



LEAD WITH WE

EPISODE 22: OLIVER PABST

Oliver Pabst:

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Simon Mainwaring:

Welcome to Lead With We. I'm your host, Simon Mainwaring, founder and CEO of We First. Lead With We is a podcast where top business leaders and founders reveal how they built their companies to be high impact and high growth by putting we first. Lead With We is produced by Goal 17 Media, storytellers for the common good. Welcome to this week's episode of Lead With We and I'm excited to talk to Oliver Pabst, the CEO of Mammut, a premier outdoor adventure brand based in Switzerland that has been around for almost a hundred and sixty years. And now they're retooling and re-engineering their company around a new purpose to lead in the future. Oliver, welcome to Lead With We.

Oliver Pabst:

Thank you for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

Oliver, you joined Mammut in 2016, tell us a little bit about your journey up to that point and what made you join Mammut?

Oliver Pabst:

Yeah, I mean, what made me join Mammut is a lot of things which I have been doing before. I grew up in Berlin being part of a family business, respectively, even my grand-grandparents they started an apparel company, so they did knitwear. And so I grew up with products. I grew up with beautiful colors. I grew up with innovations. I grew up with fabric. So since I'm very little, I always wanted to do something with products. And we sold the company and after selling the company, I went to board sports, kite boarding, snowboarding, windsurfing, et cetera. And so then more or less, I could even merge my apparel background, my sports background, and had the opportunity to head a fantastic group of people to run Mammut into the new future on a new journey.

Simon Mainwaring:

And Mammut is famous around the world, but for those who haven't come across it here in the United States, how would you describe the brand?

Oliver Pabst:

I mean, Mammut is the inventor of the mountaineering rope. What does it mean? Mammut was founded in 1862, so close to a hundred six years ago as a rope manufacturer. Have been two guys in Switzerland, not far away from the place where we are having our headquarter now and they started rope manufacturing. Beginning of the 20th century they decided as well

to go into mountaineering ropes, by the way, it was the product name, Mammut, was standing for the sickest, biggest rope which could carry the biggest load. And so what makes us different having that heritage? We are a hardware driven company. So we do understand what hardware means to conquer mountains, to do real mountaineering. And coming from that hardware roots, we then develop business as well in footwear and apparel. So it's a complete offer, but there's a strong hardware roots based on rope manufacturing.

Simon Mainwaring:

I have to say, I was lucky enough to come over to your offices in Switzerland last year and some of the stories that I've heard and some of the portraits on the walls of your office and the stories of the ascents that they've done are absolutely terrifying. I mean, is there one story that... The story that stuck out in your mind of one of your elite athletes that just really encapsulates what Mammut's all about?

Oliver Pabst:

Yeah. A story I would like to share with you is a story which was shared by Dani Arnold who is one of our key athletes. He's a Swiss guy and he was born more or less in the mountains. And he's a world record holder in speed climbing. It's amazing what this guy is achieving. What Dani is doing, he is holding records where he is doubly as fast as you would usually do a climb. So he spends a lot of time preparing it, he waits for the right moment. And then he really starts to accelerate. Being his outfitter, being his supporter, giving him the best products, I was really impressed by him telling me, "Listen, Oliver, literally I only need two products of yours. Very good footwear and a helmet to achieve my top results."

Simon Mainwaring:

I saw the video of Dani recently breaking a record and it's literally watching this guy leaping from handhold to foothold, onto ledges, sprinting and continuing that leap and doing this for two hours and scaling a massive mountain. It just takes your breath away. You're just glad it's him and not you. Do you know what I mean?

Oliver Pabst:

It looks like he's sprinting up. What you usually do horizontally, he's doing vertically. It's amazing.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's amazing. And in the last year you've had the opportunity to think through, how do you reposition the company for the future? So what actually drove that decision, you've been around almost a hundred and sixty years. Was there a particular reason to start thinking about your purpose again?

Oliver Pabst:

Mammut is so easy and so simply to position, I mean, we have a clear history, we have very clear routes, we coming from the Swiss mountains. It's very easy to tell our story. And the discussion around purpose was a conversation that started within our organization. People, and especially people who have been new to the company, we've been through a tremendous transformation, came to us and ask, "Hey, Oliver, what is the purpose? What drives us?" And me being, I mean, I'm in the beginning of my fifties, my purpose is to transform and to lead. I love to go every morning to our company to work with young people in transforming our organization. But they wanted to see a bigger picture, they wanted to understand what is really bringing me every day to work for Mammut. So it was more a grassroots push, I would

call it, to make me wake up and say to myself, "Listen, now it's time to rethink the purpose respectively, redefine and to create a narrative which we have in a, I would call it, new format or new way of language, to create a world moved by mountains."

Oliver Pabst:

In a nutshell it is us as a brand, as a group of people, as a company, being, in a way, the interface and giving people the access, enjoying the nature is our purpose. And in a way a purpose has been ready right in the moment when COVID-19 started. And I can tell you, I'm so happy that we had it in place. I mean, I did every week a check in and a check out digitally. So I wrote emails to my team because obviously during the lockdown most of us have been working from home and I use the purpose to start the conversation. Every Monday morning was a check in email and ended the conversation every Friday evening with an email and made use of the purpose.

