

Simon Leslie

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line from Miami, Florida by Simon Leslie, founder and joint chief executive at Ink. Founded in 1994, they became the world's leading travel media company, working with the largest brands and airlines worldwide, including Easyjet and Virgin Atlantic. They were the largest producer of in-flight magazines until COVID destroyed that business at a stroke. And over the last 24 months, he's transformed Ink into a media powerhouse of television, digital and content. As well as leading the firm's global commercial operations, Simon has somehow found the time to write three new books, Equanimity: A Diary of a Chief Executive in Crisis, White Belt Thinking: a fable of positivity and even a book of original poetry called Feel Good. Simon, thank you for joining me.

Wow. That makes me sound impressive.

You're a busy bee. Aren't you?

I am a busy bee. I feel like this is going to be quite cathartic for me to be able to talk about the last 22 months for somebody and just get it all off my chest. So I think hopefully it will be a powerful conversation for your audience as well.

Let's start then. So you had a successful business. You're there, it's rock and roll. You've got deals with all of the major airlines. I Couldn't fly anywhere without sort of reaching into the seat back pocket in front of me and seeing a magazine with your business logo on it. And then talk about through no fault of your own, a global pandemic shutting down every single airline. When was the moment when this started, when you thought to yourself, oh shoot, we're gonna go from being unbelievably successful to being out of business?

Unfortunately, that day I remember it very well. It was March the 9th, 2020, and March 9th is a very important day in my life. It's the day that I signed away my life. And my wife came into my life like a ray of sunshine, Paul. Unfortunately she proceeded to go through my bank account, like a bolt lightning, but every March 9th, we celebrate that occasion. And in 2020, I get a phone call from the airlines going, we're gonna take the magazine off the plane, we're worried about germs, we're worried about what's going on. And that was the first phone call. Then another one. At that time we had 36 in-flight magazines, today we have three, so I didn't have any choice but to start thinking about what the hell am I gonna do? How am I gonna transform this from a business that nobody wants anymore? Nobody wants to touch the magazine. Nobody wants to go into the seat pocket and have a read. And I think some of that wasn't real, but it was perception. And that's how the airlines reacted.

Did you take a few moments to grieve in a sense, cause you are a human being Simon, I'm sure you pivoted and you're gonna tell our listeners how you overcame it and what you did next, but there must have been a moment where you thought Jesus to God, everything I've ever worked for is it is in jeopardy literally through no fault of your own.

I don't think I did. And for me, I had this conversation with my partner. I said, you know, you are still grieving because she was very emotionally connected to the magazines. Whereas I became very disconnected from it. I thought, well, I can't save it so I've gotta think about what I can do. And I had a responsibility. We had 300 people at the time in March and I was thinking, well, the planes have switched off the engines. The airports have shut. What are we gonna do? The only thing I can do is think about how I can manage the state of my employees. Cause at this point we're thinking this is a three, six months. The most pessimistic people I knew said, it'll be back to normal by January. And I'm like, we can't survive nine months with no flights and no business. And here we are in 2022 and we're still wearing masks on planes and it's not getting much better. I heard this morning there's a new variant. And the problem is there's gonna be more and more variants. So every time that we feel like the light is coming back, something's gonna set us back. So what I did was I said, right, okay, I can't save the business, but I can try and save people's souls and give them a cause to believe in. And probably a leader to trust in me that I'm thinking about them first, because through all the other nine eleven, the financial crisis, the most important thing I realised was you've gotta look after the people first because they got you into this, they'll get you out of this. So I started bringing in speakers. I literally went through my role ATEX. I said, look, can you come and talk to my team? Just gimme an hour of your time. I dunno if I can ever pay you back. But if you look after me, I promise you at some point in the future, I'll do what I can to say thank you. And I had at the end 52 of some of the biggest motivational health wellbeing speakers come in and that really helped us get right the way through to the third

quarter of 2020. So at that point, everybody started whilst they were all motivated and inspired. They all started believing that there was no future here. And one by one, the it's not me, it's you relationship started to break. And we started to lose people. And at one I think we had 15 people left in our sales team. That's how bad it got.

