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- Jason Ilstrup

Welcome to the downtown download podcast where we hear from our members every month and learn something new about downtown Madison. All right let's get into it.

- Jason Ilstrup

Today's guest is Craig Bartlett owner of Red Card Media and Associate publisher of Isthmus. Hi Craig. How are you?

- Craig Bartlett

I'm good Jason. Thanks for having me.

- Jason Ilstrup

Just a note for all of our listeners Craig and I used to be friends, but I guess we're not now. So much so that my wife asked what happened to Craig? And I had no answer. Craig why are we no longer friends?

- Craig Bartlett

You tell me.

- Jason Ilstrup

Okay. This is an awkward way to start a podcast. Producer Madelyn is glaring at me just to get on-topic, but I thought we were friends for a long time, and I think we still are.

- Craig Bartlett

We have been.

- Jason Ilstrup

No, it's actually a joke, a running joke, between the two of us that uh, we used to see each other, what? Multiple times a week and now I think we've limited it to one time a week. But I don't think that necessarily means we're not friends. So, I want to get into everything about Craig Bartlett. Let's start with what is Red Card Media? I think many people don't know that you're involved in Red Card Media but it's a really big part of your business. What is Red Card Media? What do you guys work on?

- Craig Bartlett

So Red Card Media is, um, I don't know if you want to call it... the holding company, the company that both Isthmus Publishing and the Red Card meal plan and the CAMP meal program, for college athletics, all runs out of. So, Isthmus is the newspaper that's been in Madison for 44 years. Red Card meal plan is an off-campus meal plan for UW students that was started by myself and a business partner, Jeff Haupt in 2010 and then CAMP which is the college athletics meal plan kind of came out of that in about 2011. So yeah we do a number of different things but we're all housed down in one office and a bunch of us wear a bunch of different hats and we're actually able to do pretty much all of those things based on, you know, what Isthmus was built on and what Red Card was built on and it was kind of a --it wasn't a seamless transition to bring them all together-- but it made a lot of sense.

- Jason Ilstrup

Where did Red Card Media come from? That idea seems to make such obvious sense, but at some point, you guys said, " I think we can do a meal plan for university students, a private meal plan". Where did it come about?

- Craig Bartlett

So, Jeff Haupt, my business partner, spent 10 years working for the Onion newspaper in Boulder and ran, with his brother and another guy, the Onion out there. When he moved back here, he sold his business back to Onion Inc. I was working at the Onion at the time. When he moved back, I remember the first day we went out to lunch just to kind of get to know each other and he said there are these guys in Boulder they run this program called the Flatiron meal plan. Basically, they market to parents of incoming students and tell the parents, "Hey living in the dorm is great and having a cafeteria plan is great, but if you want somebody to really experience campus and you want to know where the cash you're giving your student is actually going and you want to teach them about budgeting, you should give them money to eat off campus. Then they can experience, (at the time it was local Boulder restaurants and sandwich shops), but then you also don't have to worry about that cash going to a bar or something else college students may do. So, we talked about that in 2007, or whenever, Jeff and I-- 2006--whenever Jeff and I first met. We worked together at the Onion for a couple of years, parted ways but we always stayed in touch and finally we just got tired of talking about starting a program like Flatiron here that we just said well let's figure out how to do this because we're starting to annoy each other with this continual banter about how could we do this, why would we do this, how would it work. So, we pulled the trigger on that. We tried to figure out what to call it. Obviously, Wisconsin is cardinal and white so coming up with Red Card at the time we did.

- Jason Ilstrup

Oh man I just got that and I've known you. Wow

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. That's why we're not friends anymore. You're slow.

- Jason Ilstrup

I was. It was coming together. That red card. Now. Got it.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. So, when we started this program in 2010 there were no functional payment applications that you could just have on your phone. So, we actually did print cards for everybody. So, if Jason Ilstrup went to University Wisconsin in 2010, he would come to our office

- Jason Ilstrup

I did actually graduate in 2011.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. Did you have a Red Card?

- Jason Ilstrup

Yeah of course. Yeah. The maximum plan. Yeah. That's what was called the maximum plan.

