

# Sounds From the Street: Adam Motiwala on Digital Training for the Homeless

**Transcribed By: Joseph Doyle**

**Adam Motiwala (Guest):** If you go to an online course or university, it's made for people who have a stable life. In the sense that they're housed.

**[Music]**

**AM:** We wanted to make a model for people who are not in stable situations but still allow them to be part of a professional class and not be relegated to being homeless.

**[Music]**

**Adam Kampe (Host):** That's digital marketer Adam Motiwala, and this is *Sounds From the Street*. A podcast about homelessness and life on the margins. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Adam Motiwala now lives in Washington D.C where he works at *Fifth Tribe*. A boutique digital marketing firm. Prior to this, he was on course to become an accountant. Lucky for the world, he took a long international detour. Adam volunteered in Honduras, worked with Oxfam in climate change adaptation in Italy. From there took a job UN's world food program doing disaster relief in Pakistan. For over a year, as part of the newly formed *Street Sense* media center, he's been teaching homeless, and formerly homeless men and women about digital marketing, a vital 21st Century skill. Adam's ambitious vision, to help a marginalized population earn extra income, became a reality because of his morning commute.

**AM:** Taking the metro to work everyday, I met Ibin Hips, who's a vendor at *Street Sense*. He's been a vendor for a long time. I always saw him at the McPherson Square metro. I'd see him over and over, consistently. He dresses really well, He's pretty dab. So I just started talking to him. He said, "Hey I actually wrote an article." I started reading it and I thought. "This person can

write.” In digital marketing, we would say that content marketing is the largest part of it. So content is king. Even the people that want to disagree with that, it’s content that is the future of marketing. It’s currently what marketing is and it’s the future of marketing. Content is text, audio, video, infographics, blogs, commercials, people talking about it. That’s what sells a brand. Now if you look at brands in terms of how they’ve transferred. People would tell you what a brand is and you’d think about buying it. Now it’s more like you want to hear what your peers are talking about a brand. That’s content being generated. Brand marketing requires content. So then I was like, he can write. We had a client that we were basically writing all of their marketing material. It was a residential company, they were targeting all of the blogs to go after that audience. If they, their husbands, or their partners were the decision makers, to sway them. We were writing content that went into those blogs. I asked Ibin if he could write a blog for this and see what happens. I met with him on Saturdays at Mcdonald's, we would sit there and we would work on these blogs. I told him how to do research, and he caught on fairly quickly. Then we wrote an outline. It was much more complicated because he’s homeless. We would write things on paper, because he didn’t have a computer. His bag got stolen, or he had gotten beaten up one time. His things got stolen a couple of times, then we would lose all of his work. Then I started taking pictures of it so we had something to go off of. I told him he needed to start typing. He was afraid to type, I told him to type on it and we’ll take time. The process took a while, but after two to three months, he wrote an article. Which was a little long, but it was an experiment at that point. There are a lot of complications in the first iterations of anything, things that you didn’t see happening. We wrote the blog and it got published for that company. I paid him for his time. Then I said, “There’s a potential here.” Then I went to *Street Sense*, met Brian Carome and Eric. He’s the Editor-In-Chief at *Street Sense*, and Brian Carome is the E.D. We found this fund, called *the D.C Social Innovation Project*, They give out \$5,000 grants to local D.C projects that are working in a social sector. They’re looking to alleviate poverty in some shape or form. We actually applied for the grant, and we got it. Me and Eric went and pitched the project and we

built a model. With the grant, we said, "We're gonna do a class now." He wanted to teach four or five percent. I think it was a little ambitious, but we went for it. It's been a year. What we did with the money is we paid the students \$25 a class. The whole idea was can a "homeless" person be a professional? Most people will say no. Homeless people are homeless, there's a label attached to them. One was like, "Is this stigma real?" Can we actually counter it? The second is, "Can these people professionals?" The whole idea of the class is to pay them, and tell them that they're a professional now. It's giving them that same self worth and dignity that they deserve. That's why they're getting paid and that there's an expectation of you you perform like a professional. We're going to work on actual client projects, there's a deliverable, and there's a fee associated to your time. That's sort of the idea that the compensation came from.

**AK:** Just to clarify, the money came from the pot from the D.C social innovation fund.

**AM:** We were able to get money from them and the GW nat fellowship. I think that was another \$5000. One of my volunteers, Samantha, she was a student at G.W She pitched the idea about the fellowship and we got this grant. She was awesome. She really believed in the project. She graduated so she left and went to work in baltimore. We also did an indiegogo campaign. We got almost \$2500 from donors online. We use that money to train the vendors on digital marketing, to pay for them to be there, and to buy equipment.

**AK:** In total, between the Indiegogo campaign, the Nat Fellowship, and the D.C Social Innovation fund, in total you've garnered around ten grand. That's Amazing!

**AM:** We need a lot more.

**AK:** I know that's like a pittance compared to a sustainable grant that could make a long term difference. The fact that you're doing this on the side of a regular job and having another life.