No business can survive on no income coming in. I mean, it's interesting that you wanted to keep them on, is that because, obviously doing the right thing, but hoping that things would come right and you didn't wanna lose the team and then have the demand return and then you have to sort of scratch around. That payroll is very expensive to keep going month after month, without any revenue coming in.

We'd just come off the best year we'd ever had. So 2019 was the best year we'd ever had. So we were sat in a reasonably good position. I always say to people that cash is king. So we were sitting with quite a lot of cash and we wanted to make sure that when it started, we were ready to go, as you said, and the problem was it never got going. We went from a hundred million to minus three because not only did we go to zero, we had to then start giving people their money back who had paid for advertising that we couldn't deliver. So we were in a huge pickle.

So what did you do next then? I'm fascinated. Like literally walk our listeners through if you can, the actual steps.

Well, once it sort of dawned on me, I guess that this wasn't gonna come back quickly. I thought, right. Okay. What markets were open? Asia remains closed to this day. All our airlines in Asia are pretty much running very skeleton services. So there's no business there. We had a huge operation in Asia, which involved a few people working from home. Europe is still fragile at best, whilst the airlines are moving there isn't much business. And I'm not really seeing much excitement in the media. So the only place I could find that was still gonna operate normally was the US and our operation in the US is in Miami. And Miami is probably the only place on earth that didn't really stop. They just kept going. I was standing in a hotel in Miami in, I think it was about April 2020. And the woman at the desk said, sorry, we're full, we have to turn you away, we've got no rooms. And I'm like, what? I thought there was a pandemic going on. It really was like going into some parallel universe. Every restaurant was full, there were no masks. It was just, okay, so we can operate from here, we can do business from here. Our TV network, which we bought in early 19, which was at the airports, was just about operational. So we focused on just that. We put everybody that was left onto the TV network and that started to bring some revenue in. Then we went to United, who was our biggest client in the states and

said, we want to send the magazine to your frequent flyers. There'll be too big a gap before they see the magazine again, can we start sending it to their home? So we just transformed that business from being on the plane, to being a delivery to their door. And one by one, we went through each relationship and said, right, where can we make money? And if we can't make money, how do we switch this off? How do we get out of these relationships? Because we had 40 or 50 products that we had commitments to our partners. And we had to say, right, I have to go now and renegotiate every single one of these deals. And slowly but surely, each of these products started to make some money, but we just kept losing more and more money every single month. And everybody, friends, families, colleagues said, well, just let it go, let it go. It's not your fault as you said, but I know it's not my fault, but it was my responsibility. It was my business, I had this business for 27 years. I wasn't just gonna let it go. I did feel like I was just rearranging the deck chairs on most days.

It must have been quite a challenge for you personally. Because although you're driven, you've gotta get through the day, keep the energy up. But as a leader, people are looking to you to set the tone. So did you share how stressful and challenging it was for you personally with the team so they could sort of see that or was that where you sort of focus on showing them the tough side, the driven, the gritty side of you.

I didn't know what equanimity meant. But it is the process of being calm under pressure and I'll tell you something very, very weird. I was clearly stressed, but I didn't feel any stress. Because I felt like I have got a course here I've gotta fix. It was only when we literally came out of this and we started making money again that I thought I had down days, like all the way through that, I just didn't have the energy I had to be positive. I had to stay in a positive state of mind that I could get through not only for everybody else, but for me as well. I had to just remove all the negativity from the voices. I stopped watching the news because every time I watch the news, I just thought this is never gonna end. And we are still living in a news coverage, which is just purely negative. And until that narrative changes, things are not gonna get any better.

So tell us about the business today. What's the headcount? What do you do? What's a typical week?