- Craig Bartlett

So, you know, we used to have a basement office on State Street and kids/the parents would sign up or. Or students would sign up and we'd print out cards for them. They'd come down they'd pick them up. Now we've fully transitioned. We don't really print out cards anymore. There still is the technology to do that, but now it's a fully functional payment platform on their phone. You know, there's card readers and scanners in ninety-five merchants on campus, everybody from Starbucks and Chipotle and Qdoba to Fresh Madison Market. So, we really kind of, you know, we provide a real strong merchant list which gives the students the opportunity to really expand how they want to eat their way through school.

- Jason Ilstrup

Wow that's amazing. So how many students use your program in any given year?

- Craig Bartlett

There's about forty-five hundred to five thousand users.

- Jason Ilstrup

Wow.

- Craig Bartlett

Yep. So, anybody could have a card. We don't really go after freshmen because freshmen usually are gonna be living in the dormitories.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, they have a meal plan.

- Craig Bartlett

They have to have a meal plan, which they should. You know, there’s a lot of adjusting that a student needs to do when they get to school to not just point them at a cafeteria and say figure out how to be an adult, do your own laundry, manage your own time, here's where you can always eat. But we do start picking up freshmen, but then it's predominantly sophomores, juniors, seniors and then into grad students.

- Jason Ilstrup

You're having a huge economic impact not only with roughly five thousand users but you're sending people to a local restaurants.

- Craig Bartlett

Yep.

- Jason Ilstrup

And that has a huge impact on State Street and downtown.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. We like to think so. Last year I think was about four and a half million dollars went through the program and...

- Jason Ilstrup

A lot of that shopping local.

- Craig Bartlett

A lot of it. Yeah. And a lot of that would have would have ended up not necessarily in food. You know students. If a parent gives a student a thousand dollars, there's a lot of things a student can...

- Jason Ilstrup

You mean that would have gone to Riley's liquor?

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah, or Wondo's Yeah.

- Jason Ilstrup

You do like ...

- Craig Bartlett

...or Urban Outfitters...

- Jason Ilstrup

What color is your favorite fish bowl?

- Craig Bartlett

Red, red obviously

- Jason Ilstrup

Good. but you really are supporting a huge amount of the economy.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah and a lot of that came out of you know Jeff and I's relationships when we were at the Onion. The Onion predominantly sold to retailers, bars, restaurants that were looking to reach the college segment. So, you know for us to start that program year one we knew all of the people and we were kind of a trusted local business at the time. You know there's been multiple different iterations. Some of them I can't even remember their names. People coming into the market to try to do the same thing. But we're here, our office now is at the top State Street. You know it takes us 15 minutes to get to one of our merchants. If their card readers not working well, lotta times we just have to go down and turn it on.

- Jason Ilstrup

It sounds like the I.T. department my computer Jason is it.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. The problem is in the chair not in computer

- Jason Ilstrup

So, you're real growth though of late has been in these campus area meal plans, this CAMP you have dozens and dozens of universities all across the country.

- Craig Bartlett

Yes. So, a year in to running the Red Card meal plan to the full student body, we were able to get a meeting with the University athletic department. We knew that they fed their students internally. But when teams don't eat as a team--so if football, after practice, doesn't go through what they call training table (which you picture just big buffet lines and vats of spaghetti and chicken breasts), when they don't do that-- per NCAA rules, scholarship athletes still need a meal. So, they were still having to make sure that their student athletes could eat. So, back in the day, they would basically go around themselves as the athletic department food dining services to these different merchants. Qdoba or wherever and work out deals for half the football team to come in and get a burrito. This student athlete would have to take that coupon ---well, the athletic department would need to set it all up-- print out the coupons, work with the coaches to disburse the coupons, the student athletes would need to remember that Tuesday afternoon they had to eat this way. So, we were able to get a meeting. At the end of the meeting the guy said, "Look. I took this as a courtesy meeting. You know, I didn't think this would actually work. But I think you guys can save us some time." I think was April of 2011. We did like forty-five meals for men's and women's sports and they came back and said you saved just like 70 hours worth of work. So, how much of this can you do? So, since then the NCAA has changed a lot of rules about how they're letting athletic departments take care of their student athletes. And we have expanded from working with the University of Wisconsin to we just signed on for our twenty fifth school last week.

- Jason Ilstrup

Wow And schools all across the country, right?

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. Yeah. East Coast, West Coast SEC, ACC, PAC 12, Big Ten.

