



LEAD WITH WE HIGHLIGHT 2020: MATT POHLSON

Simon Mainwaring:

Hi everyone! It's Simon Mainwaring, Founder and CEO of We First. We'll be back very soon with a brand-new season of Lead with We. But in the meantime, I wanted to share with you one of my absolute favorite conversations from last year with Matthew Pohlson, the Co-Founder and CEO of Omaze. Matthew has completely disrupted charitable fund raising with his for profit model. And he shared with me how his near-death experience actually helped him take his company to the next level. So thanks for listening and enjoy the episode.

Matt Pohlson:

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Simon Mainwaring:

From We First, welcome to Lead With We, 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:

Welcome to this week's episode of Lead With We, where I'm speaking with Matthew Pohlson, the co-founder and CEO of Omaze. Matt, welcome to the show.

Matt Pohlson:

Thank you, Simon. I really appreciate you having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

Matt. Firstly, what does Omaze do? Can you walk us through the process? Because you're a for-profit company, but you're working with nonprofits, and then, you're creating impact of scale. Can you walk us through that process?

Matt Pohlson:

Yeah, absolutely. So we raise money and awareness for charities by offering the chance to win once in a lifetime experiences. We have two different types of campaigns that we do at Omaze. We have our celebrity campaigns, and we have our, what we call, our prize campaigns, our own campaigns. And so, on a celebrity campaign... like say we do something with Arnold Schwarzenegger. And you get to ride in a tank with him and crush things. It raises a million dollars. We'll spend 25%, or in that case, \$250,000 marketing that, creating content with the Arnold, doing Facebook, just hard costs plus the refunds in the credit card fees. That's what it takes for us to generate that million dollars. And so then, of the remaining \$750,000, \$600,000 goes to Arnold's charity, and then \$150,000 goes to Omaze. So essentially, he's getting a fixed 60% of the gross. We get 15%.

Matt Pohlson:

On the prize side, it's different. It started when we started doing a million dollar campaign with McLaren. That was \$250,000 plus shipping and taxes and everything. So the car is almost 350 by the end. And you have more money in marketing because you don't have a talent to distribute. So a million dollar campaign, \$700,000 is going to the prize and the marketing. And then, we would say to the charity and go, "We're going to split the remainder 50-50 with you rather than 80-20, because we're taking all the risks. We're just sending you a check. You don't need to do anything. You don't need to ask for talent, like anything."

Simon Mainwaring:

So of all the examples that you've done, what was one that just hit it out of the park? Was there one partnership you did with a celebrity that delivered the greatest donations far and above anyone else?

Matt Pohlson:

We've had a lot of big hits. We've been really lucky. We've worked with some amazing talent. We did a go to Lake Como and have a double date with George and Amal Clooney at their house. That did really well. We did one where you got to be in Star Wars. That did really well. We had one where you get to go best friend double date with Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. That did very well. But we've probably had a bunch. I'm trying to think of... we did, get to be mentored by Oprah. That did really well. So we did a win a Lamborghini where Pope Francis handed you the keys. That was probably the most extraordinary one we've ever done. I had to go to the Vatican and pitch Pope Francis to do it. That was pretty wild.

Simon Mainwaring:

This is a lesson, a masterclass in marketing. For anyone, it's impactful, for profit or nonprofit. What's your process like? How do you sit down and go celebrity A with concept B? How do you work that out?

Matt Pohlson:

Yeah. We have a team, they're incredibly smart team. They come up with the ideas and the content. And we go back and tell the town, here's what we think would work and why it would resonate. And it's a pretty fun job.

Simon Mainwaring:

What inspired you to try and take on the impact space? Was it something just, that was important to you personally? Or did you see a need? How did it come about?

Matt Pohlson:

So my co-founder and I, Ryan, had been in the impact space since college. When we came out to LA to get into entertainment. I was specifically focused on cause content. We love storytelling and we did a bunch of projects, using storytelling to inspire action. We were the first directors on this concert called Live Earth, which was the biggest concert ever thrown. If you remember that, it was on seven continents in one night, to raise awareness for climate change. And Al Gore was the producer. We had everybody from Rolling Stones to Kanye. And then, we did the Clinton Foundation's big 10th anniversary global television concert event with everybody from Bono and Jay Z to Bill Gates and Tony Blair. And so, we were doing that work and we realized that we were working, obviously, with these people that were very influential and authentically wanted to do good, but we just realized we weren't doing that much good.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's a really powerful insight. But what was it in your upbringing that really inspired you to want to go there? Did your parents have an influence? I know that you had the dual experience that you just described. But you were also an actor, you studied at Stanford. Was it this conspiracy of experience or circumstances that came together?

