

Ep.2.42 - Brad Garmon

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Brad Garmon

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente, and welcome to the show. And today we have, he's a newcomer to the MEDC, but he's not a newcomer for the state of Michigan. Brad Garmon, he's the Director of the Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry. Think I missed one word in their for you Brad, Office. But I think we get the general idea, right?
- B** Brad Garmon 00:51
Yeah, I think you got it. You're rolling.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:53
So I mean, and I think people should, for your sake, I've been you've been doing this, you said you've been in the positions, like about three years now?
- B** Brad Garmon 01:04
Yeah, the Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office has been in existence in 2019. So it's just a just over three years.

E

Ed Clemente 01:12

And one of the reasons we're bringing you on today, too, and we can talk about a little bit more, but you're sort of in the MEDC sort of house now. And very excited, I've heard a lot of good things about you. But you know, people might not know exactly what your title means. What do you tell people quickly at an event, if they don't know what your job is?

B

Brad Garmon 01:33

Sure, yeah. The Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office is a creation of the state to really grow and support jobs and prosperity built around that specific piece of the economy that is comprised of outdoor recreation, and more so people often assume it's tourism and hospitality and things, but really outdoor recreation as an industry. And that's why that word is in the name. It's all the gear and equipment and vehicles and things that support that outdoor recreation lifestyle, that we all love to live in Michigan, and we make a lot of stuff and we can make more. So what I'm here to do is help Michigan really take advantage of the full spectrum of opportunities that the outdoor recreation economy provides.

E

Ed Clemente 02:17

And people love their gear, that's for sure. I don't care what it is and if it's outdoors, you know, you know, the old saying there is no bad weather, just bad gear, right? Or you don't have the right gear.

B

Brad Garmon 02:29

Yeah, you got it and that's it's a huge piece that I think people often because we've had such a successful run and would continue in the hospitality tourism space. That Pure Michigan brand is so well known and people really love to come and play on our trails and waters and lands, that I think sometimes unlike maybe other western states where they do more of the gear stuff they really don't hear intuitively think of, oh, that's that can everything from an app on my phone to a new stand up paddleboard to a carbon fiber bike, all that stuff? There's a lot of money in that, it's actually a huge economy when you really take it apart and look at it as a standalone sector.

E

Ed Clemente 03:17

We can, we're gonna unpack a lot of that, because I know there's a lot of sectors involved, but what do you, like, what is the natural sort of, like, give us a good anecdote of what you mean by an example of something that you've done or been related to?

B

Brad Garmon 03:34

Sure. You know, I think there's there's a lot lots of examples from all around the state and one

of the first folks I met when I was working on this job, Janice, she was a young entrepreneur lived in the Walled Lake area, but she had come out of the auto sector and still actually worked in the auto space, but she had an idea and she had a skill set. And she designed a stand up paddleboard that she was having produced elsewhere and selling direct to consumers online. But anyway, it was great, but she was showing up at trade shows, RV trade shows and other places where people have an interest in the outdoors and just trying to sell her products. And I met her at the RV Trade Show, probably Novi, if memory serves, and we just got to know her. She had been out to Colorado to some trade shows out there trying to sell her product. So just giving her a bit more of a platform and helping her find resources in the state. There are so many tools for for small businesses, for startups, other folks that that we can connect them to and then we can also give them sometimes visibility. You know, that's what we're trying to do. We're especially here at the MEDC helping businesses succeed is sort of our DNA and our bread and butter. So folks like Janice really helped me learn the pathway of an entrepreneur in the outdoor space and where they, what she was finding in Colorado that she needed, that she wasn't finding here and how I could build it, you know, sort of that ecosystem of outdoor consumers, outdoor trade shows those kinds of things. So I've learned that there's just so much to this, it's an industry that we can connect folks to. And I've done lots with Janice and then lots more with the more Janice's like all over the state in different industries. All around, and very high tech sort of products to pretty manual sort of products. Think about all the racks and things that people use to put gear on their vehicles, we do a lot of that in Michigan. So that's the idea that it's a it's a whole bunch of stuff. And it's a whole bunch of companies, and it's people that want to make a living. And I think the outdoors is a great place to do that. And Michigan has a lot of capabilities that we can lean into.

