



BBQ Meets AI:



How Shawn Walchef Turned a Restaurant into a Tech-Driven Media Empire

July 23, 2025 | PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



Andy Sack: This is AI First with Adam and Andy, the show that takes you straight to the front lines of AI innovation and business. I'm Andy Sack alongside my co-host, Adam Brotman. Each episode, we bring you candid conversations with business leaders, transforming their business with AI. No fluff, just real talk and actionable use cases and insights for you. Welcome everyone, special episode, Sean Walchaff, welcome.

Shawn Walchef: Thank you for having me on the show. Really, really excited to be here.

Andy Sack: So glad you could make it, Sean. You're connecting long distance. Why don't you tell everyone where you're connecting from?

Shawn Walchef: Yeah, I'm in Bulgaria. So Sofia is the capital of Bulgaria and two hours north of Sofia in a city called Vratse. My wife, she's from Bulgaria and every summer my son, my daughter, my wife, we travel to Bulgaria for typically four to six weeks and spend some time with her family in the village and my kids are learning Bulgarian. They're an eight year old boy and a six year old girl. The irony of being in the village is it's actually given me some deep work time to focus on how to use AI in both our media business and our restaurant business.

It's something that you know meeting you two gentlemen at food on demand in Las Vegas you guys were the keynote speakers I made sure to reach out to have you come on my show restaurant influencers and to think about how fast things have changed just in the time that I met both of you gentlemen how much more I'm using chat GPT, how much more I'm diving into uploading documents and using it from my mobile as well as from my laptop. But to the point of being in Bulgaria, I think, you know, getting outside of my normal routine has given me a time to focus on what does AI really, what does it mean for our media business? And also what does it mean for our restaurant business?

Andy Sack: Well, Sean, thank you. We've gone global, Adam. We've got Sean. Sean is our first international guest. So Sean, would be useful just for our audience. Give us a little bit about your background. Talk to us about the restaurant and I guess the transition to the media business. And just to orient people, think Sean said it.

Adam Brotman: Yeah

Shawn Walchef: Yeah.

Andy Sack: We met Sean at the Food on Demand Conference and he interviewed us and it was just a delightful interview. But he had his posse of cameraman and light man and we just sort of hit it off. It was that, that was the original, our original meeting. So Sean, us an, give our audience an introduction.

Shawn Walchef: Sure, yeah. So my wife and I, own CaliBBQ, three barbecue locations in San Diego. We've been in business since 2008. Very difficult time to open up any business, let alone a restaurant business. They tell you location, location, location. We picked a tough location and a tough time in a tough industry. But I think because of that tough location, we've learned obviously how to build a media company on top of our restaurant. 18 years later, we have clients now that we work with global clients toast is one of our primary technology partners.



They're the ones that sponsor the show restaurant influencers that we did together. We work with Google We work with uber we work with a lot of big brands to help them do b2b storytelling So we have the restaurants Like I said, we have a stadium location. We have a qsr location and a navy base We have the full service barbecue business, but so much of what we learn on the front side on the on the front lines of running a brick and mortar business implementing technology. So, you know, I'm here in Bulgaria.

Andy Sack: Let me interrupt for a moment. you started in 2008. When did you open your second location?

Shawn Walchef: Second location wasn't until the pandemic. So we opened up multiple ghost kitchens and closed ghost kitchens in the pandemic. The true second location is really the Navy base location, which we opened last year, 2023, actually two years ago. Yep.

Andy Sack: Okay, so the second and third relatively within the last five years and at what point did you start, when did the social media stuff and the podcasts and stuff happen?

Shawn Walchef: Well the social media stuff to be honest with you started when web 2.0 started I mean we opened in 2008 and because we opened in a difficult location, we struggled to pay our bills. I we struggled to pay payroll. We struggled to build a business. And I remember my business partner at the time, Corey Robinson, I was making fun of him for being on Facebook, telling him, you know, we're trying to run a small business here. Why are you on Facebook? What are you, trying to pick up girls? And that conversation quickly changed from a joke to, my gosh, we actually need to use technology to get our word out there, to let people know we have a restaurant, we have a sports bar, we're doing barbecue, we're giving back to the community.