- Jason Ilstrup

I don't know. That's what I love about Madison, is a story like that, how many companies like yours, like Red Card Media, are doing so much work across this country and how we're really becoming an economic power not just for our region, but in the nation. I mean, this is another time where you hear again a local Madison company making a difference for college athletic programs across the country it's pretty cool Craig.

- Craig Bartlett

No, it's interesting. You know the dichotomy of what Red Card Media does with a super-progressive, forward-thinking, cutting-edge food service technology and then we put out a newspaper every Thursday.

- Jason Ilstrup

But couldn't use those exact same adjectives about your newspaper?

- Craig Bartlett

Oh totally. Absolutely.

- Jason Ilstrup

So why did you get by the business a few years back.

- Craig Bartlett

Well we'd have to back up to May 25th, 1979 when I was born.

- Jason Ilstrup

Way back!

- Craig Bartlett

Way back. I'm Madison born and raised. I tried to leave a couple of times I could never get out. Now there's no reason to leave. I've had some interesting jobs and opportunities to go see the world (not the world). ...go see different parts of the country, cool places, cool cities. And every time I come back, I would think to myself like, Wow! ---any of those restaurants, any of those bars, any of those museums, any of those public gardens--- we have absolutely all of them here. So why do I need to go anywhere else? I was working in a business where I was doing national advertising and marketing sales. I was working with super big, cool clients, but I was stuck in the agency world and I was helping people in a cubicle in New York fill out a spreadsheet as quickly and as efficiently as possible. And there was no sitting across the desk trying to figure out how I could actually help them. Even though I was selling a product that could help them there was there was nothing that I think took into account that I was born and raised in Madison and it had only been here, and I realized that I really needed human contact. I longed for my days at The Onion where I could walk into a business owners' restaurant or car dealership or you name it and talk to them about families and kids and shared history and what did they want to do and figure out with what I was doing how I could help them. So, Jeff and I started the Red Card. I was doing a corporate sales thing and I just longed to be back doing something I felt better about. In 2014 we brought on another business partner, a guy named Mark Tauscher who a lot of people know, former Badger former Packer.

- Jason Ilstrup

Yeah producer Madeline is a big sports fan. Big sports fan. Is he your favorite Green Bay Packer?

- Craig Bartlett

Our favorite right tackle.

- Jason Ilstrup

Yes. Yes.

- Craig Bartlett

So, when we were looking to expand Red Card, we thought there were things we could do on the athletic side. Mark and I had been friends for about 10 years. We started talking about bringing him in to help with that. Also, while Jeff and I were exploring, you know, what could we do with Isthmus. It's an important part of the media landscape in Madison. It had, it's got, a fantastic past. It was ready for somebody to come in and try and figure out what is media moving forward, what is print, what is social media. So, we brought Mark in at that point. That was five years ago this last July, and about 98 percent of my time and energy spent on all things Isthmus which is the newspaper, the website, social media, event production. We just, about two and a half years ago, three years ago, got into video production and video production is everything from helping DMI create a Facebook video to send out to their followers or something to help tell stories about their partners, something to live on their Web site or original content series like something we just started a couple of months ago called Food for Thought-- which really explores the local food scene and why it's important to think about sustainable agriculture, where your food's coming from, where you can get it, why you should get it.

- Jason Ilstrup

Why is it important that the Isthmus is in Madison? Why is it important we have an independent newspaper like Isthmus?

- Craig Bartlett

You're talking to the business development sales guy, so I can only I can only tell it from my angle of being a Madisonian. Madison is a city that needs something like that. We need independent local journalism to tell stories that dailies or, whether it's a TV station or a radio station or group-- there are stories that need to be told and an independent newsweekly like Isthmus-- that's part of what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to watch the watchers, we're supposed to make sure that if somebody else isn't picking up a story or exploring an angle to a story that we're there to fill that role and then if you think about what is Madison right now and where's it going. You need somebody to do the investigative journalism and opinion columns and, you know, operate on a daily basis with real true editorial integrity, while also trying to figure out how to pivot what Madison is becoming because of people like American Family that are growing, people like Zendesk that are moving a bunch of 20- somethings and 30- somethings to the city, and people like Epic Systems out in Verona who you know employ, I don't know what their latest number is, ten thousand people. A lot of those people aren't from here, so somebody needs to tell them about everything that goes on here and that's kind of the second part of what Isthmus provides for a community like Madison.