E

Ed Clemente 05:56

Well, you know, after doing the show a while now I realize how many engineers we have in the state, for example, but it's amazing, not only just because they're engineers, but it's like NASA, like how you can use products that were made to go to space to actually use stuff you mountain bike with, like, you know, different GoreTex and things like that. And that tech transfer of, because I did a lot with the green energy space, but like safer stand up paddleboards I know there's a lot of fiberglass companies in the state too. They do the wind turbines, for example, or carbon fiber stuff, you know?

B

Brad Garmon 06:31

Absolutely. I mean, I think that's one thing I try to reinforce about the outdoor recreation economy is that it's in general, a very innovative space, because you just think about most folks have some outdoor stuff, but you want everything from lighter weight gear to stuff that dries faster to stuff that wicks water better, to shoes that stick better to certain surfaces, that is all really innovative materials, designs, all that stuff. It's an incredibly innovative space. And then you just extrapolate that out to camp chairs and headlamps and bike parts and boat paddles, every piece of the outdoor economy is just waiting for the next great idea and the next improvement the next subtle tweak. And to your to your point, that is what Michigan has, really in our history and our culture, our heritage is innovation. And that's what we have done for all kinds of sectors, including the outdoors, historically, and we can do it again.



E**Ed Clemente 07:39**

Yeah, we used to call them sort of 'Garage Edison's' you know, sort of that they're doing things and then they can figure out how to make it come to practice. In fact, we've actually had the US Patent Office on a previous podcast because it's based in Detroit. And I know a lot of people after they heard the podcast started approaching them with ideas.

B**Brad Garmon 08:01**

It's absolutely, you know, I was just I get two examples of conversations within the last couple of weeks. From an ATV, you know, company that now is huge and well known, but the number of patents they've had in just the last year as they think about how the ATVs and side by sides are changing. You realize whether it's electrification or other pieces, like there are hundreds of patents at any one of these companies, all the way to the original. I just ran across it again the other day, and I was reminded the pop up tent. There's so like ubiquitous now we all think of the pop up tents with the lightweight poles and stuff, but there's a patent from Ann Arbor for the pop up tent that eventually became Moss Tents. And they moved to Maine. But that was a Cranbrook, that came out of Cranbrook and there's a great display there of some of the early patents in the outdoors. And the pop up tent was one of those two. So that's, it's really an invention of snowboarding in Muskegon you can go and look at a statue of the Snurfer, yeah, just they're all over the place. The Marble Arms Safety Axe, and all kinds of things. So we are a state that makes not only new products, but whole new ways of going outdoors, new ways of experiencing this incredible place. So that's something we can build on and something I'm trying to replicate over and over and over.

E**Ed Clemente 09:21**

And in fact, it might be common to you, but a lot of that is not common to people if they don't snowboard, for example, or, you know, and I think that, you know, you got to think of what you're talking about sort of like we see the nouns, but you're talking about the verbs, right, that are actually making the things. And I think that that's like an action item right that people can actually do this. And I mean for your background on let's let's get a little bit about your background, too. You originally I believe worked at the Michigan Environmental Council too at one point and a couple other jobs.