Matt Pohlson:

I think it's a combination. My parents are a huge influence. They're very service driven. My mom had started a program called No One Dies Alone, where she would sit with people in a hospital at the end of their life and comfort them, if they had no one else. She was also working in a hospital. My dad was a criminal defense lawyer, and he did that because he sees the best in people. And he believes that there are systems, structural systems that lead people astray. And a lot of these systems, as we know, are biased along racial lines, along class lines, along gender lines. And he just thinks that he could fight the system within you, by helping people who've been in tough situations. My uncle died on the street homeless, and I saw that happen. And so, I knew that just because people ended up in bad situations didn't mean they were bad people. And that you need to kind of work against that system.

Simon Mainwaring:

So Matt, I know that you had a very profound personal experience in the last couple of years that has impacted the way that you're running Omaze. Tell us a little bit about that.

Matt Pohlson:

So basically, what happened was, yeah, two years ago I was declared dead, and then they brought me back to life. So what happened was, when I was four, my stomach was twisted in a knot and the scar tissue from that surgery broke off all these years later. I was supposed to die when I was born. And so, it was this freakish thing that happened and created this bowel obstruction. And I didn't know that at the time, I just knew that my stomach really hurt. And so, I called my buddy who is a doctor and explained what was going on and explained that I was throwing a dinner party that night. And I really want to be able to do that. And he said, no, you need to go to a hospital.

Matt Pohlson:

So I went to the hospital, and I was supposed to meet our COO, Helen at the time. And so, she came and then my parents came and they did all these tests, and they couldn't figure out what was going on. And so, about 10:00 at night, they said to my parents and Helen, "You guys go home. We're going to keep Matt overnight. And if he's not better in the morning, then we'll do surgery then." So that time, Helen drives home to her house and she pulls into her driveway. It's almost 11:00 at this point. And something is telling her not to get out of the car. Something is telling her to go back to the hospital. So she drove back, and if she hadn't driven back, I would have died 45 minutes later. Because my blood pressure had plummeted and the machines had not alerted the nurse. And so, Helen came in, and she had been in the hospital with her grandmother, a couple of months earlier. So she knew her way around. She's like, this doesn't look good. She went and got a doctor. The doctor took one look and immediately called in the crash team. They rushed me down into surgery, came out of surgery.

Matt Pohlson:

And they said to my mom, "The good news is we know what it is. It's bowel obstruction. The bad news is that we can't figure out why his heart rate is continuing to plummet. And he's in critical condition. Then about two hours passed, and my mom went downstairs to get my dad and my brother. And she's coming back up the elevator, and she hears over the loud speaker code blue in room 437. And my mom works in a hospital. So she knows that means flat line, and she knows that's my room. So she rushes to the door. And the nurse says, "I'm sorry, you can't come in. This is very serious." And my mom said look, "I was there when he came in this world. If he's leaving this world right now, I'm going to be in that room." So she let her in the room, and they were doing the compressions, and they were doing the electric shock treatment with the paddles. And my body wasn't responding, I was flat lined.

Matt Pohlson:

And so, my mom started to crumble. It's one thing to lose a child, it's another thing to be in the room when it is happening. And at the same time, my dad was outside with my brother. And this doctor came out and said to another doctor in front of my brother, not knowing it was my brother, "Hey, we lost this guy. He's gone." And so, my brother pushed my dad in the room saying, "You need to be with mom." And so, my dad came in from my mom's left, and she was faced to her right to me. And he was crying so loudly when he came in. And she turned to him and said, "Gary, you got to be quiet or they're going to kick us out of this room."