I've always called myself lucky. I was actually gonna change my name by depol at some point because I never thought I was very good. I always thought I was just lucky. And people would figure out that I didn't know what I was doing at some point and they'd catch me out. And we had a couple of lucky moments where other people walked away from businesses. And I was very quick to jump in. So CNN decided on

January 21 that they didn't didn't want to be in the airport anymore. And CNN had a really robust network at all the major airports in the US. So I saw that as a huge opportunity. And I think on my 27th no they wouldn't sell it to me. They wouldn't let me take it over. But I just kept going. Cause I thought this is gonna be a huge game changer for our TV network. We were already in 90 airports, but we were only in the bars and the restaurants. Adding a gate network to that would just give us a real dominating position. And they just kept saying no, and I kept going higher and higher up the food chain until one day on one conversation, she turned around to me and said, look, do you not understand what no means? I said, no, I don't. I just, I clearly haven't given you a good enough story yet that you're gonna say yes. So we carry on going and going and going. And I never got a yes, by the way, Paul, I gotta let me take this back to my team. And that was enough for me. That was the foot of the door I needed. And we saved them lots of money. We saved the airports lots of money. We came up with a deal that worked for everybody. And then I think that was the pivoting moment, hate that word, the pivoting moments of the business. When we took that on and in a few months after that, we actually agreed to deal with the NFL, to have all the rights to play football at the airports, right the way through to the super bowl next month, those two things I think really transformed what was a nice little TV business into an amazing TV business, which is where we are today. And the magazine started to go back on the plane as well at the same time. So I start the book by saying I had a 1500 piece jigsaw puzzle. I had a few pieces to go and then some bugger threw it through it on the floor and said start again, but there's no picture here. See what you can do with it.

Our listeners will be able to understand that if they're sitting in an aeroplane seat, there's a magazine in front of them in the seat back pocket, you publish that, could you sort of go into a bit of detail and sort of make it idiot proof for our listeners in terms of like what you actually do in terms of the TV solution. So you produce programs that are shown in airports, is that right?

Yep. So CNN used to play their network at the airport. We had a network called Reach TV, which was a mix up of news, travel, shopping. It was content from multiple networks. We curated it, it was very short form and we sold some of the adverts that ran in between the programming. CNN was slightly more polarising. So there was always discontent from customers at the airport about the content that was played there. So when we took over their screens, they removed CNN from the screens and we replaced it with our own content. At the same time, we signed a deal with NBC. So we got to produce CNBC, the morning show and many of the big, well known shows that are in the country. So our content is curated to distract people while they're sitting there waiting in their gate, waiting in the bar, waiting for their plane to take off. And the thing that really helped us was because people had to get to the airport earlier so they were spending longer at the airport. Planes were getting more

and more delayed. So we had people at the gate. So all of a sudden our impression counts went through the roof. You also had passenger number changes, slowly through 2021 the numbers started to start to look a bit like 2019. So the point they got to the end of 21 and when they actually had more passengers than 19 on some days. So you've got this captive audience, the same audience that we were talking to as magazine publishers. And now we're producing content for them, but in a digital format. And just entertaining them at a different point of the journey. It was actually the only point of the journey that we never covered before. We had people presearch and we had people on the plane, but we never had them at the airport. So all of a sudden we'd fix that problem anyway.

So although it was very unpleasant and a lot of stress, it sounds to me like years from now, assuming the economy does return that this actually might be a welcome pivot for the business that ultimately this is taking you into exciting new areas.

I don't believe in good or bad, who knows if it's gonna be good or bad. All I know is that right now we've managed to re-employ a lot more people. We've built a studio and we've made two or three really sexy acquisitions, which I will share with you. And the bit is moving in the right direction. I don't think I've learned enough from this pandemic as what would I do differently next time? And I keep asking myself that question. If suddenly we go back into lockdown again, what things could I do better? And I'm struggling to answer it a little bit.

Is that one of the reasons why you started writing these books then? What was the genesis behind them and why not one book, why three?