And that was really the beginning of using Facebook, using Google, using Yelp, figuring out a website, figuring out what SEO is, you lot of business owners, small business owners, especially waited until the pandemic to go, oh, we need to be digital. We were digital in the beginning because we had to be. It was a matter of necessity. So, you know, the evolution of telling other store, other people's stories, you know, when we started podcasting in 2017, that's when I say we started our media company. We knew how to tell our own story. So now we needed to follow our curiosity and find other business owners, other marketers, other brand leaders, other technologists so that we could learn from them. And that's how, know, essential we launched a B2B media company.

Andy Sack: Adam, isn't it just so fascinating talking to Sean? He's got the restaurant and the media company and we've sort of, we've migrated towards restaurants. I'm sort of curious what you're thinking about as John's talking.

Adam Brotman: Well, first of all, can imagine being in a, you know, not a high traffic location. You got a restaurant. You got to get people to know you're there and understand your story. like, you know, Facebook has a funny story about your business partner on Facebook. you know, Facebook, all of a sudden it's like, well, I can...you know, before, before digital and technology came along, you had to, you know, I don't know, advertise in local newspapers and I'm trying to think of like what you did. Yeah, like yellow pages and newspapers, flyers, you know, like that, that kind of stuff, which is all still somewhat relevant. But then of course, being able to sort of self publish

Shawn Walchef: We did that. We did yellow pages. It was that long ago that I actually, I paid for a yellow pages ad. Yeah, for sure.



Adam Brotman: And that sort of you became, you know, today, like as much of a professional media company as you are a restaurant company. And that's really interesting. And by the way, it's kind of just as a person that's been in the restaurant business and food service business, I am impressed with the idea of like, you need to become your own media company. Like that's true of any restaurant, retail, you know, got to tell your story. You got to think of yourself as a media company. And you you you took it all the way to the literal you became a media company, but because you built that foundation. So that's, that's super cool. I mean, that's that's, that's authentic. And interesting. I can't wait to ask you some questions about your AI journey. It sounds like you've been on you know,

Andy Sack: Why don't we transition to that, Sean?

Adam Brotman: Yeah, I'm curious. mean, I honestly you brought it up, Sean. So, you know, you so you get to Bulgaria, or you're on your way to Bulgaria, you get there, you got some alone time, you got some deep thinking time. While you're in the village eating some I want to hear what the Bulgarian food is all about. Because that sounds good.

Shawn Walchef: Yeah, it's a Shopska salad. It's fresh tomatoes and cucumbers right out of the garden. Picked right from the garden, grown that day. Enjoyed with some Bulgarian feta cheese,

Adam Brotman: Right on. So you're eating that sounds great. So you're eating that and you're like, you've got like chat vt iOS app or something in your hands, or you got your laptop up like what give give us an example or two of something that lately, you were like, you were tackling with AI either to brainstorm on and get insight on or do research about

Shawn Walchef: Well, I'll tell you a story about the restaurant first and then I'll tell you a story about the media business. So we arrived in Bulgaria with my wife, my kids, my wife and I, we've never taken a vacation with our children and anybody that has young kids knows that it takes a while to be able to trust and to leave them alone with grandparents or loved ones. So we took our first trip to Istanbul. So we went for four nights to Istanbul and that was an opportunity for me to use chat GPT prior to even getting to Bulgaria to figure out where in Istanbul did we want to stay.

We wanted to stay in the old part of Istanbul. We wanted to be close to the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia, all the cultural aspects so that we could really enjoy the city and learn about the city. Well, instead of going to Booking.com or TripAdvisor or Yelp or Google, I used ChatGPT to narrow down our search and the search was so much better, so much cleaner than I could ever have imagined that it helped me get the information that I then needed to go back to a website like Booking.com to actually book the reservation.