- Jason Ilstrup

And I think you hit it right on the head about why this newspaper is so important for this city because we as we grow, as Tom Lynch is known to say, as we go from a big little city to a little big city there's a lot of challenges to that. And us in the private sector and civic leaders and those in the public sector need to make sure we have, 1.) important information, but 2.) that somebody is watching, right, to make sure that that we have the best ideas out there that people aren't running afoul and the Isthmus can provide that. But you're also becoming sort of this cultural curator in a way of what's happening in Madison. Because again the city is growing, we have so many new residents. A sense of place and quality of life is very important not just in the recruitment of those residents but getting those people to stay and spend their money here. And I think you do an excellent job of really, honestly, it seems like your goal is to tell me what to do on the weekend. Right. This this conference happening at the Sylvee or the Brink Lounge or this is the new restaurant here or this is the new cocktail that I need to get at Mint Mark. I mean Craig, one could say you're the curator of cool.

- Craig Bartlett

I am not but...The mission the mission of Isthmus is to be the curator of not just cool but informed.

- Jason Ilstrup

Yeah. Absolutely.

- Craig Bartlett

So, if you're going to talk about investigative journalism opinion columns news coverage but then you roll into the you know the back half of the paper which is really just arts and entertainment and entertainment does as anything you do outside your house. So, you know that is concerts its food it's drink its art shows it's what's going on in local parks it's anything and everything. And you know it's one thing I think we pride ourselves on and sometimes in any of our lives we get stuck in the grind and you forget but I think we do a pretty darn good job of curating what people should know about. And that's in the print format. We're limited there by space and advertising dollars. But if you go on to Isthmus.com, you know it's the highly it’s the highest searched piece of our of our Web site. There's endless things listed in there. We got a guy Bob. He's the best who does nothing but input events for us.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, having an event calendar is huge for this city.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah. And I don't know what's cool anymore. There was a time. There was a time when I was young and wasn't married with kids and run off to get hockey gear or coach soccer practice, five-year-old soccer practice by the way. Earplugs.

- Jason Ilstrup

Like ladybugs

- Craig Bartlett

it's louder and yeah worse you can't fast forward through it. There was a time....

- Jason Ilstrup

But you'll want to slow it down as they go to college...

- Craig Bartlett

There was a there was a time where I knew and part of it was working at The Onion at the time. I knew what the next cool band was going to be. Now I still can do that through Isthmus. I just don't have as much time for it. But we have people who, like, it’s their job, it's their calling in life, to figure out what other people should know.

- Jason Ilstrup

So, what you're telling me is you knew that Nickelback was going to hit it before Nickelback even knew it.

- Craig Bartlett

I knew Nickelback was done before they hit it...

- Jason Ilstrup

That's even better. Honestly though in all seriousness, I think it's important to acknowledge this role the Isthmus plays on both sides of that coin. The sort of quality of life, but also what this, you know, the news part of the Isthmus. I think it's important the work that Judy Davidoff Joe tar don't Rogen but also people like Mike Popke those guys are doing on both sides.

- Craig Bartlett

Yeah

- Jason Ilstrup

I think having a robust weekly makes a big difference for the city. I think one way you guys are doing that and extending that brand is through events.

- Craig Bartlett

Yep

- Jason Ilstrup

You guys put on a tremendous amount of events. I mean how many events do you put on a year?

- Craig Bartlett

We consider ourselves having six signature events which starting calendar year January: Isthmus Beer and Cheese Fest, then we do. Craft Beer Week at the end of April, beginning of May. We do Isthmus Uncorked, a wine festival at the end of May, Paddle and Portage on Father's Day weekend in June. We partner with the Clean Lakes Alliance on that. That's a fun event. There's nothing more Madison than paddle and portage.

- Jason Ilstrup

No, there is not.

