



LEAD WITH WE

EPISODE 27: SIMON MAINWARING

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Jay Curley:

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Adam Lowry:

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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 the 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.

Simon Mainwaring:

We're coming up on the end of the year, and 2020 has been a whirlwind, to say the least, although you might want to ask yourself how would you describe 2020. No expletives are welcome. Personally, in the midst of all this craziness, I've been thinking about what I've learned through the conversations with these amazing purposeful leaders this year with startup founders like Modern Meadow's Andras Forgacs, to those leading established corporations like VF's Steve Rendle, and BlackRock's senior managing director and global chief marketing officer, Frank Cooper. And I think we could all use a moment to slow down and reflect, and so today is a different sort of show. It's just me, and I'm going to share with you some of my favorite moments from the show in the hope that you too will be able to put those insights to work so that together we can step into 2021 with a sense of positivity and optimism towards our future.

Simon Mainwaring:

Obviously, we can't talk about 2020 without talking about COVID and the powerful response from the business community, whether it's to medical practitioners or first responders by delivering restaurant meals to hospitals, or whether it's in a retooling your supply chain or manufacturing to create PPE equipment or ventilators. All of these responses was something we haven't seen all at once, at such a pace, at such a scale ever before. And one of the most compelling, sincere, and also counterintuitive responses to the pandemic came from Vans, the iconic footwear company. And earlier this year, I spoke with Doug Palladini, who's the global president of Vans about how they supported small, local retailers that sell their products.

Doug Palladini:

We come from a world of board sports shops. These guys, they're cultural epicenters, and they run on passion, not on cash flow. And we heard loud and clear for them that they were scared for their business lives. So, in thinking about what we could do, we have a very robust customization platform. So, we said, "Hey, why don't you take a Van shoe as XYZ Skate Shop and make it your own, customize it, bring in one of your favorite artists, put your logo on it, and we will help you sell those shoes and you get the proceeds from them to help support your store so we can help. Working together, both the shop and our brand can help drive interest for this product and remind people how important your shop is."

Doug Palladini:

And the best part about it was the local communities that came alive to support the stores. You heard people in the neighborhood of XYZ Skate Shop reach out and say, "Everyone should be doing this. This is a really good thing for us to do," and sort of close ranks around that shop and to take care of it. And that was just such a beautiful outcome. I just can't say enough about how much that inspired us at Vans.

Simon Mainwaring:

What is so powerful about what Doug just shared is they recognized that their brand was a platform for the mom and pop stores that are the lifeblood of their business. It wasn't about the bottom line. It wasn't about P and L. It was about how can these stores serve this community of people who love doing the same thing. And so if you were to ask what is that light bulb moment, what is that light switch you could do for your business to transform the way people experience your brand and how you inspire them to drive growth. Stop being the celebrity of your stakeholder community and be its celebrant. When you do that, the entire community will build your business with you.

Simon Mainwaring:

This is all really in the context of the disruption that was driven by COVID-19. Everybody's had to retool what they make, how they make it, and how they take it to market. But at the same time, there's a huge opportunity in this process, this ability to sort of become a serial disruptor and catch marketplace opportunities that most don't even see. A great example was my episode with Adam Lowry, who co-founded Method and Ripple Foods. I think every one of us can learn from Adam in terms of how you disrupt a product or service category by using business to prove out a better alternative that will transform an industry for the long-term.

Adam Lowry:

So far, I've really focused on categories that seem like they're really overpopulated and they're hyper-competitive with brands, but what I look for is not that. What I'm looking for is white space relative to the consumer opportunity. With Method, obviously, it was the idea of making a greener cleaning product, something that was beautiful and smelled good and you could leave out on your countertop. Pretty simple but powerful idea. With Ripple Foods, it was the fact that all of our dairy alternatives right now are terrible alternatives to dairy. And so there was a lot of white space from the standpoint that consumers just weren't getting what you want from dairy in the non-dairy space.

Jay Curley:

So, it starts with the consumer need or opportunity.

Adam Lowry:

Always. Always. And then there's another important piece with the Ripple side of things, which was we developed a technology that others don't have that enables us to create a really nutritious dairy alternative that doesn't taste planty the way that a lot of plant-based products do. So, the philosophy that I have is that doing good in the broad sense, whether it's environmental, social, whatever it is that the business is doing, should just be part of the quality of the product and the way the business does business. It shouldn't be the differentiating factor. It's pointless for us to make green products for green people. What we need to do is we need to make green products for everybody. Right? When you're talking about soap and milk, the sustainability of those products is relatively unimportant to most people. And I don't blame them for that. Because if we're successful, all brands are going to adopt these mannerisms.