The same thing with the plane tickets. I did the same thing with where are we going to eat? What are we going to see? So these are all leading up to getting to Istanbul. But while we were there, we've been in a pilot with Polona.ai and Polona.ai is a technology that we've deployed in our restaurant at CaliBBQ. So it is an AI voice agent. Sean AI is what we have trained him on my previous podcasts. So the polona.ai team took our restaurant influencers podcast with Shaquille O'Neal with Emeril Lagasse with probably with you gentlemen, they took it. You're on the show now. your Sean AI has been getting trained but prior to us leaving, we wanted to launch Sean AI at our restaurant on Father's Day.



Father's Day is our busiest day out of the in our entire business. So for that day we typically what we've done in the past is just I would do a voice recording of Sean and send it to my general manager. He would put it up so that someone would call and we would have them text the restaurant or order online. But what we did while I was in Istanbul was launch with Sean AI and that launch actually helped us drive 18 % sales increase. had \$26,000 in total sales, which is a busiest day we've ever done across 268 orders. And we had 92 % increase in pickup orders. So Sean AI answered 150 phone calls that my team would have had to answered. And we did all that while I was on the other side of the world.

Adam Brotman: Amazing. So wait, so I just want to understand you. You guys set up a system at your primary location that when they call in, when a customer calls in to place an order, ask a question, whatever, they can actually, it sounds like it's you, but it's actually an AI version of you. And it's, but it's actually taking the order and

Shawn Walchef: Yep. Yes. Correct. It we haven't launched with toast yet. So the integration with toast isn't live. We hope to have that live by 4th of July, which is another one of our busiest days. But right, but right now it's answering all the calls. Yes.

Adam Brotman: But does it actually like, like leave a, send you a message or send the store a message. The store can then get the order ready and then process it when they get there. Is that how it worked? So you didn't, so in other words, your staff didn't have to answer 150 calls and they could spend time with their customers and in the kitchen or whatever. Yeah, that's amazing. Amazing. And it was in your voice too. So I love the, you know, and the father's day thing. That's really cool. Yeah.

Shawn Walchef: Yes, yep. Correct. No one answered the call. Yeah, it was really cool for us and something that.

Shawn Walchef: You know, while I was in Istanbul, I went to one of the best dinner restaurants in the world. This is a place that David Chang says is one of his favorite restaurants in the world. They make, they only, they don't have a menu. They have one item and it's the dinner. You go and you tell them, I want one portion or two portions or three portions. And they serve it to you. But that, that business has 150 employees. have 25 motorcycles outside of their shop doing delivery. They have three staff members just on the day that I was there answering the telephone. So when you think of Sean AI launching in my restaurant where I'd have one to two people like we don't have 25 drivers, like I don't have 150 people at my one location, you can only imagine the amount of impact that the scalability of something like just a voice AI agent is for a business like a restaurant globally.

Andy Sack: And Sean, while we're on that topic, so, I mean, I just want to highlight, mean, the using, using AI as a voice agent, training it in your voice and having it take orders. you used to have one, what is, what's, what's the, you used to have one person answering the phone.

Shawn Walchef: On a father's day, it would tie up three phone lines. Yep.

Andy Sack: You'd have three people and it would be three people for, you know, 10 hours. And so you basically eliminated that, that task. and those three people were still employed by you, but.

Shawn Walchef: They're still employed packing orders, but instead helping us drive more sales and get more orders out of the door.



Andy Sack: Yeah. Yeah. So that's like just a great application of AI and what was involved, like how long did it take you to, you know, what was involved in planning that, getting somebody, I think you worked with an outsourced provider to help you train the, agents, just walk people through that.