Matt Pohlson:

And when she did that, when she turned to him, she said she saw something she'd never seen before in the hospital. She said every nurse and every staff member and every doctor in the ICU had just gravitated outside the window. And then, there was 40 of them. And they look like the silent church choir, just sending in this positive energy. And she was so moved by these people that were sending love to someone that they didn't even know. It just filled her up with strength. And she took a deep breath, and she started coaching me. And she just said, "Matthew David Pohlson, these people are fighting to save your life. They're fighting so hard to bring you back, but you're not fighting hard enough. You need to fight harder. And these people are fighting to save your life." And they said it was this surreal experience because here's this 65-year-old mom who's standing in a room that she shouldn't be in. There's never anybody but doctors in this room.

Matt Pohlson:

Because she kept fighting, they kept fighting. But the flat line went on for four-and-a-half minutes, which is a really long time. And so at one point, my mom started to think, well, this is too long. I can't believe I'm going to lose him. And if I lose him, I'm going to lose my husband. And how is this happening? And right as she started to think that, the doctor shook his head as if to say, this is done. And my mom pleaded with him. She said, "No, no, no, please, please don't call it." And then right as she said that, he paused for a second. He said, "Wait a second, I think we have a pulse." And then all of a sudden, my eyes opened up and I popped up. And I was on my side and I lifted my right arm and kind of gave him a thumbs up.

Simon Mainwaring:

Wow. Firstly, Matt, thank you for sharing something so personal and so profound in your life. And it makes total sense that it just changes your vision for what you do with your life, what you do with the company and how you serve others. Tell us a little bit about how that shows up in your life now and in the company.

Matt Pohlson:

Well, in terms of my life, when I was going through the flatline, I had this kind of come back to light experience. And it's one of those things, you get to this state where your ego just dissolves and you realize the interconnection we have to all things around us. And it's like they say in Buddhism, you become both a drop in the ocean and the entire ocean. And I was on the other side, there was a conscious choice of, do you go back or do you stay? And so when you go through an experience like that, it vastly changes your perspective. I used to be way more ego-driven that I would've cared to admit. I wouldn't say you would've called me an egotistical jerk or anything, but I care a lot about what people thought. And so, that really changed my perspective pretty dramatically.

Matt Pohlson:

And then in terms of the company, I was out of the office for two months after that. And when I came back to the office, I was really struggling to be back because I felt like, I don't think that we were contributing at the scale that we could. And I felt like we were just doing the celebrity stuff, which is all we were doing. At that point, there was a limit to how impactful we could be. And then six months before I had left, we had done this campaign with Daniel Craig, where you got to go to New York, you got to go to the Aston Martin track with him. You got to ride around in a one of a kind Aston Martin. And then you got to keep the Aston Martin. And it was supposed to raise \$300,000 and it raised \$2.1 million. And halfway through, our marketing team was really smart, and they said, "What if there's no Daniel Craig? What if it's just a car? And it performed almost as well."

Matt Pohlson:

So then we decided, okay, we're going to take a big bet. We're going to go buy a \$250,000 McLaren. And we're going to offer it up with just Omaze distribution, no talent. And if we can raise \$500,000 with that, then we have something. And then that car that McLaren coincidentally launched the day before I unexpectedly went into the hospital. So then when I came back and I was trying to find my way, I sat down with Nina, our CFO, who shared this desire to create greater impact with greater scale. And I said, "By the way, whatever happened with the McLaren, did it raise the \$500,000? And she said, it raised \$1.9 million.

Simon Mainwaring:

As entrepreneurs, we're all taking a bet on ourselves, and we're putting ourselves out there in the world. Because consciously or not, we feel like we've got a purpose. Have you found that entrepreneurs commonly have some sort of profound experience, which informs their decision to have an impact in how they build their business?

Matt Pohlson:

I do. Fortunately, most people haven't had a near death to get their mind right, like I did. But entrepreneurship requires so much courage. There are some people that just get it right out of the gate, but that's very few. And I think, so often when we hear stories of entrepreneurs, like we hear about Elon Musk or Richard Branson. These pioneers who just did everything with courage, impressions. And if they had a failure, it was quickly turned into a success. And the reality is every entrepreneur is scared. But everyone takes some kind of leap, and they realize that everything you want is on the other side of fear. And they're able to quiet down the noise about these potential consequences that can be very overwhelming. That is just fear. And they take a leap when they're not sure if it's going to work out. And that is in itself, is a transformative experience for people.