Simon Mainwaring:

I was really struck by Adam's consumer-centric approach to green alternatives. And what's so powerful what he's saying is that if you want to disrupt an industry, you need to compete on a product level. The quality, the experience of that product must be first and foremost. And, counterintuitively, look at those categories that are overpopulated by people doing the same things because it's indicative of the fact that there isn't enough imagination there. Because if you can go to market with a product that works as well if not better than somebody else, and it does more good and less harm to the environment, to our future, then there's no competition. So, how do you take that one step further? How do you elevate this disruptive mentality and really take on issues perhaps larger than the company itself? Well, I had the pleasure early this year of speaking with Jay Curley, the global head of integrated marketing at Ben and Jerry's. And he told me that at Ben and Jerry's, they describe themselves as a social justice company that happens to make ice cream.

Jay Curley:

What we do is controversial sometimes and often provokes backlash. I mean, I hate to say it, but it often proves the point that we need to be doing the work. So, we've been doing work around racial justice for two-plus years, specifically in criminal justice reform, with the focus around divesting from the broken system, the courts, the jails, the police, in investing in what is actually going to make communities healthier, economic development, housing, education, et cetera. So, when George Floyd was murdered, we'd been working in this space. We'd been engaging in this space and we were able to quickly respond in a way that hopefully was steeped in our experience trying to do this work and was a little bit more poignant and specific than you saw other businesses saying. Right?

Jay Curley:

If you're at a big company trying to do this work, if you're an entrepreneur trying to do this work, humbly, this is the most important thing I think I'll say over this course of this podcast. Stop developing your own campaigns. Stop trying to think that you are going to come up with the solution to solve these big issues. You're not. And that's good. That's okay. That's not what you're in business to do. Like, we make great ice cream. That's what we're in business to do. What we aspire to do is take the lead of the people who this is their job. This is their expertise. Right? And then we figure out what do we have to bring to the table that's unique that can help them to reach their goals.

Simon Mainwaring:

What Jay Curley from Ben and Jerry's just laid out for us there is probably one of the most acute and difficult questions that any brand faces today, which is if there is a greater expectation on business to play a more meaningful role in society, how do you go about it.

And so what he suggests is that you identify those issues and then you work with those movements over the long-term. And the reason he suggests that is very important. Those movements that exist independent of you have legitimacy. And they're led by people who really understand the issue and had been working on the ground extensively for a long period of time. If you don't do it that way, often you'll find brands, with the best of intentions, their commitment is framed in terms of the life cycle of a campaign. And we saw this around the Black Lives Matter movement, where a lot of brands came out, but everybody turned around and said, "We don't want your hollow statements or affirmations. Show us how you're moving the needle."

Simon Mainwaring:

And it's been so powerful and meaningful for me to learn from all of these guests and to really kind of discover all over again that the common denominator they all have is purpose. And I really want to lean into that thought for a second because too many companies today, they still think the purpose is communications, or CSR, corporate social responsibility, or philanthropic exercise. But hopefully from the different episodes we've done this year, you'll realize that it's something that really underscores every aspect of the business. And the reason this is so important is that the success or failure of a business turns on one pivotal moment, which is, are you in the consideration set for a customer. And the more true you are in how you live your values, the better chance you have in-store or online to make sure that consumer buys your product because you share the same values.

Simon Mainwaring:

And so, as we wind down this episode, I kind of want to point back to the purpose of We First itself. For those of you who don't know, I started the company, We First, as a tonic to what I saw was the me-first mentality that led to the global economic meltdown in 2007 and 2008. I was an ad guy at the time. I really struggled with what I saw playing out in Main Street and people losing their houses, and their hopes, and their healthcare, in the US, and Iceland, and Greece, and the Gulf states, and all around the world. And I hadn't really thought or cared about these larger issues up till that point. But I tried to think, "Well, what's at the heart of this? What's wrong with this picture?" And it really was this idea that everybody is operating from a point of me first.

Simon Mainwaring:

And I don't mean to paint a broad brush about everybody, but I think it's fair to say, at the time, that was fairly true of the investment banking industry and beyond. And so what is the opposite of that? If a me-first mentality is, in a sense, the enemy, well, that's when I introduced the concept of we first. It's all about putting the priorities or the interests or the wellbeing of the collective first.

Simon Mainwaring:

So, I've actually got a new book coming out next year called Lead With We, which is taking all of this thinking and really laying it out in an actionable way so that everyone, whether you're a startup, whether you're a midsize high-growth company, or you're a very complex, global corporation, you can look at the practices and thinking that work and apply it to your business.

Simon Mainwaring:

So, thanks for joining us for this year-end review, this sort of wrap-up show for Lead With We, and thank you to the co-founders of Goal 17 Media, Greg and Allison Mollner who have been

supporters, enablers, and guides through this entire process of developing the show, as well as producers, Caroline Halter, and Michael McMorrow. Also, a huge, big, socially distance hug to my entire team here at We First, and in particular two people who make me sound like I know what I'm doing each day, Jill Lindeman, director of client services and operations at We First, and my wonderful executive assistant Karina Alvarez.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We. We'll be taking a break until the new year, but make sure you subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Google, and Spotify because we'll be rereleasing some of our best episodes every Tuesday until we return. Until then, please stay safe and get lots of rest. 2020 has been quite the year. So, happy holidays and see you next year on Lead With We.

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