Shawn Walchef: Yeah. Yeah, so we we you know part of the benefits of having a B2B media company a lot of brand new technology. They know who we are. They know that I'm on multiple customer advisory boards for companies like toast. So any emerging tech, typically the founders reach out to me if the tech sounds like something that I believe in the story. I believe in the founder Maria Zhang. She's the CEO and co-founder of Polona.ai and she comes she was the CTO of Tinder. She was also responsible for launching the Instagram Reels experience. So she worked with Mark Zuckerberg and team when they started competing with TikTok where it went from just a photo sharing app to an actual video app. She also worked at Google. So very smart extremely talented. She has a team backing her and we believed in that. So we partnered with Polona. We told them we would do this case study. We didn't plan on getting it live before Father's Day, but the team they worked overnight. was texting with my business partner, Eric, on Father's Day, making sure that all of the...

Andy Sack: How much work did it take to get it?

Shawn Walchef: Really, took us, it took us nothing. It actually took Maria. Yeah.

Andy Sack: It took you how much time from first contact to going live.

Shawn Walchef: First contact, believe we've been in touch for probably six weeks, six weeks to get that launched, which is just remarkable.

Andy Sack: Okay and in very little less than an hour of your time.

Shawn Walchef: Remarkable, less than an hour. Yeah, probably for sure.

Andy Sack: And you continue to use that as the order taker at your app. That's a great story. That's a great AI first transformation.

Shawn Walchef: Correct. Yeah. Yeah. And now, now, and now because we got an ad week article and because, know, obviously we believe in storytelling, we believe in podcasts, we tell the story, we repurpose the content. I share it on LinkedIn. I share it on Instagram. We talk about it on our YouTube channel. I have restaurant owners that all have been following us that believe in what we're doing that are building significant brands that are now asking about the technology. They want introductions to Polona.ai because they know that if I trusted it enough and my team trusted enough on our most important valuable day for our business, while I was on the other side of the world, wow, it must be something that they should be looking into as well.

Andy Sack: All right. Talk to us about AI in your media business. it's worth mentioning the one piece of context, which did not get, was not made explicit, which is you started as a restaurant company, you've expanded to other locations. but really the media side of your business, you really, when I asked you, which are you, are you a restaurant company or a media company? You answered me, we're a media company. So now tell us about the AI transformation of your media business.

Adam Brotman: Yeah.



Shawn Walchef: Sure. Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, having conversations with gentlemen like yourself that are on the forefront of, you know, putting out a book. I've ordered the book. It's probably waiting for me, I believe. And at my home, there it is. A.I. first. I've recommended the book. I've every person that I talk to in any technology company, I refer that book to them. For me, it's understanding speed at which the rate of this technology is changing and that in order for my team to be as good as we possibly can be, I'll break it down the way that we talk about creating quality content.

When I talk to founders, when I talk to business owners and about storytelling, about social media content, they always tell me, well, we want to make quality content before we start publishing a podcast a YouTube channel a LinkedIn post and what we tell them is that you need quantity plus speed plus consistency before you ever get to quality People are scared to look stupid or sound stupid on the internet, which is why they don't post on LinkedIn That's why they don't post on YouTube. It's why they don't start a podcast is because they're scared of what other people are going to think and the reality is with storytelling, we do we tell stories just like we tell it. We make our barbecue in the beginning. Our brisket was terrible. We started doing brisket in San Diego.

It was not good brisket. We were learning the craft of barbecue, but now 17 years later we make much better brisket. And that's the same thing when it comes to telling stories on the internet, podcasting, making YouTube content. And the way that we want to use AI, you know, back to your original question is when I got back from Istanbul, I didn't have my media team with me. So it was just me and my wife, but that didn't mean that there weren't restaurant stories and business stories that I thought that people that know me, people that follow me, people that are connected to me wouldn't want to learn about on Instagram, on Facebook, on YouTube, on our podcasts. So what did I do? I did what we call smartphone storytelling. I took out my iPhone, I handed it to my wife.