**AM:** We've gone through a couple of iterations of the class.

**AK:** So the classes have been going on for about a year. It's gone through some growing pains. You kinda have a better handle on the model. Though i'm sure there's things still being ironed

out. Things you wish you could do that you can't based on limitations. What happens in a typical class.

**AM:** In a typical day, these students get together. Before what I was doing is I was giving a marketing 101 overview. This is a persona, this is a brand, this is a call to action. What we did is we had client projects from different clients that I've worked with. Like Oma Health Clinic, a medical health center in L.A, a health clinic in Falls Church. We had this solar blogger in D.C who needed people to help create content for him. We had three client projects. We had a lecture, Capstone projects. The next thing to do was to get a certification. During the marketing 101 is where you see if people are interested and if they care to understand the concept. This week we're going to do brainstorming. For one week this is the prompt, this is the project. They want to earn \$10,000 dollars online in a week span. So we have to create five emails. The first week is identifying the donors. The next week is identifying things that the donors would care about. Then we created an outline. Then we split up the team. You're gonna do this email, this person is gonna do that email. Then they filled in the content and I edited it and we sent it off.

We have five students right now. There's Regie whose 30 years old. He's very smart, he understands the digital space. He understands marketing and research. Then we have Ken, he's like the senior in the class. He's like the wise one. To me, he offers a lot of mentorship. He's had a couple of businesses himself, when he was in his twenties and thirties. He keeps the class in focus. Then we have Sasha, a young mother whose sort of ferocious. In the sense that she's going to succeed. She's going to find any opportunity to succeed. She keeps everyone in the class synchronized. Then we have her sister, Toni. She's younger, still finding herself. She's in her twenties. She's looking for opportunities for a job. She has skills and she knows she's employable. She almost graduated college, but she had three credits or classes left, but that's when her family lost housing and she couldn't afford it anymore. She is

basically three classes away from graduating. She's a theatre major, so she can't take these classes online. She's now looking at other ways of saying that she has a certification or some professional credibility. This class is one way of doing that.

**[Music]**

**AM:** Each week we're breaking a larger problem and making it smaller. Now what we're doing is a certification by a large marketing organization. They offer this free inbound marketing certification. That's what we're doing now and that's our goal for this year. They come into a class every week. They're supposed to do one lecture by themselves and we discuss it when they come in. They're supposed to do one in class and write about it. Like write a blog. So this way they're also creating marketing content to build their portfolio. By the end of the class they have a certification, client experience, and marketing content that shows that they're an expert in this field. Therefore their portfolio is employable at that point. They can start getting jobs on their own without me facilitating things. So their portfolio can stand on its own. That's what we'll do next.

**[Music]**

**AM:** Some of the surprises are, they're really creative. The group of people we've had, we've had other students who have come and gone. One, he wasn't in the right mental state. He would shut down in the middle of class and not do the work. The other students wouldn't find that fair. They would share the profits equally. This created a challenge because if one of the students didn't feel like working, we'd have to have him leave the class. It's hard to do that because these people are in need.

**AK:** You had to pull so and so aside and say, "look, i'm sorry."

**AM:** It's hard, because these people are in need. That makes it more hard. But the integrity of the class would fall apart. Then the whole structure would fall apart. Those were the

challenges. Ken who's a great writer, he gets it, I don't have to teach him anything he gets it. He was living at DCA for the majority of the class last year.

**AK:** For those who don't live near the national airport.

**AM:** He basically lived in the terminal. If you go to the airport, you'd be sleeping on chairs. His sleep sucked. His sleep quality wasn't enough to have him be productive. He would be tired. He wouldn't have the ability to focus or concentrate. It delayed things. You're dealing with these types of issues that you or I take for granted that we don't have to worry about when we go to work the next day. A, we know that night that we have a home. The night before we probably had a decent sleep, a meal, if you're not sick or anything. That might not always be the case for some of the students. A lack of predictability but also being on the streets or in a shelter, Toni lives in a shelter, shelters are not a safe haven at all, they're more like a prison. You're always living in fear, people are stealing your goods. A lot of the students they didn't have computers, now we work at the *Street Sense* office, we work at their lab. We use Google Drive so everything's saved. Before we were writing things down, you would lose that work. Things got stolen, things got lost. One of our students got beat up on the streets. You dealt with all of these complexities that you wouldn't have to otherwise. We want to create a model where people can be professionals in that type of environment. Right now if you go to an online course, a university, or some of these other digital marketing certification programs it's made for people who have a stable life. In a sense that they're housed. We wanted to create a model for people who are not housed, who are not in stable situations but still allow them participate in the economic model that we live in or in the economic world. To be part of a professional class, and not just be relegated to being homeless.

**AM:** That's the challenge, and that's sort of what we want to do. It requires a lot of creativity and patience thinking how we solve these problems.

**[Music]**

**AM:** When I think of the society around me, I see that people say that the economy's going to shift, there's going to be new jobs, we're going to create many jobs. The people who take those jobs are people like you and myself. I studied accounting. I don't know what you studied before.

