



SEASON 3

EPISODE 09

[INTRO]

[0:00:05.8] ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to Happy Porch Radio. The podcast for progressive agency owners and web professionals. Season three is focused on the growing number of agencies who are making the world a better place.

We explore what this even means, why is it different from any other agency and how can it be reconciled with the real-world challenges of running a profitable agency? Join your host, Barry O’Kane as he speaks to leaders of agencies who are driven by verify use to positively impact the world around them.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:42.5] BOK: This week’s guest is co-founder of Emergence Creative, a global creative agency focused on social impact. Eric brought his vast and varied experience to emergence. Among other things he led innovative strategy and accounts for Coca-Cola and other major clients while at McCann Global Health. However, one of his motivations for founding a social impact focused agency was that larger agencies without the same focus were simply not able to deliver the level of professionalism and impact that he wanted to have.

We discussed this and the challenges around pro bono social impact work at the start of our conversation. Eric also shares some examples of the amazing work cadet Emergence do and the values that motivate them to do this kind of work plus the future of where this journey might take them. All of this provides a perfect insight in to how the challenges an agency like Emergence faces can also lead to opportunities.

So let’s meet Eric.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:48.7] EV: So, I'm Eric Verkerke I'm the co-founder and chief creative officer of the Emergence Creative. A little redundant in the title there. So we're a social impacts creative agency, we started about three years ago. My partner Raj and I used to be at McCann Erickson we started up the global health practice at McCann and decided to run off on our own and try to do this independently about three years ago. We had initially been really focused in global health when we saw an opportunity to expand beyond into national development and public health, as well as clean energy and social justice issues, things like that.

So, that is sort of the nutshell of it. We work globally, we're based here in New York but we have a team that ranges from Costa Rica to Berlin and so we work with folks from all over the world and we work with clients all over the globe.

[0:02:41.1] BOK: Yeah, fascinating there's so much Eric. I'm really looking forward to the conversation but let's start at the beginning, why did you – when you said three years ago you went to and you decided to do your own thing. Why did you decide to do that?

[0:02:50.5] EV: It's a combination of things. I think, really large agencies frankly struggle to do this kind of work. I think a lot of the big agencies just aren't really structured to do smaller and more agile projects. I think that's part of it. I think there's also just the desire for degree of creative independence and the excitement of doing it on our own and sort of taking that leap and I had helped start another start up a number of years ago on a medical device company that is also social enterprise, so I have had some experiences this sort of social entrepreneur.

And so, it was exciting a prospect and it seemed like the right time. There are just a lot of constraints when you're working for a big agency. The contracts have to be so big and the overhead is very high, so the costs are very high, and there is just a lot of opportunities that you can't pursue with smaller organizations or organizations without the massive budgets that, you know, obviously we would love to have access to those but we've been very lucky to be able to work with of all range organizations, from very early stage that are multi stage cover initiatives other social enterprises to standing up new projects and new brands, and entirely new sort of platforms for behavior change even.

I just don't think we would have been able to do within a large agency because they're a little bit more constrained.

[0:04:13.8] BOK: So, when you say constrained do you mean that specifically when you're looking at the social impact side in that kind of work and inability to work with that or is it the purely the scale that you're talking about.

[0:04:25.5] EV: It's a combination of the two, I think social impact in large agencies is often seen as a pro bono area, a lost leader or a feel good but it's kind of a – it's not a priority let's put it that way and I think for us we wanted to be able to work exclusively in social impact do it at a very professional high quality level and deal within budgets that are affordable for organizations to be able to do that. I think, I'm sure you've experienced this as well, but I think that there's a lack of quality creativity in the social impact space because I think part of that comes from the kind of culture pro bono work to some degree which is that social impact organizations whether it's NGOs or international organizations INGOs.