And when we went to the Duna restaurant, I had a little lav mic and I told the story. I asked questions. And as I asked questions, my wife, filmed me and we created a YouTube video. Why? Because I was so impressed. I was so impressed visiting Istanbul. When you go to Istanbul, there's tourist restaurants where it's a cheesecake factory menu. They offer everything. Why? Well, they offer everything because they don't want to lose the business. But the places that stood out the most were the ones that didn't offer everything. They offered one thing. It was the one baklava shop. It was the one Duna restaurant. was the one meatball restaurant and they've been doing it for generations of generations.

So if I have the ability to take my phone out of my pocket and now getting back home, so coming back to Bulgaria and opening up the laptop and sitting with coffee where I can actually have time to think, well, what if I started blogging and I just started sharing, journaling my notes? These are the thoughts that I have in my head. I remember going to the Duna restaurant, meeting with this person, meeting with this person. Literally chatting with chat GPT and it's documenting every single thing that I did and I asked chat GPT Well, I want to make a LinkedIn post. I want to make a YouTube video I want to make an Instagram reel and chat GPT is giving me prompt now These are things that I've already used to do in my own head. I did in my head my team does in my head But now I have a thought partner that's helping me go through and say, Hey, I want to make a 60 second reel based off of three restaurants that we visited while we were in Istanbul.

And I want to tell the story with a voiceover narration in the style of Anthony Bourdain, but I want you to make sure that it's tailored to Sean Walchef. You know who I am based off of my profile that I've given you chat GPT.



So I don't want it to be like Anthony Bourdain, but I want to blend of the two and give me the voiceover. It tells me exactly from one to five seconds. These are the clips that you need to put into Instagram. These are the clips from 6 to 15 seconds. This is the text. I don't like that text so I go and I'm having a conversation with somebody that I've paid. I mean what \$20 a month for the chat GPT \$20 a month and I'm having this high level production meeting. In Bulgaria, literally just because I have have an Internet Cafe. I mean it's remarkable where we are and this is only 2025.

Andy Sack: It's awesome, Sean, it's great. Adam, you have questions or comments you want to make?

Adam Brotman: I mean, first of all, that's a great story because I love how you're describing it as that you felt like, well, I don't have my real production crew and team with me, but I've got Chachi BT with me and I can effectively collaborate with this entity, so to speak, this tool that can act as a traveling version of my team in a way that's, it's gonna pinch hit, so to speak. just like you said, you had to get your phone out instead of like your camera crew. had to get Chat TV T out instead of your production crew. it's a really great story of the everyday always on you know, ability to sort of invite Chachi BT to the table. and, and I, you know, I love that story. I mean, there's a lot, there's a lot we could talk about, because I actually think as you were telling that story, the other thought I had is you mentioned how with media, like your brisket, you have to just like, what do you say, be consistent, be willing to be mediocre and just like produce the content and just get out there and do it.

Andy Sack: and fast.

Shawn Walchef: fast speed.

Adam Brotman: Yeah, fast and consistent. You know, it reminds me of a story. Andy was got me thinking about the history of Mr. Beast. And if you actually there's a documentary sort of thing that he sent me on YouTube where Mr. Beast said exactly what you just said. He was like, I think for years, I want to say he just put out he didn't matter what it was. He put out something random every day and you know, in his room, his mom thought he was crazy or whatever. And like, now look at him, like the number one media, you know, platform in the world, basically, right?

So like, I mean, kind of. so, but it started out as the internet, and you mentioned that that's how you think about like, the media side of what you're doing. I can't help but draw the analogy to what Andy and I teach people in our AI boot camps, which is like, you just got to start using it. people get so, we actually had this conversation just now with our book community and some other folks where like, there's a lot of folks that are just like, I, I don't know where to get started with AI. My data is not ready. I, whatever. Your story just reminded me of that. It's like, what you're saying, the same thing applies in all these different sort of pursuits, it applies with AI. And you just got to like, just start talking to it.