Simon Mainwaring:

Absolutely. And I think you probably saw challenges within the impact world, nonprofit NGO foundation. And you felt like it could be done better. Have you disrupted, do you feel like you've disrupted the nonprofit world, the impact world? Has it had a ripple effect?

Matt Pohlson:

I think we've had a ripple effect. Absolutely. We've now netted over \$140 million for charity. And well, that's money that they wouldn't have raised. But I also think moreso, we're fighting against a lot of social outdated mores that hold back the nonprofit world. But we don't let nonprofits do what we let for profits do. We don't let them advertise. We don't let them invest in scale. We don't let them pay talent top market rates. And the reason is because the origins of charity actually come from Puritans coming over, finding a new world, making a lot of money. Then feeling like, Oh wow, if we make all this money, we might not go to heaven, and so then we created the concept of charity, is like a form of penance. So that you never make money in the thing that was your penance for making money.

Matt Pohlson:

And so, we've had that permeated through our culture for 400 years, as a result. And so, we're still stuck in these old ways. And so in that way, we're trying to disrupt that world. We're saying we think it's better that we're for profit. We think it's better that we're profitable. We think it's better that we take a healthy percentage of what we're doing. What really matters is the impact that we're creating for these causes. But there's a lot of people that reject that. There's a lot of people that we have to fight against.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think the public is waking up to this shift. You've got billionaires launching foundations, but with a sort of for-profit mentality or structure. You've got corporations becoming more purposeful. The whole idea of reaching out to celebrities and partnering with them and creating these one of a kind experiences is so breakthrough. Because

usually those celebrities are only available through their minder and keepers and talent agents and the platforms of movies and so on. How big is the team? How large is the company? How do you get this done?

Matt Pohlson:

Yeah so, we're 108 people. We just have a really passionate team, and we're really smart people. Everyone's really purpose vision driven. Our vision is to dream the world better. We believe we get to make dreams come true, but we also believe that optimism is a fuel for dreams. And optimism is a super power that makes people realize what they thought was impossible is actually possible. And we want to scale that. And so, we have a lot of people with that kind of mindset. And they get an extraordinary amount done. And we want to be the first company to give a billion dollars to charity in a single year. And then we'll do it. It's not a massive team for the scale that we're at, in terms of the impact.

Simon Mainwaring:

Every purposeful company out there wants to attract the type of employee you're talking about. Someone who is hot lead that just wants to show up and make a difference. How do you find those people? How do you bring them on board? How do you maintain the culture? What do you do to kind of unlock that secret sauce inside the company?

Matt Pohlson:

Yeah, it really starts with our virtues. We have virtues instead of values. Because values are what you believe in virtues are what you do. And it doesn't matter what you believe. It matters what you do. So we've organized the fundamentals of the company around that, we before me, take ownership, dream giant, spread joy. We reinforced those actions. And then your virtues inform your culture and then your culture informs your brand. And all those things ladder up. So we reinforce those a bunch of different ways. We construct our leadership around that. We're constantly checking in on that. We're constantly assessing ourselves against those virtues.

Matt Pohlson:

And then, we screen for that when we interview. We look for people that want to maximize the ripple effect. We look at people that want to dream giant. We look at people that, they'll have envisioned that from day one and work their way back. And so, we ask questions, but we then share back to the other team members how the interview went. We can give examples of actions they took that represent those virtues, not things they said, but actions they took.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's interesting. Sometimes, we hesitate to talk this way in business terms, because it may sound a little bit woo woo. But if you look at the macro forces out there right now, where business is becoming more purposeful and we're shifting from shareholder to stakeholder capitalism, and we're reanimating our relationship to each other and the planet. Because we're in crisis. What we're really doing is reweaving the social fabric and our fundamental connection to the planet on which we depend. And so, is actually what's showing up in business right now. Do you think that's the case? Do you see it moving in that direction?