They get used to either getting things for free or they don't really value communications or branding, or creativity in the way that more commercial organizations often do, I think. And so, for us we saw a market opportunity to really focus exclusively on social impact, to do it. And sort of I would say that reasonable but not cheap price point. So, there's a lot of freelancers out there who work for these organizations and you're never to be able to compete with them on price but I think that the value of bringing in an agency that has pool of talent and a real strategic process that has a debt to it and rigorousness to it, or rigor to it, is a big part of why we saw an opportunity.

There's just a lot of very kind of ad hoc work that gets done, it's either last minute or it's underfunded or there's not a lot of thought put in to it. And so, a lot of communications and marketing, and brand work in social impact is very the same, you see the same kind of feel goody kind of stuff. There's just a lot of generic work and so it's been really exciting to be able to bring I would say almost a very professional commercial type lens to that and bring that in to that area.

[0:06:38.3] BOK: That does sound interesting and very exciting that you say. I guess really what you're talking about there as well is that professional approach and actually that adding to the impact rather than the you're describing this sort of generic – I'm assuming you're seeing that as less impactful as well as the less professional input.

[0:06:55.8] EV: Yeah, that's exactly right and I think that kind of activity between the effectiveness of these organizations and the impact of the organization and their ability to tell their story, their ability to clearly communicate who they are and what they do. I do think those things are absolutely tied to each other and I think there's often a bit of cockiness and over confidence. I think a lot of folks in social are backed, are very well, educated, they have very successful careers in other areas and they tend to think that they can do everything. It's not – I don't if you worked with tech companies or engineers but I love engineers, I love technically minded people, physicians are often there as well.

They're highly trained, they're extremely intelligent and they often just assume that because they're highly trained and extremely intelligent that they can do everything. So there is often a bit of – people see communications as being as trivial or they see it as being an after thought or something anyone can do. And so, I think, we really had to work at that perceptual shift with a lot of our clients from, well, we're just going to have this, we're going to have somebody use a friend of a friend to do this thing as a favor, shifting from that to, "Oh we're actually, you know, in the same way that we would hire a lawyer on to do legal work for us or that we would hire PhDs to work on a certain research project for us."

„We're going to hire really, professional agency to do this work for us." So, that's been an interesting learning process for us as well as there's a lot of folks that we worked with.

[0:08:36.8] BOK: Yeah, you used this term perception there you mentioned earlier by this sort of culture of the pro bono kind of creating an expectation of that this stuff doesn't matter. Do you think that it is something, I mean do you think that's part of it? That people view this part of the process, the communication, the clarity around that as not important or do you think it is budget driven as in "Hey, we got a small budget we need to decide to where to put it."

[0:09:02.8] EV: I think it's a mix, look I'm not trying to critique the entire field. I think it's a mix and I think budgeting is, budgeting is a reflection of perception, right? Yes, they're limited with budgets but there are also – I've seen many, many organizations where there are literally hundreds and thousands of dollars put to consulting firms and business and strategy consultants and they'll tack on 10 or 20k branding and communications fees and you're talking about order of magnitude difference in budget. I think it's partly that there's a lot of perception that you just hire a designer at the end of a process rather than engaging in this really thinking through what your values are and what your organization does and what its value proposition is.

That is admittedly an agency moving in to the space of traditional business consulting but I think it's doing it through a very creative lens, it's really doing it focused on values and focused on clarifying what your differentiation is and why you matter in the world. And, I think a lot of organizations don't put in the time to do that. It's kind of, it's kicked down the road, they develop a name or a logo or some language early on in their development as an organization and then they kind of hang on to do that then maybe it's tweaked and refined every time but there's never really a rigorous process where you think through, you know, "What are we saying and why but what does that mean?" I do think that there's often huge opportunity for bro - and this is just on the brand side but for broadening the impact of these organizations for broadening the impact of those organizations for broadening the funds that they raise.

I mean, in a certain way we had plenty of clients who we branded and then went on to either bringing a whole lot more new clients or a lot of new funding and things like that. So, I do think it can make a big difference but it's the classic problem of advertising, 90% of it doesn't work the problem is we don't know which 90%. I think that's particularly true in branding because it's a varied to somewhat an ephemeral undertaking. We have a very rigorous process around it but at the end of the day, it's largely about sort of self-belief to a certain degree.