- Craig Bartlett

And then July we partner with another local business, Pasqual’s, and do Margarita and Taco Fest which is probably the... All of the events we do are really cool, and they're really well done. But the combination of Madison food and drink in one spot with people making amazing tacos with Sitka salmon or beef tongue and then you know the fantastic mixologists, (if that term is even in fashion anymore), making great margaritas that that event's really cool. And then we roll into August and between August and September we do a Mad Faves concert on State Street. We run our Madison take on German Octoberfest, OctoBeerFest ,that's in September and then we host a tailgate party every Badger home game. Busy. It's busy. So it is, it’s fun, but there's a there's a real importance to that. Running a newspaper with an editorial staff is expensive and you know that the phrase print is dead. It's not true it's certainly not true in what we do in the news that we try and tell because you can't get that anywhere else. You can get a lot of the news we all consume every day on our phone almost instantaneously or through somebodies Facebook feed. Investigative journalism takes longer and is better in a longer format which, it's easier to read a thousand or two-thousand-word story in a newspaper or sitting on your desktop than it is on your phone. But as advertising revenue has shifted because there's so many more options now. Whether it's social media or Facebook or Hulu or whatever, events are really important to make sure that we are taking advantage of the people that interact with Isthmus and giving them things that they want. So, all weeklies, even dailies, used to survive on advertising dollars. Now as advertising dollars somewhat shrink, we need to make sure that we're still bringing in the revenue to offset that shrink. So, events have become super important of what we do.

- Jason Ilstrup

All right. Last question for you as a Madisonian, native Madisonian, and someone that looks out and literally onto downtown from the window. What's the greatest challenge, what's the greatest opportunity Madison has as it has this huge growth spurt? Simple easy question.

- Craig Bartlett

You know I think a lot of things have been brought up in the last year with the mayoral race with some of the stuff we see from homelessness, the homelessness or mental health issue downtown. Inclusively, equality, transit, affordable housing. I think that's like a revolving mix of priorities, and I think depending on how

- Jason Ilstrup

They're intermingled

- Craig Bartlett

Super intermingled. And I think the greatest challenge is figuring out how to bring all of the people that can help together. And you know I think it's an interesting time. It's not something that I feel like the city government can do on their own without the private sector being willing to step up. Whether that's with expertise and time or it's financially, but I feel like that's the greatest challenge right now is figuring out how all of these things work together and how they can be fixed. And then the bringing together of the right parties to do it. You know, whether that's you guys at DMI working closely with the mayor and her office and trying to connect people and then that's the upside is. Madison's a fantastic place. I think everybody who’s here and in a position to help wants to keep it that way should figure out how to get it all together.

- Jason Ilstrup

Well I've got to say a big thank you to you. I mean you've quietly become a huge civic leader and you've done a lot of work bringing young leaders together so they could be part of those conversations because I think in the end, we all care about our city. And you're right we had to bring all those people that care about our city to find solutions. Now I want to thank you but I'm going to put you in the hot seat with the fast and furious five and ask five rapid fire questions. Just answer them with what comes to the top of your mind. Are you ready?

- Craig Bartlett

Yes.

- Jason Ilstrup

Favorite yacht rock performer

- Craig Bartlett

Didn't we already discuss, I'm not hip and cool anymore.

- Jason Ilstrup

Well it was a genre of music in the 70s or 80s. So, one could define whether or not that's cool or not. We'll go with Michael McDonald. That's the right answer. All right. A favorite kind of popsicle

- Craig Bartlett

Oh, bomb pop.

- Jason Ilstrup

Which flavor of the bomb pop is your favorite?

- Craig Bartlett

The red.

- Jason Ilstrup

What is your favorite taco in Madison?

- Craig Bartlett

I'll just go with the last taco I had which was Friday, Great Dane, fish tacos.

- Jason Ilstrup

Good choice.

- Craig Bartlett

Be careful with habanero hot sauce hot.

- Jason Ilstrup

Well I'm the guy from Minnesota that thinks that Heinz Ketchup is a little unsettling...

- Craig Bartlett

Don't eat the hot sauce.

- Jason Ilstrup

OK then I won't. All right. Last question. The not so fast and furious five. Your wife is the cicerone. What beer do you enjoy with that?

- Craig Bartlett

IPA. Well, at the Dane its Old Glory IPA

- Jason Ilstrup

Sounds delicious.

- Craig Bartlett

Been drinking that since my days at the Mallards, 2001.

- Jason Ilstrup

Very patriotic of you, too. Well, all right, Craig Bartlett you're out of the hot seat. Thank you very much Craig for being with us today on the downtown download podcast. Craig Bartlett is the owner of Red Card Media and associate publisher of the Isthmus. Thanks for being here.

- Craig Bartlett

Thanks guys.

- Jason Ilstrup

Thanks for listening. Be sure to tune in next month to learn something new about downtown