily: Yeah, that's a great question. It all depends on the individual. I think everyone has their own individual point of view, but for myself, I think that a lot of the other online channels are pretty full. They're full of

talent and they're also pretty well-established. In the online world, things are changing rapidly and daily, so there's definitely always more to learn and more to do, but those channels are barely established. In affiliate industry, there's so much more growth that is coming, and industry leaders in the marketing industry predict that in the near future, affiliate marketing is going to become one of the largest part of brands' online marketing mix for some of the world's leading companies. If you're looking for a new challenge, a growing industry, so much more to learn, it really gives people that ability to step out and learn a whole new channel, and be exposed to something that is on a great growth trajectory.

Lenox: It's not like they would just have to say "sayonara" to all these other great digital marketing skillsets. I think I want to clarify that, that it's not just one or the other; affiliate is a part of this whole huge digital marketing tapestry.

Emily: Exactly, that's such a good point. It really all interconnects, and people that have some of these strong skillsets in other areas can really utilize those strengths and make it all tie together in affiliate. They can be experts in other ways. We love to bring people onto our team that specifically have deep channel knowledge in other areas because it just can make our whole team stronger because they can bring in a whole new area of expertise. There's even one lady on our team that has expertise in SEO. She's been starting to help on some of our influencer programs, and she can just bring such a different perspective on how some things can be run and some different things that we could be doing better, and asking these really, really intelligent questions because of her knowledge in other channels. It's really interesting, I think, to merge and see all these channels start to cross over.

Lenox: So what is Affiliate Academy? How do you guys define "Affiliate Academy?"

Emily: Sure. It's essentially a twelve-week program that combines everything from formal trainings to hands-on exercises, job shadowing, a one-week on-site practicum where we get really into the nitty gritty of things. It's really hands-on and combined with on-the-job training. It's generally a cohort of about three to five new hires that are brand new to the industry, so everyone's learning together. It allows [to really 00:14:02] get great support system, and then new hires will spend a larger part of their first five weeks together as a group through those formal and informal learnings before being assigned to their team and their account where then the continued on-the-job learning occurs. It's designed to build upon itself, allowing a manager to work towards a full account load by the end of their 12 weeks, but it's based on their readiness. We don't want to just throw a full account at them if they're not completely ready. Everybody sort of learns at their own pace and is ready at their own pace, so the goal is by the end of the 12 weeks

they'll be ready for that full account load, but everyone's going to kind of get to that point at a slightly different pace.

Lenox: I think that's pretty revolutionary. Here you can take someone with digital marketing paid or search experience, and ideally would you guys say you would like them to have management or client services experience, not just necessarily straight out of college with a degree in marketing? Who is it? How would you describe the persona of this ideal candidate for the Affiliate Academy?

Emily: Yeah, I can take that one. I think somebody that's coming straight out of college or has only a couple years of marketing experience, digital marketing experience, those are great candidates to come in as associates. They can come into Acceleration Partners, apply for associate position, and they get really on-the-job learning and training in affiliate marketing behind the scenes. They're starting to learn client services. That's really where somebody that needs more of the skillsets is a great entry point. For Affiliate Academy, we're looking for somebody that already is a few years into their career. They already have a really strong client service skillset. That part is not something we're teaching in Affiliate Academy; in Affiliate Academy, we're focusing on affiliate program management. Really good, strong client services background, and then additionally to that, some digital marketing experience. Maybe it's eCommerce, maybe it is PPC, maybe it's email, maybe it's display, programmatic, the list can go on and on but somebody that understands that digital landscape and really has a strong client services background.

Then the last thing is they just really need to be excited about affiliate marketing and be pumped, and believe in the channel. Really just want to jump in two feet first.

Lenox: Angela, any thoughts on that? Anything to expand?

