



0 to \$35M

Building an Agency from 0 to \$35M: Lessons Learned

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sm[💡]artsites

Agenda

1 Personal Story

A brief history of myself & how I got started

2 10 Things I Learned

What I learned from scaling the business

3 Recap

Closing Thoughts and Q&A



Alex Melen

Co-Founder, SmartSites





1991



T35 Hosting

1997



2011

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Forbes
SEO SERVICES
#1 BEST OF 2026



OVER 1,000 5-STAR REVIEWS

Company Name	Revenue 	Number of Employees 
 SmartSit...	\$105.9M	439

what is the largest private digital marketing agency in the US.
private meaning they haven't taken on any investments or
sold any equity



Finding a massive digital marketing company that has **never** taken outside investment is rare, as most scale by selling equity to Private Equity (PE) firms or Venture Capitalists (VC).

As of 2026, the largest private, strictly bootstrapped digital marketing agency in the U.S. is **SmartSites**.

1. SmartSites (The Bootstrapped Leader)

While many of its competitors have succumbed to "roll-ups" (where PE firms buy and merge agencies), SmartSites remains 100% independently owned by its founders, Alex and Michael Melen. 

- **Status:** Founded in 2011, they have famously never raised a single dollar of outside capital. 
- **Scale:** They currently employ over **350+ people** and manage hundreds of millions in ad spend.
- **Recognition:** They are a perennial fixture on the Inc. 5000 list and are currently the highest-rated agency on major review platforms like Clutch, boasting over 1,000 five-star reviews. 
- **Niche:** They dominate the "high-velocity" digital marketing space, focusing on SEO, PPC, and web design for thousands of clients ranging from small businesses to enterprise brands. 

Small Businesses Need Digital

Most can't afford an in-house team

No time to learn it
No budget for full-time specialists

Marketing

The whole is greater
than the sum of its
parts

Founder $\neq$ full-stack marketer
Team outperforms one freelancer
doing everything

Value of experience & scale

Benefit from repeatable wins
Economies of scale = lower cost,
higher ROI



THINGS I LEARNED

1. Nothing special about an agency 📺
2. Force growth 🌱
3. Tell everyone the job sucks 📈
4. Pay people very little 💸
5. Give everyone an owner's burden 👑
6. **Stop doing what got you here** 🛑
7. Be lazy 🛌
8. Ignore KPIs 📊
9. Make yourself replaceable ↺
10. Don't lead 🧘

1. Nothing special about an agency

- **Low barriers to entry:** Anyone with Wi-Fi can sell digital marketing
 - **No patents, no exclusive distribution, no IP**
 - **Trade secrets are short-lived**
- 💡 **Your people are your value proposition.**



2. Force growth

- **I never wanted a big company.** But my best people demanded growth.
- **I could grow... or lose them.** We made a plan and stuck to it: 30% annual growth.
- 💡 **In the long run, staying small was the bigger risk.**



3. Tell everyone the job sucks

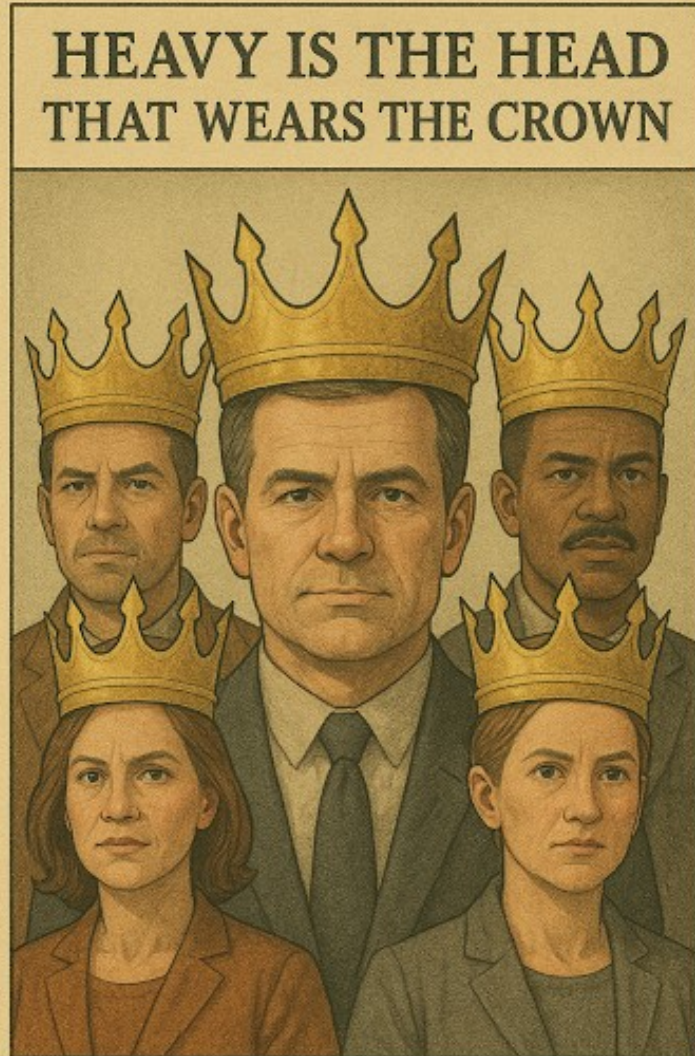
- We have tens of thousands of competitors
- To survive, we have to work harder, learn faster, and execute sharper
- Most have one boss — you'll have 20
- If you want “chill” — this isn't it

💡 **Pitching hard work attracts the best people** -- and sets expectations you can exceed.



