



LEAD WITH WE
SEASON 2: EPISODE 005
Marc Washington – Muniq

Simon:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We, the podcast where top business leaders and founders reveal how they build their companies to be high-impact and high-growth by putting We First. I'm Simon Mainwaring. And today, I'm joined by Marc Washington, the founder and CEO of UR Labs, which has just launched a nutrition brand called Muniq, which leverages gut health science to help those struggling with chronic conditions, and the brand was launched during COVID-19. So Marc, welcome to Lead With We.

Marc:

Thank you very much, Simon. Great to see you.

Simon:

Marc, firstly, tell us a little bit about your journey because as a first-time entrepreneur, it's always informed by where you came from. So, walk us through your career up to this point.

Marc:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, for sure. For sure. So, as you know, I am really more of a veteran operator, an executive in this space of health and wellness and all things better for you. I was very good at it and thought it might've been kind of my path that I was destined for. It's like, "Oh, I really enjoy this path and success with helping other entrepreneurs scale their vision." And I'm learning a lot of tips along the way as to how to do this successfully, but also along the way, there are things I was like, "I would do that differently."

Simon:

Right.

Marc:

Right. If this were my ship, if I had say two hands firmly on the steering wheel, there are some things that I would do differently and I just kept note of those sort of along the way, just in case when I got my shot. And it's one of those things that kept going at me internally like, "Yes, you can take someone else's vision and scale that, but why not truly build it by design from the very outset, from the very foundation?" And that was the head part, if you will, of, maybe it is time to throw my hat in the ring to start a business from scratch. So the company is called... The full name is Uplifting Results Labs, which kind of embodies the ethos of what we're about. So was UR Labs for short. The business is about how do we help people through nutrition regain control of their health and frankly their lives and Muniq is our brand.

Simon:

It's interesting. You said that head part, obviously you need that heart as well.

Marc:

Yeah.

Simon:

What was it that helped you identify what area to kind of... What category to play into, and that really kind of ignited that passion to make that leap of faith?

Marc:

I had an aspiration to do something that I don't think had been done before in our space of not just better for you, but fundamentally transformative, especially for adults in this country that are living with chronic conditions. In my mind, I didn't see many businesses that were effectively making a difference in their lives. And then what really takes it to another is my own personal why, which is my sister Monica and describing her personality, she was vibrant and colorful and full of life and literally the life of the party. But like so many, she struggled with her health.

So she struggled with obesity. She had diabetes, hypertension, which is high blood pressure. So she has two beautiful, beautiful kids that are teenage young adults now, but she got pregnant again later in life and it was a very high-risk pregnancy just given, not just age, but the combination of these underlying conditions. And she tragically passed away. It was about five years ago. So the inspiration for the Muniq is Monica, Monica plus unique equals Muniq.

Simon:

And I'm so sorry to hear that Marc, and I'm sorry for your loss there. And it's a very powerful thing that you've done to really kind of repurpose yourself through the lens of your personal why. It's one thing to go from sort of an instinct to want to do something to focus on a certain area, it's another to get a company off the ground. And launching a business during COVID, this is a high bar for any entrepreneur. So how did you get the company started?

Marc:

Yeah. So really, it came back to some relationships that I had in this space. And I reconnected with a group of investors, actually, more of not traditional venture capital investors, actually more of a foundry business model that support and incubate new businesses and brands. And I had a relationship with them over the years. It's a group called The Production Board based out of San Francisco, where we had connected years ago. And I brought this concept. I said, "I really want to fundamentally transform human health, but I want to do it through nutrition. I don't want to do it through drugs and therapeutics and injections." I really believe that there's a way to truly use food as medicine. And that's where this marriage came together because the group that founded by very successful entrepreneur investor named Dave Friedberg.

He was like, "We also have been studying the space, but we've been selling specific technologies around the gut microbiome. We'd love to partner with you in building this business, launch it from the ground. We'll invest in the company to get this business started." So, essentially had a seed investment well

before we had a product. Just when we had this concept of a vision of the type of company that we wanted to launch.

Simon:

And that's a powerful lesson in and of itself. This relationship capital you build, even before you decide to become an entrepreneur, is what allows you to kind of get off the ground in the first place. Were there any unique challenges that you found? As soon as you launch the business, you're barely coming out of the gate and you slammed straight into COVID.

Marc:

Yeah. Yeah.

Simon:

So how did that affect you?