You want something done, ask a busy man, right? The first one was called Feel Good. And actually, it's a book of poems. I used to sit on the bench, outside my house and think how the hell am I gonna get through this? And one day came this four line poem. And then the next day I wrote more. And then one day I wrote 25 poems and I thought, oh, I'm quite good at writing these poems. And then I thought, what should I do with them? And so I created The Motivational Poet on Instagram, and then people started sharing their poems and people started putting them out there and I went, okay I'm gonna keep writing them then. And 365 days later, I published a book with 365 poems in it. I actually put about 400 there. Because I liked to go overdeliver. And I produced a big old book. And rather than selling it, I literally walk around with them in my bag and anybody who's incredibly positive or cheers me up. I just give 'em a copy. And it's been the most heartwarming thing I've done. And I get messages from people all over the world saying, can you send me a book? And I've been sending them out. It's just been one of those things where if you feel like

you have a gift, the art of a good life is to give that gift away. So I used it very much to get me through and now I'm using it very much just to help other people inspire them if they're in a bad day or having a good day, just to help them keep them in the right state. And I keep going and I keep writing more and I actually really enjoy it. And it does keep my brain positive. Because when you're writing positive messages, it's very hard to then be in that negative mindset. White Belt Thinking was just, I dunno what to call it. It's a fable. It's a story of a young boy from Ireland who goes on to be a boxing champion. And I wrote it with Billy Schwer who won his title at the fourth attempt. He was a sort of boyhood hero of mine. And it's just all the language that I used in all the last 20 years of being in business, all the mantras, the motivational messages, some of the things that I would do in order to keep me on the straight and narrow. And I think it's a fun little book and I hope it becomes like a cult read for people who want to believe in themselves. It's about mentors. It's about angels. It's very, I wouldn't say spiritual, but it's just very lighthearted in giving people a course to believing. Cause that's something that I needed to do for myself.

One of the things that was inspiring about you Simon is doing all of this is like no one was sort of sharing the agony. I didn't take any pleasure at all from what you were going through, but I took pleasure in sort of seeing how positively you took it and how your sense of grit and determination. That was inspiring to me as a fellow entrepreneur. And there's a lot of entrepreneurs that sort of said nout, as it were, they didn't wanna be boastful if other people were suffering, but also no one really wanted to sort of share publicly the agony they were going through. And I think that your honesty, your painful honesty was actually very refreshing and very inspiring.

I think I got more messages from people saying keep writing, keep writing, don't let the buggers get you down. I would just go there that I'd rant, but it wasn't a negative rant. It was a rant of reality, of positivity, trying to find the light at the end of the tunnel in every situation. And the amount of people that said to me, you really helped me unconsciously, you don't realise how many people you've helped. You dunno how many people I've shared that post with. And one guy said to me, I've shared that with a hundred people this morning, because I think it's such a powerful message. And that's the thing, when you write something, you dunno how far it goes. When I started writing these poems, a guy called Mo Gawdat, his book Sold For Happy and he's a huge component of happiness and positive thinking. He keeps my poems and I'm thinking blimey, I really have captured the imagination with these poems.

Where are you gonna take things then? What are the next steps over the next few years? You've survived. You've avoided the apocalypse, but it's time to fly. You're already well on the way, but where you're gonna take things over the next few years.