B**Brad Garmon 09:57**

Yeah, I'm actually an import from Kansas, but I've been here for a long time. And I came, I think for a lot of people like we came in, I found the water. I think that was a big piece of it, the water in Michigan. I had some friends from Kansas moved out here. I'm a Western sort of kid by nature, I grew up in Kansas, but all my play was in Colorado. So I assumed I would always need mountains. And that was part of my upbringing was playing in the Rockies and up and down the front range. But yeah, once I got to Michigan, as sort of a tentative step in 2001, I fell in love with it. And you know, I did a lot of work. And I had the blessing of working for an organization that cared about the whole range of Michigan. So I got to up to the UP once or twice a month, which I was shocked to realize so many Michigan, folks never make it to the UP, the place, is amazing. And I got to Traverse City and I got to the Thumb, and I got to Detroit and I got to Grand Rapids, I got to the coastal sand dunes. And so it was a job that really

allowed me over the course of my early young, professional career to work with some really great leaders and thinkers and policymakers, and also get into communities and get into places and talk to small business owners who are trying to figure out how do you make a living? When when people are mountain biking, instead of doing the things we thought they were doing? How do I as a bar owner, something make a living, so I spent years just really falling in love with the place and getting to know it. You know, and it's just such a diverse and interesting state from urban to rural that I I've never left you know, I've gotten back home and I visited the mountains, but I I think I'm hooked now and then. Like with a lot of people, I think found family and found enough here to keep me here for sure. And that's been my mission ever since to sort of take the good parts of the Western Colorado's and bring it to Michigan and maintain what we've got here and what makes us special.

E

Ed Clemente 12:02

And I think with you being at the Michigan Environmental Council too, it actually plays into a lot of what you think about when you approach companies about sustainability, and products that are, you know, going to be able to be put in the circular kind of manufacturing things, too, I would guess.

B

Brad Garmon 12:19

Yeah, it's really nice that I mean, it was a good fit for me to make this jump. Because you know, truly what I've learned about the outdoor recreation economy is it is a pretty, like I said, it's an innovative company. But it's also largely thinking in those sustainable ways, especially if you get into companies that are in manufacturing of products and gear that take people outdoors, there's a sensitivity to that consumer that they don't want, you know, they don't want to leave trash, and they don't want their products to sort of pollute the water, if they're fishing. They there's a sensibility to the consumers that the businesses need to respond to, and they're doing it in a big way. You know, across the board, I think they understand that they're the folks who go outside and enjoy it want to buy and support companies that also support that. So you see it in the philanthropic side, where they're giving money back to communities to build trails and, you know, create programs that deal with invasive species. The outdoor companies are pretty socially responsible companies for the most part. And I think that's part of what I love about working with them.

E

Ed Clemente 13:33

Well, especially millennials and Gen Z, they're almost demanding it. It's not even like an option for some people who are getting into these kind of sports now, too.

B

Brad Garmon 13:43

Yeah, yeah, for sure, and I think that's a lot of what we're finding and I'm just, as I look at data, I get updates every year about sort of what's growing and what products are selling. And there's such rich data when you work with the industry directly. But yeah, what younger folks are doing does look different than maybe what Michigan has built a heritage around. And it's

hunting, trending down, perhaps, but archery trending up. So they're shooting sports and things that people are loving. But once you get into it, I was looking at numbers recently about paddle sports, and you just see the explosion in that and how what a perfect fit for Michigan that that is what more and more people are doing. Like you say younger folks are finding ways to be outdoors. And paddling around Michigan is just an absolutely wonderful thing and boating in general, that's one of our strong suits. We not only get a lot of folks out on the water, but we also make a lot of boats and a lot of gear to to get people on the water.

A

Announcer 14:43

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E

Ed Clemente 15:00

One thing and this is just more of a general observation from my old cultural economics class, the, you know, people in temperate climates sort of have more innovation demands, because we have four seasons, right? So I mean, literally, I'm sure you could probably apply four different sort of epics of what gear when you shift from one season to the next as to what people might do more of, and clothing to, I would guess, as well.