Marc:

Yeah. Many, many challenges because even though we launched the company a year and a half ago, we launched the brand six months ago, which is right in the midst of this. I will say there are multiple occasions, pre-launch where we're sitting around a table saying, "Does this make sense? Should we pause and wait this thing out? There's so much noise happening right now with the pandemic. There's so much social unrest happening with the Black Lives Matter movement and some of the social injustices happening." And all these different factors that we can't even work together anymore. We're all remote, kind of all these challenges stacked on top of each other. But at the end of the day, as I stepped back and looked at the situation, frankly, the stars aligned even more, because when you look at the current environment, it hasn't just created new challenges, it exposed existing challenges, right? The fact that there are so many people suffering with chronic conditions, the fact that it's disproportionately minority suffering from these conditions. It shone a bright light on the fact that so many people are in such critical condition and that was before anyone had ever heard of COVID, right? And so now it's exacerbated.

Simon:

Yeah. Let's talk about just how chronic these problems are. Give us a sense of how broad-based these chronic challenges are?

Marc:

So, rough numbers, over 100 million US adults suffer from one or more chronic condition if not disease. And so, it's a long list of them. Right from diabetes, obesity, hypertension, high cholesterol, et cetera, et cetera, right? So massive, massive impact. They tend to ride along with each other. So the vast majority of individuals that deal with one chronic condition deal with multiple. And when you go down that list of each one of these chronic conditions, every one of them has a disproportionate impact on multicultural communities in particular black and brown communities. And so I'll take diabetes as an example. Literally 40% to 50% more likely for Hispanic and black populations to be impacted by diabetes. And the numbers are shockingly consistent in terms of much higher incidents rates as you go down that list of chronic diseases and conditions.

Simon:

And the causes are so vast from food deserts to lack of healthcare support, and social services. It's extraordinary how interconnected the issues are, right?

Marc:

It really is. It is something that I've thought a lot about. Frankly, growing up and seeing it in family and community and environment and seeing it happen and have studied in research and I've been in the space. And so, yeah. No, it's not one thing. There is structural inequities and racism that absolutely is pervasive and plays a role as well. There's genetics, there's lifestyle choices. There's culture, all these factors all kind of contribute to this, but at the end of the day, it results in this health disparity and it's longstanding, right? This is not something new. Like I said, this environment has shone a light on that health disparity gap that has existed for years.

Simon:

On one hand, you got to this point where you want to be an entrepreneur and then you kind of laser-focused in on what role you want to play. But then you had the challenge as a first time entrepreneur to develop a product and not just a product that has the taste appeal and the texture and all those sorts of things, but also the science-based rigor to solve for these very, very complex problems that people experience for different reasons. So, talk about the gut, talk about gut health and talk about how you develop the product that could really sustainably address that.

Marc:

Yeah, absolutely. I love talking about this because it's so core to what we're doing. And I'd say before starting the company, I was gut aware, right? Taking probiotics, I knew a little bit about fiber and so forth, but I definitely wasn't deep in the space, but really diving deep into the scientific research around the gut and the gut microbiome was like an awakening, an aha moment. And so at the highest level, what it is, it's literally the trillions of bacteria that reside predominantly in your large intestines, your gut. It's been shown through scientific research and technology advancements have really made this much abundantly more clear now than it has been in the past. Just the outsized role that those trillions of bugs, predominantly bacteria that are in your gut, the outsized role that they have on your health.

And so if you look at the studies and the science, when you look at chronic condition after chronic condition, disease after disease, there is really solid and sound research around the connection between what's happening in your gut and all of those aspects of your health. And so not only that, we also know now that there's ways you can fundamentally engineer or work with your gut to actually improve on those conditions as well. So for me, that was the aha moment. That was the pathway to actually activate this vision. And while there's a number of things that I'm looking at, diabetes was at the top of that list.

And that's really where we landed upon, some really insightful and fascinating research around a unique class of what are called prebiotics, which are essentially the food for your gut, the food for the bacteria in your gut, and a unique class of prebiotics called resistant starch, which are incredibly well-studied, showed a lot of benefits. And that technology is used to create an application that could fundamentally change the way that you manage, not just your gut health, but your blood sugar.

Simon:

And so let me ask you, it's a double-edged sword when you're launching a new brand in a somewhat complex area like the microbiome, because it allows you to kind of capture people's attention by launching a word like microbiome and almost breathing life into it. So it becomes the thing that everybody wants to know about, and that cuts through all the clutter. At the same time, you can alienate people who really don't want to know anything. So how did you marry in your marketing the education piece, along with the taste, texture, product benefits piece?