Matt Pohlson:

I do. And which goes back to the ripple effect. We just want to remind people that we're all interconnected. And that was part of my experience in coming back from the near death, is you just realize how we are all interconnected in this. The idea that we're all separate is really an illusion. It can sound woo woo, but I think there's also a lot of evidence in evolutionary biology that this actually is what has to happen. If you even look at Darwin, everyone knows survival of the fittest, but there's also an [inaudible 00:20:25] of what's called inclusive fitness, which is in a ecosystem of abundant resources, that those who are most likely to pass on their genes, are actually those best at sharing resources with others, working together within a community. And there's a lot of

evidence that that actually is what needs to become the prevailing force of evolutionary biology. That's actually what we need to optimize around because we have enough resources for everyone to live plentifully and happily and fulfilled. We just have too many people, essentially, requiring a disproportionate amount of those resources.

Matt Pohlson:

And so, I think the business reflects that. And in the push towards that reflects some of larger forces at play. It's not just people doing mushrooms on weekends that think we should do this. It's actually what has to happen.

Simon Mainwaring:

It has to happen to not only be prosperous, but to sustain that over time, for sure. And how do you compete? Is it purely on the strength of your storytelling? You've come into the market, you've enjoyed strong, aggressive, and impactful growth. What do you do to compete?

Matt Pohlson:

We believe storytelling is central. You need to connect with people on an emotional level. We also reconstructed our strategy around a flywheel that exists in sweepstakes, which is the more customers you have in your database, the better the prize you can offer, the better the prize you offer, more people that enter, the more people that enter, the more customers you have in your database. And so, we're very strategic in terms of how we provide value to our customers, how do we integrate with other partners who can bring in more customers, how we design our regulatory strategy around being first to market, so that we can acquire customers, how we use storytelling to spread. And so, it's along all those dimensions that we're pushing. But what we're doing has existed forever. The Great Wall of China was built off of a sweepstakes, the first building at Harvard was. The Revolutionary War was financed in that way. So it's the oldest form of public finance. And so, we're just bringing new brand and content to that. And then trying to accelerate those network effects in that flywheel.

Simon Mainwaring:

So Matt, as a final thought, both in terms of being a man, being a CEO, being an entrepreneur, you went through an extraordinary experience that very few people have been through, where you had that near-death experience and came back. What would you share with us as fellow entrepreneurs in terms of how you see the world differently and how you bring yourself to your role as a CEO or as an entrepreneur differently, because of what you went through?

Matt Pohlson:

I think a big thing I would say to most entrepreneurs is that everyone is scared and that's okay if you are too. And just be a best friend to yourself. I used to be terrible friend to myself. And it took me going through that experience, realizing that the framework with which I was looking at the world and how much I was comparing myself to people, how much I was worried about what others thought, was just getting in the way of trying to put love and optimism out in the world.

Matt Pohlson:

And it's okay if you're scared. And so, recognize that everyone who has done this, who has ever had success... I have friends who were incredibly successful, far beyond mine. And I look at people who lionize them and assume that they never had any fear. And I know that's not the case. It's just about getting to the other side of that, and the way that you get to the other side of that, is recognizing that there's so much more than just what you do with your company. But if you're enjoying and you're loving what you're doing every day, and you're getting a little bit better every day, for whatever the time horizon it is, you'll end up being very fulfilled when you get that.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thank you so much, Matt. Thanks for sharing your personal story. Thanks for the leadership of Omaze, so far. And thanks for putting that profound experience to work, to allow you to scale your impact, and for sharing really powerful insights into how to enjoy the entrepreneurial journey more. And as you say, by doing so, unlock even greater potential for yourself. So thanks for joining us today.

Matt Pohlson:

Thank you, Simon. Thank you for telling the stories of purpose-driven companies and for leading them yourself.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Lead With We, where I was talking to Matthew Pohlson, the co-founder and CEO of Omaze, who shared with us how to disrupt your industry to scale the difference that you make, and how to manage your mindset to find greater joy and success in the entrepreneurial journey. If you're inspired by what you heard today, here are three things that Omaze is doing that can help you become a purposeful business. Firstly, define your company, purpose and virtues. Secondly, leverage the power of communities to accelerate and scale your impact. And then thirdly, adopt an optimistic mindset so that you can not only enjoy the entrepreneurial journey, but scale that much more effectively.

Simon Mainwaring:

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