Angela: No, I think I just want to reiterate the client services piece of it. I think that it's such a critical component to our affiliate manager role and something that people need to feel very comfortable with. When it comes to being an affiliate manager, we can teach that affiliate piece of it, we can teach that content, but you have to have that right persona, that right comfort level to deal with clients. I think that that can come through by any channel. If you have that account management experience or the client services experience that we can kind of fill in the rest of it.

Lenox: So can anybody anywhere in the US, in the world, apply for Affiliate Academy? If they're in California, you guys are on the east coast, or are you guys right now just pretty focused on people who live in and around the Boston area?

Emily: For this particular next cohort that we're looking for starting in September 2017, we are looking in the Greater Boston area. We are trying to build around this particular hub, and we are looking for folks in this area. However, in the future, that decision has not been made. I don't know if we will continue to focus in the Boston area. We might choose to build a cohort around one of our other hub cities. That question is not easily answered for the long term, but for this particular next one, it is focused in the Boston area.

Lenox: Fair enough. We've talked about what Affiliate Academy is, who it's designed for, and how it can benefit a digital marketing professional who has client service experience and someone who wants to learn the ins and outs of this really incredible marketing model that is only growing quickly. What would you guys say is the benefit of Affiliate Academy for the affiliate marketing industry as a whole?

Angela: I'd say that without talent in the industry that our growth is really limited. I think that the more that we can hire and cultivate smart affiliate marketers, the more we can support and move the industry forward as a whole.

Lenox: For closing thoughts from you guys, what kind of advice would you give to a digital marketing professional who might be satisfied with what they're doing; they might enjoy the paid or search or retargeting work that they're doing, but they see their growth trajectory in their field limited and they might be looking elsewhere. What kind of advice would you give them, or reason to say, "Hey, why don't you check out the affiliate marketing industry?" Some people might not even know that that's even an option.

Emily: I would say that if somebody is interested in learning a new channel, learning for a challenge, putting themselves out of their comfort zone at least for a little bit during the training, and just really learning so much about this new channel, I think it's really something that they should check out. Whether they're looking at Academy or whether they just want to start learning about affiliate marketing, it is a really interesting channel that I think is going to start to become much more mainstream. Getting knowledge and getting experience on it now while it's still growing is a really exciting time to start learning about it, so I would definitely encourage people to start reading up on it.

Angela: I'd say, too, just to take that leap of faith. I talked a little bit earlier about my path here and the affiliate marketing world that I knew of. The role we had at my prior roles that had "affiliate marketing" in the title, it was nothing like what we do here. Like I said, I sort of stumbled upon it by accident, but I took that complete leap of faith. I had no idea what the industry was all about before I started here, and I've learned an enormous amount of information since I've been here and have been opened up to a whole different industry that I literally knew nothing about before. It was scary. I actually had a job offer at the

same exact time to go to a very well-known company, a huge company, somebody I had worked with years prior, it was a great opportunity. I decided to just take that leap of faith, like I said, and come to AP. It was the best decision I've ever made.

I've had a lot of opportunity here. I was in that same exact position before as a lot of these affiliate Academy new hires where I didn't know anything about it and I got to learn by trial and error. We didn't have the training program that we've developed today; I had to learn by different means, but that's fine. It still got me to the same point. I think I would've really regretted it had I not taken this path.

Lenox: I love that. That's really great advice.

So to our listeners out there, if you are a smart, experienced, digital marketer with client experience and you want to learn the ins and outs of a marketing model that we strongly believe will become a large part, if not the largest part, of the online marketing mix for the world's leading companies, then be sure to check out the Affiliate Academy page on our website. We'll also include that link in our show notes as well as links to our Affiliate Academy Frequently Asked Questions page and Application page. Emily and Angela, thank you both so much for taking the time to explain what our Affiliate Academy is, who it's for, and how it will benefit not only digital marketing professionals but really the industry as a whole with this incredible new talent that's being cultivated.

To our listeners, thank you for joining us for the Outperform podcast episode. Until next time, thanks for listening.