Simon Mainwaring:

And what did you see as CEO as a response to that? Because there's some really important dots here. The team really challenged leadership to look at the purpose and then COVID came along and made that purpose even more meaningful. What response did you get inside the company? A, to there being a purpose and B, applying that purpose during COVID?

Oliver Pabst:

Yeah, I mean, some people or some of our team members got it straight away, it was so easy for them to understand, so easy to apply even in their daily routine. And some others had question marks, "Okay, what does it mean now for me? How do I apply it in my daily routine, in my work, collaborating with my colleagues?" So it was quite a diverse reaction on it.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, right. And it's not easy to define a purpose for a brand that has so much history because at one extreme, you've got employees who've been there for decades who are diehard, mountaineering people. And then obviously you've got younger millennial and maybe even Gen Z employees who look at the world very differently. Did you find that there was a tension between those two groups or the purpose could actually form a bridge between them?

Oliver Pabst:

I think it bridges a lot. I mean, even in the moment we launch it until today, it's more a very individual approach to what extent do I understand, take it in and can apply it? I wouldn't say it's a generation thing. It's a very individual journey people have in that regard. The most interesting learning I had was as well when our HR team came, obviously they have been involved in the purpose conversation respectively, the development and the question, how do we apply it in future as well when we go out and hire new people respectively, and when we onboard people? And our onboarding process totally changed. I mean, now people first go with us into the mountains or to the mountains and enjoy nature with us before they even start to work with us. So when we talk about, to create a world moved by mountains, we show people first what it means so that they can apply it in their daily work, that experience which they have outside in nature.

Simon Mainwaring:

Now that we live in these mobile, digital, web driven marketing days, every brand has the opportunity to play all over the world, to reach consumers through their phones all over the

world. So at one extreme, Mammut is this incredibly visceral brand where you're literally in the mountains at the top of the Swiss Alps, at the same time you've got the opportunity to find new growth and reach new audiences in Hong Kong or in Sydney, Australia. So what are the ambitions for the brand to reach these new audiences that don't live in the mountains and how do you think about bringing that to life?

Oliver Pabst:

Yeah. It's very interesting, and I would like to share with you a little bit, a story around the communication which we started throughout the momentum over the last couple of months. So the first big communication piece was, stay home the mountains will wait for you. Because obviously within a lockdown phase, people can't go out, but we helped them, let's say, to prepare for the next adventure. So we created content around how to take care of your shoes, how to polish them, how to clean them out, to repair them. We gave content around how to wash a hardshell jacket, et cetera. So that was already, the mountains will wait for you independently where you are, where you live, because obviously people live in Hong Kong and they enjoy mountains. They live in Shanghai and they go out.

Oliver Pabst:

So we connected already people being at home, our purpose in the sense of, nature is waiting for you don't get angry, don't get...

Simon Mainwaring:

Frustrated, yeah.

Oliver Pabst:

Frustrated. They will wait for you. And then lock up came, we started our so-called Local Adventure Challenge. So it was not about traveling to a mountain far away. It was how to enjoy nature around your place. And you even find a hike in Hong Kong. You go to Lantau Island and you can enjoy nature on a small mountain, even in Hong Kong and same counts for Beijing, two hours by train you're on the mountain. And you know that from...respectively, San Francisco as well. So it's near, nature is closer to you than you think. And we want to motivate people to enjoy nature, which is even around their place. So I think leveraging the purpose and making people aware of how beautiful nature is around their place is part of the purpose.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's been one of the most powerful takeaways for everyone. I live in Los Angeles and the family and I have gone for walks at night. And you just see other families out there walking, and you notice the gardens, you notice the trees, you notice how close nature is when, I would admit, when life was so hectic and crazy busy before, you would drive past all of these things and you were rushing to the next thing and it's really been a slow down moment for us to appreciate the simple and important things. Now, obviously straddling Hong Kong to San Francisco to Switzerland, these are very different geographies, regions, cultures. How do you go about developing a brand voice that can speak with confidence to all of those different regions because the whole category is so competitive? How do you go about getting a unique voice and staying consistent?

Oliver Pabst:

And it comes to how do you talk? What is a brand voice? I think more than before we have to think in adjusting the voice, adjusting our message to certain generations and to certain regions. Imagine you talk to a young Swiss guy who grew up in the Swiss mountains versus a

young guy, same age in Shanghai who doesn't know what climbing means respectively, where I have never seen somebody climbing with a backpack or mountaineering with ropes. So you need to apply the brand values differently, still sticking to the core of what you want to share.