B

Brad Garmon 15:29

Yeah, and I mean, again, that's what having me like to understand what this job is, is to really get in tune with the the industry itself, and they work in cycles. So you know, coming up, where it's, you think about the winters of Michigan, there's the Outdoor Show out in Colorado would be the outdoors show, the winter show, it's the Snow Show, and you go out there, and it's all about the winter sports, and folks, you know, are innovating in that and you're looking at what they're doing on ski edges, and you're looking at what they're doing on apparel and clothing and that kind of stuff. But then you turn around and go to a similar show in the summer and it's all about camping. And it's the latest you know camp stove, and backpacking gear and, and that kind of stuff. So it really is a four season industry. And the cool thing to me about Michigan is again, like sometimes the small towns that have a great summer tourism season, can sometimes struggle in the offseason and vice versa. If you got a great sledding season and lots of lots of snowmobilers in the winter, but maybe you don't get quite as much and you're too rural for the summer months. That this is a way to begin to diversify and buffer those economies so that they're not quite as seasonally dependent on the visitors, but they can be seasonally relevant and what they're making and producing and designing year round. And we're doing the R&D and we're testing in season and we're producing in the offseason. I think that's a way to think about the outdoors in a much more comprehensive way.

E

Ed Clemente 15:32

And I would imagine with you now being even though you physically haven't changed tremendously, and you're sort of mission and vision, right but you're being at the MEDC obviously it's a much more economic development focused sort of mentality. I think that it's a

obviously, it's a much more economic development focused sort of mentality, I think that it's a little different than traditional sort of state government agencies kind of.

B

Brad Garmon 17:31

Right, and it works really well together. Because the great thing about this office, when it was created, it was actually created as a partnership, the way it was designed, there was a memorandum that linked the economic development arm of the state to the Department of Natural Resources. And I worked essentially for both and I had access to teams to support the work of the office from both agencies. But so the move on we kept that same agreement, we just kind of flipped it around. Because, as you point out, and I think there's there's great programs, the state park system, the national park system, it's all really, really well high functioning, award winning programs. How do we leverage it differently, the toolkit of the MEDC, when you think about entrepreneurship, you think about small business support and sort of the integration with the economic development strategies of communities, I can serve as a bridge in a lot of ways now because I have access to both toolsets, relationships of both agencies and we can really do the work with the full with the full arsenal of what Michigan has to offer talent and a lot of other pieces are now closer to me by being inside MEDC.

E

Ed Clemente 18:48

And I'm going to take some advantage as the host to ask two things as for your future things a little bit, but you just touched on one. One is going to be talent of how you either retain it or attract it and then I think also you had a good anecdote about a shoe company. I think too and you can get to the both of them separately, but I just think they're both sort of futuristic things that are trends that are helpful.

B

Brad Garmon 19:16

Yeah, so you know, we've done a lot of work to really understand Michigan's opportunity in this space, and we looking at outdoor recreation, specifically, mining a lot of data, like I said, a lot of consumers data, trend data, things like that. So what became really clear to me is and why the move to MEDC makes so much sense is that we are primed to be this state that innovates in the outdoor recreation economy. And to do that, you know, it's twofold. First, I think we are trying to showcase the opportunities to our existing companies. Like if you're one of the suppliers to the autos, for something, it's not a long stretch to look at the outdoor rec space and say like, yeah, I can produce some of those goods too. Like I have the machinery, I have the skilled CNC operator, I can do stuff in this space. I've just never thought about doing it for a bike or a, you know, a climbing harness or a climbing axe or something. I've never thought about doing that. So showcasing that is one thing that we can do really, really well that takes advantage of the talent we've got, and the machinery and the skill sets. I was presenting at a bike industry conference not too long ago, and this is the makers of bikes, likes like the big brands Specialized and Treks. And then somebody lamented like, oh, there's just not a manufacturing culture in the US to build o. We'd love to bring manufacturing back. And I was so glad I was there to be able to stand up and say like, hey, have you looked at Michigan lately, because we make stuff and we're good at it. And we have a lot of really high skilled folks, you know how to do that. So that's talent that we've got. I think there's also, you know, a really exciting opportunity that the outdoors can do talent as an attraction too, because you know,