Can I tell you about equanimity? Cause I think that's gonna be the blueprint for people who are looking at themselves, their lives, where it's not going right. Especially entrepreneurs, you just don't realise how many people are running their business. They're paying themselves less than a normal executive salary. They're working more hours than God gives us. They're stressed out their mind. They're not sleeping properly. They're not eating properly. And they go I've got my own business. That's not why you set up a business. You set up a business for freedom. And what I did within the book was I'd created a diary. So I talked about the last 22 months, what I went through, what the emotions I was going through on a daily basis. What the speakers who came in, because I had 52 speakers, what they said, what message they delivered, because the message that they were delivering for my team was actually unconsciously helping me. What would I do here? Chris Vos was a great example. Chris is the FBI negotiator, never split the difference. He and I've become good friends through this. And I phone him up and say, look, Chris, I've got this negotiation. What the hell do I do? And he goes, right, this is what you gotta do, get and say this, get to say this. And all of a sudden I had this army of people around me who were incredibly talented at what they did and I was picking their brains all the time for, okay, that's something that I need to deal with. So this isn't about being in crisis, but this is about how you navigate through life and who you call on. I realised that all of a sudden I was actually really good at collaborating with people. I was very good at getting people to do things. There was no reason for them to do it. That had always been my strong point in the sales department was getting people to sell more than they really should have been able to do, to perform at a level that they didn't think they could achieve. And I wanna take that into the future. I want to do bigger and better things. I was in Vegas at the beginning of the new year and I walked into the Bellagio poker room and there's two groups of tables. There's one, two or one, three tables. And then there's the ten 25. And it dawned on me that the same game, just the stakes are different and what you can win is better. And I just realised too much of my life, I've been playing at the wrong three tables. I've been playing small. I've been thinking small, and I need to start thinking bigger and more ambitiously. I need to have a moonshot. I need to have something which is not just, okay, we're gonna make some money this year, I want to really create an unbelievable TV network. We've just acquired a stake in a TV company called Players TV, which is the first athlete owned players network. So these are people like Dwayne Wade, Ky Irving, Chris Paul, big names, Travis Kelsey, who had a great weekend in football this weekend. And they've got together and they make content with their passion projects. So it's not about sport, it might be a shark tank type show or a cooking show or a golf show, things that they're really passionate about. And we play this content on our network and we're gonna help them bring valuable sponsors to the content to make sure they can produce even more content.

I mean, so it sounds like things are ultimately gonna turn out all right.

I believe so. For the first time in 24 months, I am starting to believe that we're on a much better trajectory and not just alright. I think they're gonna be amazing actually, Paul.

I mean, the media, the industry itself has been challenged as never before. Do you think there is gonna be some consolidation of brands and frankly closing down of long established titles.

We've seen it. We've seen so many losses over the last couple of years. The magazine business has been obliterated. I actually think some of the magazines are actually gonna come back. I think people will realise that there is a gap. I've taken 14 American flights since October, there's a missing element to those flights. In the last quarter of last year and the first quarter of this year it was tough with all the supply chains and campaigns being cancelled. And I think we've got a whole different set of problems than we've probably ever experienced before. And I think that unless you're incredibly optimistic, incredibly nimble, and a lot of these are not very nimble, they take too long to make decisions. They're gonna miss out. And we are very nimble, very opportunistic. And we're looking for deals the whole time where we can say right, we can accelerate these companies just by being part of our stable now.

So what's a typical week look like for you now? Are you living in Miami? Are you gonna stay there for a fair while? What do you actually do if you don't mind me putting that directly to you?

Yeah. A lot of people ask me that, most people on Facebook think that I've retired and I've just been sitting on beaches smoking cigars and go horse racing, which is pretty much what I do. My role now is looking for new deals, new opportunities, things that I can buy, things that I can help turn around that will bolt on to what we're doing and make them go even faster. I'm still responsible for making sure we sell enough advertising every month. And that's my passion, sales is my passion. I'm honing that skill as much as I can. You know the concept of a white belt thinker is that as a martial artist, you are given a white belt as a beginner. And if you think like a beginner, then you've always got this open and opportunistic mind. That's who I am. And that's where I sit today with this belief that anything is possible. If anything, the pandemic has taught me that I'm not lucky, I'm actually quite good at what I do. I am quite capable and I have got a lot of confidence, more confidence. I had quite a lot of confidence before more confidence that I can really turn my hand up most things.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in their career?