Simon Mainwaring:

Often when companies look towards their own purpose statement, they think about the company itself, leadership, management, employees, maybe even suppliers, but they fail to realize that your customer out there, your partners out there and even more broadly, the industry can all be collaborators in your purpose so they need to be reflected in the purpose. And obviously you mentioned the future, when Mammut began in 1862 it was a very different world and the environment looked very different than it does today. We've got the climate crisis top of mind in addition to COVID and all these other challenges we're facing, I know that Mammut cares about glaciers. They care about the mountains, obviously, how do you bring that sort of a purpose statement to life in terms of your sustainability or what you're doing around the environment?

Oliver Pabst:

Yeah, I mean we kicked off an initiative, which is called Together For Glaciers. So the Together For Glacier initiative is literally based on having the purpose statement in place. We set our own CO2 goals going forward. We developed a very systematic approach, actually very Swiss, systematic approach to reduce our own CO2 footprint. And we have been investing a lot in, especially material management, in our supply chain, but even in what kind of electricity we are using in our own sites. And we didn't know actually how to bring that really across and our industry, we have some very good examples, like Patagonia who have been approaching that much before we started. Respectively, they have been much better in communicating it, what they are doing.

Oliver Pabst:

Without a purpose statement. We haven't been that clear where our, we call it which spot we want to own in the conversation around bringing across the huge amount of measures we have been taking over the last couple of years in regards of sustainability. Because if I look at it, maybe with a positive eye, we are quite good in taking care of the environment, or the playground which we are using to enjoy nature or sport.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. So the Together For Glaciers initiative, you're making that effort internally to reduce your carbon footprint and then you're also communicating that externally, sharing those steps with consumers and letting them know that sustainability's a top priority within the company. And for those of us who don't get the benefit of going to Switzerland and seeing the difference, the way that, for example, climate crisis is showing up, people of Mammut have been living in the mountains all their lives. What differences are you seeing out there?

Oliver Pabst:

I mean, just to take the example of glaciers, I mean, we are a glacier rich country and we have been observing how glacier melting is happening in front of our house, in front of our door. But having it every day in front of your house makes you really think and rethink how you approach how you do business, how to approach how to push sustainability.

Simon Mainwaring:

The world is really challenged in new ways now. If you had to speak to other CEOs and other purposeful companies and really talk about the role the business should play now, how would you describe it?

Oliver Pabst:

I think you have one, a very strong... Or you have to live up to a very strong commitment internally, but this you can't only do internally you need other stakeholders to make that happen. So for us, for example, upstream in the value chain, this goes up to our tier-one suppliers, so the guys who producing, or the companies producing our products. It's tier-two suppliers, meaning as a fabric suppliers, or even the supplier of a zipper puller needs to be involved in our initiatives to reduce our own footprint. That's on the one hand, upstream, and this is one, starting the conversation, two, setting targets, three, taking measures and then obviously to control it and to improve. But the same counts as well downstream towards our retail partners, respectively as well, our consumers, people who are let's say, enjoying with us, embracing with us in nature. So we have to start the conversation, defining a target, defining measures, starting to execute them. So it's a big work and I think all of us are in this together.

Simon Mainwaring:

And what about the industry? Do you see the industry coming together in new ways? Do you see collaboration? Because the more responsible the industry is the better consumers all around the world feel about it.

Oliver Pabst:

Absolutely. Absolutely. We have a lot of very good initiatives across industry. I give you one simple example we have initiative, we call it single use of plastic or avoiding single use of plastic initiative. And you need a couple of companies to accumulate enough plastic, to start a non-virgin plastic approach. To set new standards you have to do that on an industry level and not only yourself. So they're a couple of initiatives we kicked off and execute.

Simon Mainwaring:

And armed with this new purpose statement. What can we expect from Mammut looking forward? What are the plans, the vision?

Oliver Pabst:

That's a very good question. I mean, obviously the purpose is a base or let's say, the overarching seam of what we are doing. So it drives growth respectively, developments out of the core, into the future and looking at an organization like Mammut, we have literally three, I would say direction and growth, one is, let's call it a product stream, secondly, it's a stream when we think in regions and the search stream is channels. And obviously channels is very digital. So growth for us, business for us going forward is even more digital than we have it as of today. And the purpose will help us to create the content to engage with the consumer and to steer the voice of the brand as we have been discussing before. When it comes to regions as well, growth potentially is for a company coming from Switzerland in all parts of world but primarily in Asia for us. And when it comes to products, we coming from the core and develop more and more versatile products for everyday use or everyday life, how we call it.

Simon Mainwaring:

Oliver, thank you so much for the insights today and also for putting purpose at the forefront as you define the future of Mammut.

Oliver Pabst:

Thank you so much. And thank you for having me. I enjoyed a lot.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us on this week's episode of Lead With We where I spoke with Oliver Pabst, the CEO of Mammut, who shared with us how to literally repurpose a premiere hundred and sixty year old brand and how to leverage that purpose inside and outside of the company to accelerate your growth and impact. Make sure you subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and please do recommend it to your friends and colleagues, so they too can build a purposeful and profitable business. If you'd like to learn more about how you can become a purposeful brand checkout wefirstbranding.com where we have lots of free resources and case studies. See you next week on Lead With We.

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