just like I was with water and other things, if you could show people that there's opportunities to do outdoor rec jobs, that are high wage, high skilled, you can do software design, like Sportsmen Tracker in Grand Rapids, they're doing really high end apps for hunting and fishing and getting outdoors. To like Janice and doing your own products, you can do a lot of different things. You don't have to think of outdoor recreation only as sort of manual labor, like getting out and building trails, there's some really cool jobs in that too but there's a pathway. If you love the outdoors, you get outdoors and you know, your space, then you can divide, you can design the next product or the next innovation to make that even more enjoyable. That's a talent opportunity that we can showcase to folks in Colorado, California, Utah, North Carolina, other places that are also well known outdoor spaces and say like, look, we've got this manufacturing base. We've also got opportunities if you want to be in the outdoors. And you can work in it. And yeah, to your point, a great example to me and one of the big wins recently, if you think about economic development, I you know, often talk about it as a team sport. But there's a company in Grand Rapids now called Holo Footwear that moved back. They had some legacy and history in their family with Merrill Footwear, which not a lot of folks realize is the largest sort of footwear and hiking company, and it's in north of Grand Rapids up in Rockford. But they had family, I think it was her grandfather. But this is a Hispanic-owned and managed really cool company. They were out west, Portland, but this Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Detroit and the Right Place and other partners, recruited them. And they came back and they found, I think, a real opportunity here in Michigan. So they're in the footwear business still, but they're innovating and building on that legacy of hiking boots and things like that, and really doing innovative designs, innovative materials. And they're doing it with a different perspective, because of their experience, both culturally but also having worked, you know, and designed and been part of it out west. And so I think that's the kind of company that we're gonna find more and more of, and it is bringing a team of really talented, innovative folks into Michigan. And I think we just want to build on that and do more and more of it.

E

Ed Clemente 23:36

Well, you know, and I know we're pretty much out of time, but I do have a couple more questions. [Sure.] And if you could go back and talk to your Kansas 17 year old self, what advice would you give yourself now? Did you think you did the right path? Or would you give yourself some different advice now?

B

Brad Garmon 23:56

Well, I can't argue with the results because I do truly believe I have the absolute best job in Michigan. I get to do amazing things go and visit Stormy Kromer and climb Copper Peak and then come back down and go to Detroit and hang out on the riverfront. It's a great job. So I can't argue with the outcomes. But you know, knowing what I know now about the opportunities and what I would tell folks too, is I think, innovation and entrepreneurship. It's really the future and I think that we can do more so I would I would coach folks like yeah, look at there's business certificates you can get there's even outdoor economy business certificates that you can get online doing some of those things, but the basic skill set of sort of understanding of business and what it takes, we can help a lot but just having a sort of a how to operate a business. I wish I would have had that and I learned a lot of it on the job. But yeah, take some business classes for sure. I would tell myself, you'll have a lot of opportunities to create and make your ideas come to life and having some business skills would certainly help.

E

Ed Clemente 25:04

Well, you sort of answered the next question too, because you already mentioned it multiple ways, but where you like to go and what you like to do in the state. But I just wanted to make sure that you got all your points in on that, because I think we could go on for like a couple hours just you and I on this conversation alone. But I just want to thank you. Again, I'm glad you're here, excited about you being here. As a former legislator, I'm very excited about this program and how much interesting more things we can do in that space. But I just want to say a guest again, our guest was Brad Garmon. He's the Director of the Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office. And thanks again, Brad, we look forward to maybe you giving us some of your recruits for us to interview in the future too.

B

Brad Garmon 25:50

Happy to send them your way Ed, this has been great. Thanks.

E

Ed Clemente 25:54

Join us next week. We're have special two guests, Doug Del Grosso, he's the President and CEO of Adient and then also Ron Hall, who's the President and CEO of Bridgewater Interiors, and you can learn about their unique automotive partnership.

A

Announcer 26:10

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