Well, I'm very lucky cause I've been asked that question a few times. What advice would you give to your 21 year old self? My son left school at 18 and he came to work for me. And after three years actually mid pandemic, we were in Aruba and he said, dad I wanna leave. Bear in mind that all these people have really left and I was feeling pretty crappy. He was like, I wanna leave too. And I'm like, typically not even you wanna stay and work with me. He goes I wanna go and start up this agency, he had a friend who was an influence and he said I've been helping him on the side and I really want to help him. I said, good. This is what I always wanted for you. I wanted you to do your own thing. So from his bedroom in his underpants, he would sit and sell his influencer to brands that was in January 2021. He now has, I think, 90 influencers. He's doing hundreds of brand deals every month. You've got a big office with a lot of people. So in a weird way, I'm reliving my youth through him. I'm coaching him, I'm helping him. And I'll tell you the most rewarding part about all of that is that he's using my playbook. He's following the same principles that I followed and he's having huge success. And that reminded me or reinforced maybe that actually, I wasn't just lucky. It was a good formula. The formula worked, we were all about incentives and travel and he took his whole team to The Maldives for Christmas. And I went you're taking over where I left off young man. And so I get to do it every day and I love the conversations. He listens to me more than I ever listened to my dad. I used to ignore my dad's advice. He's an absolutely amazing student of sales as well. I'm wanting to get better and help his people. And there's nothing better than that. There's nothing more rewarding than seeing your playbook play out nicely. Your son do amazingly and feel good about yourself at the same time. And it makes you feel young in the process.

Unlike many entrepreneurs, another thing you're candid about Simon is the spiritual side to what you do. I've seen you on Instagram talk about angels and ethics and so on. I mean, do you want to talk our listeners through that side of you?

Yeah, I think I got to about 40 and I thought what's been on here. I've got a nice business, and a nice family. And I am the most miserable human being that I know. I'm grumpy and unhappy. So I went on this journey and I'm coming up for 14 years of this journey and I've studied everything there is about happiness and positivity. And I think about it like this when you do well, if you are like a candle, a candle doesn't get brighter but the candle can light so many more candles and light many lights. And I wanna be the candle. I don't wanna be the brightest. I just wanna be somebody who can share their messages. I wanna just take you back to 2001, because a miracle happened to me, because that's the only way I can describe this. The business was about to go bust. And by the way, I'd been busted three or four times. So this was like my final chance of succeeding. And I turned to Michael, who's my partner and said, we're gonna run outta money. If we don't get some money this week, we're gonna run

out of money. And I'm not quite sure what to do. The next morning I came into the office and there was £57,000 in the account. And I had to keep opening and shutting the banking software to say what's that all about? And it comes from Kleinwort Benson.. So this is a big private investment bank in Germany and German banks don't tend to make mistakes. And they certainly don't forget when they've given you money by accident. Anyway, they didn't ask for it back. And after a couple weeks, I thought, well, I'm gonna put this money to some good use. I'm gonna work out how I can use it and leverage it and keep us going. Fast forward to 6th of April, 2003, we sold the business for the very first time. So we've gone through our distress phase. We've grown and we've been acquired. The very next day, I got a letter from Kleinwort Benson and we appeared to have said, I get goosebumps telling this story. We appeared to have sent you £57,000 by mistake, can we have it back please? And I went, how did they go through three year ends or two year ends and not spot this? Why did it only happen the day after we were safe? Somebody was looking down on me and I do believe that through my last 27 and years in business, I've been that angel to some people. I get emails every single week from people saying your words helped me, your book helped me, your first book helped me, that conversation we had, I've done this and this and my life has turned around. And I see that as an important part of who I am. I want to be somebody that helps other people. And by default, if you help enough people, you get enough of what you want. And that's what I believe in. And it doesn't always marry with a hard centred businessman to be so soft centred writing poetry and about angels. But that's what life is. Life is a complete mix of good and bad. It's not linear. I don't know if anything is really good or bad today. I will only know in ten years time when I look back on it and go, yeah, that was really good. Or what I thought was really good was actually a load of poo. And that's how I live my life. It's just to help as many people as you can, believe that the future is better than the present and smile a lot.

Well, Simon, it's been a tough couple of years and you've certainly helped me. And I know a lot of other people buy your practical positivity. I call it tough minded optimism. You are a realist, but you're not there miserable saying, woe is me, you're saying things are tough, but we're gonna make the best of it. And I really admire your pluck and your grit, and the fact that you've rolled these sleeves up and through sheer force of will and doing the right thing by your colleagues, you've pulled through this and I wish you the very best of luck. Thank you ever so much for your time on the podcast. It was inspiring. And I wish you the very, very best.

Thank you, Paul.