5. Give everyone a small business owner's burden

- Build a culture where **everyone thinks like an owner**. Create a structure that empowers ownership
 - **Hypothesis:** PMs take on fewer projects once they become Team Leads
 - **Reality:** Team Leads actually manage more—projects and people
- 💡 **Small business owners work twice as much as employees - NY Enterprise Report**



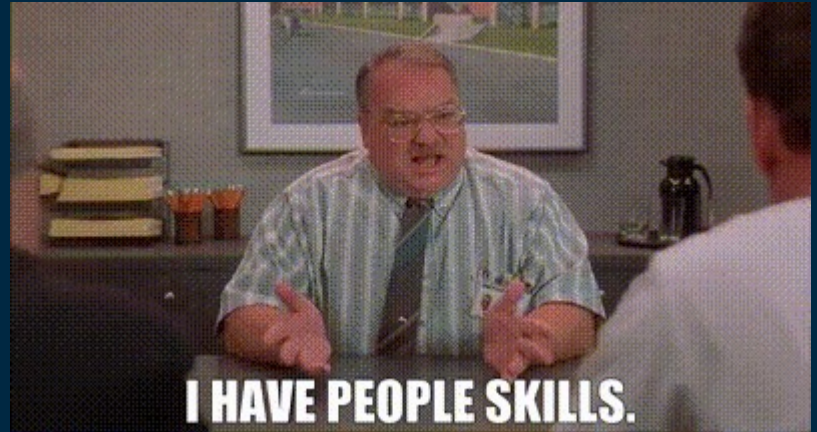
6. Stop doing what got you here

- The skills, behaviors, and habits that take you from \$0→\$5M actively hurt you from \$5M→\$35M.
- Founders who keep executing instead of systematizing become the bottleneck.
- The lesson: every growth stage requires you to reinvent yourself.



7. Be *long-term* lazy

- Delegation is a superpower disguised as laziness
 - A good strategy today = fewer problems tomorrow. Look for shortcuts that save more over time.
 - Best way to remove your ego? **Remove yourself.**
- 💡 Always try to do less - **but still get an A**



8. Ignore *most* KPIs

Office Key Point Interferences



- Come early; stay late
- Short lunch break
- Not rude; not loud
- Social and inclusive
- Attend company events
- Look busy
- Extraverts get an edge

Secondary (Signals)



- Time Tracking (Ops)
- Email Reply Rate (Client Facing)
- Feedback Stars (Ops: Primary)
- Upsells (Client Facing)
- Qrtrly Performance Reviews

Primary KPIs



- Sales**
 - Sales \$
 - Close Rate
 - Avg. Lead Value
- PMs**
 - Managed Billables
 - Retention Rate
 - Reviews
- Ops**
 - Actual vs Budget Analysis
 - Task Throughput & Queue
 - Internal Feedback

9. Make yourself replaceable

- If your absence breaks the business (or department), you didn't build one.

- **Be extremely replaceable — that's how you scale.** Leaders should build systems, not dependencies.

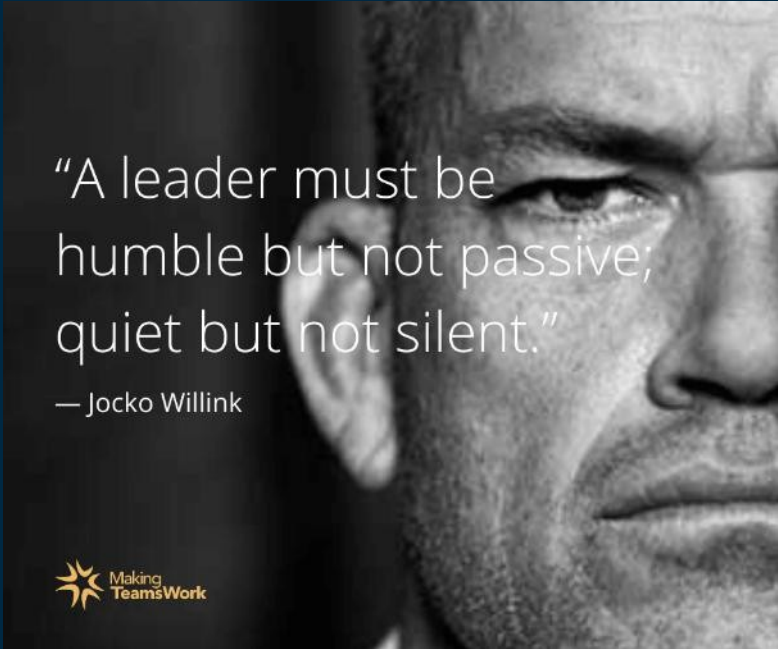
- Some companies have Mandatory Time Off (MTO) to help identify points of failure.

💡 Create people and processes that run without you.



10. Don't lead; *let others lead*

- **Let others lead.** Practice quiet leadership.
- **Empower those on the ground to make operational decisions**
- Step back — and be there only when needed. **The best leadership often comes from below**
- 💡 **Build a culture where people don't wait for permission**



"A leader must be
humble but not passive;
quiet but not silent."

— Jocko Willink



Recap

The Hook	What It Actually Means
Core Truth: Small Businesses Need Digital Marketing	
Nothing special about an agency	People are your value proposition
Force growth	Staying small was the bigger risk
Tell everyone the job sucks	Set expectations; pitch hard work
Pay people little initial base salary	Link compensation to performance
Give everyone an owner's burden	Everyone should think like an owner
Stop doing what got you here	Reinvent yourself at every stage
Be lazy	Optimize to do less over time
Ignore KPIs	Focus on bottom-of-funnel KPIs
Make yourself replaceable	Build systems, not dependencies
Don't lead	Quiet leadership empowers teams



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Thank You!



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