**AK:** English.

**AM:** English. So you studied english and I studied accounting. None of us studied anything digital. We're the ones that took these digital jobs because we had a degree, the stability to learn new skills and adapt quickly. These new jobs are being created for the people already employed, who are already part of the professional class. The people who are not part of that class of professionals, they're just going to get further and further relegated away. To me, it's dangerous and I guess it bothered me to the point where something needed to happen or change.

**AM:** That's where the big picture of my life is. Tying it back to my work with with the U.N. A lot of humanitarian and development work, when I was there I saw the trend of moving away from giving people food to giving people money. That's controversial, but that's the trend and that's where it's going to go in the future. That's basically letting people make the decisions for themselves. You have to trust people. This allows them to build their own local economies, and allows them to create something out of it. That's where the development world is shifting and that's what influenced my approach with this project. Besides giving the homeless food or shelter, but giving the money and skills so they can make more out of it. Reggie for instance, he started the class right after Ibin. There's a new student, he'll be able facilitate some of the concepts to him. To me that's a big deal having your students able to teach new students. That's a change that i've seen.

**AK:** What are you most proud of with your work in this universe, not just of *Street Sense*, but in overall humanitarian work?

**AM:** Three moments come to mind. One is we did this project for this health clinic in L.A. The project manager there, I told him when I submitted the work I asked him for feedback. And you know he was like, “Yeah it’s great, it’s fine.” And I asked him if he knew what the *Street Sense* project was and he had no idea. I told him earlier but he forgot. He said, “I had no idea that this was written by people who were formerly homeless. To that was really good. Because the goal is to compete on the market. It’s like I have the skills to compete. That affirmation from him felt really good.

**AM:** Another moment was. One moment we were writing a blog and it was about if you should bulleted lists or not. It’s not like it’s a big deal. What happened was the students were arguing about it. They just googled it and looked for if you should use it in a blog or not. They had this debate themselves without me doing anything. To me that was a good turning point. That was a good turning point because that showed they had ownership over what they were doing and they had a good enough understanding to to search. They knew what to search. They could argue like I would about a topic at work. That was a really good moment. It made me feel really good, progress is being made. I’m not a teacher. My biggest fear is that i’m wasting their time. There’s an opportunity cost. Would they rather be here or selling papers on the street. Six o’clock is still a rush hour time where there are still people coming home from work until about seven. There’s an opportunity cost There’s also hope that something’s going to happen in the end. What if it doesn’t work out? Did I fail them? That fear really bums me out. When they’re able to make arguments about concepts on their own, and then finish the work. We did this one project over a weekend. We met on Saturday and Sunday. We just crammed it out. It was tiring but it showed a commitment. It showed we can do things if we need to right away. They understood it enough, we could bang out a project. That was cool.



**AK:** So you're a busy man, you've kinda answered this. You've got a full time job, and wife, and now a newborn. Why dedicate yourself to this work?

**AM:** Um. I don't know.

**AK:** We'll just move on to the next one. You sort of explained it in the Ibin story.

**AM:** There's a couple reasons. I get a lot of this experience of this as well. I'm someone who is a vicarious individual in general. Being able to work with these people and learn from them. Ken mentors me a lot about life in general. I get a lot out of that. The students keep you accountable and responsible. You become a family where you get to know each other's personal lives and you hold each other accountable. That's one thing that keeps me going. It's fun. It's an experience where I wouldn't have learned these things any other way. I wouldn't learn these things by reading a book. The second thing is potential. You see potential in something and you want to see where it goes. You want to see where it leads you. We spend two hours a week. I remember us talking to one of the volunteers, Samantha and we had another volunteer. I was talking to both of them. It took us like a month to do this thing. I think it was like one assignment. Technically we spend two hours a week so eight hours. I was like, "You're right." Eight hours, that's actually not bad. That gives me hope as well if we were to change the model a little bit to structure. Maybe get more volunteers and more funding we could train people for at least two hours a day or five hours a day every other day. I think that would have exponential results.

**AK:** My next question, which I ask everybody. What is your goal for the class, the grand vision?

**AM:** The grand vision is to get people employed one at a time. Then we want to scale that up. That's why we're doing to certification and trying to get online contracts. So we can get more people in the class and speed up the progress. If we can get people coming four or five days a week for five hours a day, they'd be able to quickly get a certification and a new source of income. If they wish, they could continue to build skills and become online marketers. Or use that skill to do something different.

**AK:** The five that are currently there. I'm curious if you've witnessed a change in the people in the class that have been participating regularly. I guess what I do see is that this is like a community. At the end of each class we give each other group hug. There's definitely a sense of community. There's another extrinsic value that I haven't been able to capture or understand, that has an affect on the class and the people when I speak to them. I think it gives people hope that there's hope that there are opportunities. A lot of people won't invest in people who are homeless. If they do they'll give them basic needs. They're not trying to create models where they're part of the future generation workforce. There are some programs for unemployment and those are Awesome. There's a program that's focusing on the digital world where lots of job growth is now and in the future. Where basically lots of the jobs are headed towards now. Where all these millennials like myself are gravitating towards. This for me is a way to do that for a population that is not considered employable.

**AK:** THAT WAS DIGITAL MARKETER AND HUMANITARIAN, ADAM MOTIWALA.

YOU

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