Marc:

Right. Yeah. For us, and this has been a learning, right? And I would say that we're still not there in terms of having fully optimized the education around the science to coincide with the access, but it has been a journey. And I'd say where our journey has gotten us to is, the most important thing is making it about the consumer, right? We'd lead with emotion, right? We lead with the benefit, we lead with empowerment, right? So this is a product that you can enjoy.

Simon:

And it's the business of hope, as you say that you can overcome these chronic diseases because they're so deeply ingrained and systemic as you said, that it must feel almost impossible, you can't get your way out of them.

Marc:

Right. Right. Exactly. And so we connect with people by showing there is a way, and we use a lot frankly, through social proof. Kind of customers who had this amazing experience that have been using Muniq and the stories that they tell us. And then, as we bring them in, that kind of gives us license to still meet people where they are, but start to educate around the gut and why this is the foundation for your health. So we kind of have that curated education process with customers throughout their life cycle to kind of build that literacy.

Simon:

Yeah, the more you raise awareness around the problem, you position your product as a solution and they make the conscious choice themselves. And there's a couple of very important things that you shared there. One, it's not about you, it's about them. Most marketing in the purpose category fails for that reason. And then secondly, it's about celebrating the customer and their success stories because they're much more interested in that and they're much more likely to share that with others when it's about them, as you said, rather than about you. So let's talk about that, the direct-to-consumer, the DTC approach you talk... Obviously, a lot of brands, companies outright were forced to go online if they weren't already or even more so if they were, so was it a conscious choice out of the gate that you thought, "Listen, let's just go direct-to-consumer for access in it's low overhead," and you didn't have to compete for shelf space or was it, "Okay, well, this is COVID induced. We have to go this way?"

Marc:

Yeah. It was very much the former, like before anyone had ever heard of COVID. The model was always about direct-to-consumer, not just because it's a space that I'd come from, is very passionate about. I love a direct-to-consumer, the direct engagement and the feedback mechanism that you get with consumers. And the fact that it's an efficient way to launch with lower barriers to entry and a way to

effectively get a product out there and build awareness and scale. So, those factors were obviously part of it. I'd say the bigger factor was knowing what we are trying to do. This education gap that we're delivering this unbelievably effective dosage of these gut microbiome-based things that could change your gut and change your [inaudible 00:14:58]. That's not something that is easy to just tell walking in a retail store. And it's also largely a subscription-oriented business model as well. It goes back to the fact that an everyday usage is really key to getting effective results, which also lends itself more to direct-to-consumer. So yeah, it always had been the plan.

Simon:

And so you've got this relationship with The Production Board and obviously they take an educated risk in supporting a new company going to market, but you've got to continue to grow. You've got to continue to raise finance. Success necessitates more resources. So, talk about that aspect of the journey. What's it like once you've got some traction in the marketplace and now you need to kind of keep growing?

Marc:

Yeah, it's interesting because that's literally where we are. I feel fortunate that we are having a really significant impact with consumers at a very early stage, which has helped us really grow at a very fast clip, but that also takes resources and capital, et cetera in order to support that growth. So yeah, we're actually at an earlier stage than anticipated, had gotten to a level of traction where we're like, "yeah, there's real proof of concept there. This is not just a significant opportunity. We have an approach through our product, through our community to really effectively address this need." And that's basically where we are right now. I've been telling our story meeting with a number of predominant venture capital firms about sort of who we are, what problem we're trying to address and sort of what milestones that we are aspiring for, even though we're so young. It's just a business and a brand that launched six months ago. So, that's definitely a unique challenge just given we don't have that much history behind us.

Simon:

And let me ask you, as a black entrepreneur and as an extension of your deep commitment to supporting multicultural communities and so on, have you found that there's been obstacles that you've uniquely had to face or have you found actually in response to Black Lives Matter and so on? There's actually been a rallying of support or an awakening, a long-overdue awakening around entrepreneurship by people of color, what's your experience been?

Marc:

Yeah, I'd say the jury's still out. I would say I've been on the one hand encouraged by the number of people who have raised their hand and spoken about the importance of representation and the importance of supporting diversity, both within their firms and the entrepreneurs that they back and more light being shone on it. But the jury is still out though. Words is an important step, but it's not enough. It's like a necessary, not sufficient condition, actions matter more than words. And I think there's still a lot more words than there have been actions in this regard for businesses and firms and individuals who have taken proactive and intentional steps to right some of the past wrongs and to create a level playing field and to really put money where their mouth is in terms of therefore supporting

black entrepreneurs and taking meetings that you wouldn't have otherwise done and having more representation on boards and kind of on and on down the list.