Like literally just pull it out and have a conversation with it. you know, probably something good will come of it. You might actually get some output that you use, but you just got to start doing that. And then pretty soon you'll figure out like, that was interesting what the idea gave me or you forget how, you know, how you already had, you said, Sean, you already have these thoughts in your head. So I, I, your story was inspirational for me to kind of remind people in the future about like how to get started on their AI journey. Cause that's the most important thing that can happen for somebody is that they just start using it.



Shawn Walchef: Yeah, I think I think speed is something that as we've learned over the years as especially as a barbecue business because everything we do is low and slow, but in the media business, the speed and the willingness to make mistakes and to look stupid like the speed at which we're willing to test new technology, but especially in the world of AI, it's not going to be perfect. But the more that we test it and the more that I give examples for my wife to test it. And I'm here, you know, in the village in Bulgaria and I'm asking chat GPT to do deep research on, you know, on a business problem that my father-in-law is thinking about acquiring land and getting into a trucking parking business.

And ChatGPT is doing deep research, giving me 40 pages of deep research on how much does land cost in rural Bulgaria? And what are the people charged? And how much do you need to, you have to have a gas station or do you have to have a shower at the facility? And this is what you can charge in Levra. And it's just unbelievable of like how many experts would I have to acquire to be able to get that kind of information? And I got it in 15 minutes. I got it in 15 minutes and I can go to my father-in-law with a business case study of like if he's ready to invest 600,000 euros into this trucking business, this is the competitive advantages. These are the strengths. These are the weaknesses. And like, it's unbelievable.

Andy Sack: So awesome. All right. I think we're we're closing in on time. Adam, anything I mean, you sort of summarized just a moment ago, but anything else you want to add to your summary of talking to Sean about what jumps out at you from his story or stories?

Adam Brotman: Yeah. Well, I mean, I'm inspired by Sean telling the story of being over there and not having like almost being forced into using ChachiBT as a co-intelligence augmentation tool. I actually think that's a really, really important point because we've actually said like so many people are like, I don't know what I'm going to use it for. And by the way, what if I heard it makes mistakes, which it does, like a human makes mistakes. But my point is like, you're inspiring because it's like, like you, you literally had a situation where you didn't have a choice, but to use this tool. And I sometimes think people just need to almost pretend that they were being forced into using it. Cause I think once they get off the snide and start using it, you kind of get the habit and you can't stop using it. And that's something that, you know, I, I I'm taking away from this.

Shawn Walchef: Yeah.

Andy Sack: So I'll add to that. I love this episode. Sean, I'm so glad that you came on and I'll tell you why. you started as a single location restaurant, a barbecue shop, and then you expanded to two others. And next thing you know, AI comes along and you've used AI to totally automate order taking on Father's Day at your barbecue, which is just a fantastic vignette anecdote that everyone can relate to and everyone can intuitively get the ROI from that of freeing up those three people. And then you turned around and gave us another one, which was like, you know, I'm in Bulgaria, I'm in Turkey, and then my father-in-law wants to buy some land, and so I do a deep research report. And like those two vignettes, like you just served up vignettes, and it's what I enjoyed when I met you, was you were, you know, a walking, talky, storytelling machine. And thank you for sharing that with our audience. That's what I take away from this conversation and why I enjoyed it so much.

Shawn Walchef: I appreciate it.

Andy Sack: So thank you, Sean. With that, all of those that our audience that have tuned in, thank you for listening to AI First with Adam and Andy. As you know, for more resources on how to become AI First, you can go to our website, forum3.com. We have case studies, research, newsletters, and executive summaries there. Lots of amazing material. Check it out. We truly believe you can't over invest in your AI learning.



Ready to become an AI First organization?



Andy Sack

Brings over 25 years of entrepreneurial and investment expertise in high tech and finance.



Adam Brotman

As the inaugural CDO at Starbucks, Adam's background in digital innovation is unparalleled.

[Book a free consultation](#)