So there's definitely been movement, but in terms of real actions, real fundamental shift, I think we have so far to go. So far to go. So, the jury is out to be honest.

Simon:

And what would your advice be to a young black or brown entrepreneur who feels very isolated? They've got an idea, they've got a passion for something, but they don't even know where to start or they've had a direct experience of racism or inequity in and around an opportunity. What would you say to them? Because you've worked through that journey. So what would your advice be?

Marc:

Yeah, honestly, I think it's about hunkering down. I saw a couple of different things. One is hunkering down and keeping your eye on the prize because at the end of the day, good ideas and good business wins and what does talk is green.

Simon:

Right.

Marc:

Right. So, obviously I do believe and I've experienced this for myself and other black and brown entrepreneurs can probably relate. It does feel like a longer putt, so to speak, right? Just being the only one in the room in and of itself even if everyone's well-intentioned, not having that network and resources... And the majority of the meetings that I have had, the people that I've been Zooming with, typically don't look like me. And so there's a fundamental disadvantage going into it, but despite that, if you're focused and eyes on the prize and really deliver against a true need, you will eventually get there, whether or not you take on that capital from those on the outside.

The other point I would make is reach out, right? Find someone that inspires you, that motivates you for input and counsel and advice, whether they share kind of the same ethnicity or whether they don't. I do think some counseling and guidance and advice can really be helpful. And sometimes that doesn't necessarily mean you have to have a mentor who you talk to everyday or every week. There can be just nuggets of insights that can point you to a better direction of success. So, yeah, finding people that you can connect with that you think you could get some of those nuggets from, I do think is another important piece of advice.

Simon:

And one of the really powerful ways to do that, people often overlook is the contributions you make. Because when you show up in a meaningful way, other people show up in your lives. What are some of the things that UR Labs or Muniq has been doing during COVID? Are there other ways that you've been showing up trying to support those multicultural communities?

Marc:

Yeah. For me, it's about... This is the nice thing, right? Starting a business from scratch and building a business by design, this is woven into our ethos as a business. And so, it's not like a separate effort to talk about, "Okay, what can we do from a social impact? Or which costs can we support? Because this is important to us. So we want to look like it's important to us." It's our business. And so, yeah. And so in addition to just the general executing on the vision, I am, and we are as an organization, very outspoken about our desire to have an impact on multicultural communities. And so we communicate that through our social, through our database, through our website, et cetera. And we're also very intentional about representation, right? And so I think that matters. We're intentionally very, very inclusive in everything that we do.

And that also plays into not just myself, but my team as well. And so my aspiration, my desire is that our team reflects our brand, reflects our consumer base which looks like this country. And so I've been very intentional about how we build our team. And so it's just infused in how we think and operate as a business across all different dimensions.

Simon:

And it's so powerful what you're saying, because success inspires replication. And let me ask you, how big is the team now and give us a sense of what the future of UR Labs looks like or even other expressions of Muniq.

Marc:

Yeah. Yeah. So, our team, mighty team... Small but mighty team of 10 right now. And I really aspire to be a truly trusted destination for someone looking to regain control of their health essentially regardless of what that condition is. I think we have an opportunity and if we have a pathway to create products that can address multiple conditions. We're starting with effective blood sugar control but working through your gut. There's a number of other conditions that we aspire to address as well. So that's the aspiration, right? Is to have a suite of solutions to help address these conditions. So that's sort of the vision where we're going.

Simon:

Well, fantastic, Marc. Thank you so much for your time and for the insights today and congratulations on the success in very difficult circumstances and may you continue and Muniq can thrive and UR Labs can really help solve for some of these very complicated and long-standing issues. They're long-overdue and really appreciate the effort you're making.

Marc:

I really appreciate it, Simon. Thanks for having me on. You can tell how I'm passionate about the impact side of this. So thanks for having me on to let me share a little bit about our story.

Simon:

Thanks for joining us on this week's episode of Lead With We, where I spoke with Marc Washington, the founder and CEO of UR Labs that just launched the gut health brand Muniq. And he shared with us how to launch a consumer product brand with great success during COVID-19 and how to drive growth by solving for large and complex health and social challenges. Make sure you subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and please recommend it to your friends and colleagues so they too can build a purposeful and profitable business. And if you'd like to learn more about how you can build a purposeful brand, check out wefirstbranding.com where we have lots of free resources and case studies. Thanks for joining us and let's all 'lead with we'.