[0:11:23.2] BOK: And you touched there on the values and I kind of was reading – what my interpretation of what you're saying is that you're talking about your values as providing the services to the organizations that you're working with. How important do you feel or think that is from your point of view from the agencies from the Emergence point of view?

[0:11:40.1] EV: I think it's essential the reason we focused exclusively on we're working in social impact was because it's something that we're passionate about. We thought it was an opportunity, as I said a market opportunity. I think the values the value that we bring to it, the rigor to it, the depth of our approach comes from our experience working with the organizations like this for a long time and recognizing that the way that you do that effectively is through trust and through listening and to share value and understanding where the group is coming from and what they're trying to achieve and then helping them to distill that down and clarify it, and refine it. Then bring it to life through design or language or whatever the case maybe.

But, yeah, I think that it is important and I think that it's something again looking at the big agency kind of piece. It's difficult when you're working on selling sugar water one day and then working on public health the next or if you're selling the cigarettes and working on some social justice issue. I think that there's a lot of area of often hypocrisy and sometimes at the very least kind of questionable ethics where some of these projects here, "Well we're going to make a bunch of money doing very questionably ethical work and then we're going to kind of made up for that by doing some pro bono work for what we consider to be a charity." I think that's a pretty questionable approach to things.

[0:13:17.9] BOK: Yeah, interesting but at the same time – here's playing a little bit of devil's advocate, isn't that fair to them not doing any charity work at all?

[00:13:27] EV: Oh yeah, absolutely except in so far as it does as I mentioned and sort of alluded to. It distorts the market to a certain degree. If you've got a group that is being constantly provided something for free, it shifts the perception of value of them. But, you know, look I agree with you I think at the end of the day it's better if large corporations give to charity regardless of whether what their fundamental business is, if it's good or bad for the world.

I think it's better for them to evolve their business models to be less harmful or to be more positive. I think you see a lot of – you do see a movement towards that shift in the kind of in the Unilevers of the world or trying to much more to really integrate it into their business rather than do it as a kind of an apology, which I think a lot was a traditional philanthropy model was, "Well, we make a lot of money mining coal or exploiting underpaid laborers in developing countries but here is some charity money to make everyone feel better." Yes, it's better that they do that than

not do that but I think that the own is, is on them to start to really shift their business models more intentionally along the way.

[00:14:45] BOK: And at the same time, what you mentioned at the start about as well as pro bono kind of creating this expectation of like undervaluing the work but also you implied that pro bono in itself leads to lower quality of that work because of lack of focus and lack of prioritization. Is that or am I paraphrasing slightly what you said?

[00:15:05] EV: I think that's a fair – I mean again there's been plenty of good pro bono work done out there but I've also been in agencies and seen the level of tension that goes in to pro bono work or to social work, there is a degree of passion on the part of a lot employees to their men's credit. But the reality is within the agency everyone is lurking on a lot of different things and the priority is going to be that multimillion dollar contract that they are also working on not necessarily the small pro bono project. So, I guess what I'm saying is long-term? Yes, I think that overall pro bono work tends to be lower quality. I think it tends to be under resourced and I think it tend to be deprioritized not necessarily by the creative folks who are working on it but by management like a company does not have a huge incentive to put a lot of resources behind pro bono work.

They have a lot more incentive to make it look as if something is a huge contribution and then to limit the cost I mean just look at the economics of it.

[00:16:13] BOK: So, that will make sense how it really I can spend a long time just talking about that specific topic. But, actually let's talk a little bit more about Emergence so we started at that part of the conversation about why you're starting, why did you decide to co-found and set it up on your own and tell me a little bit about what the journey has been like and over the last couple of years you said you started off with the focus on sort of health and building up this broad global team so just tell me a little bit about the story, the early days of the story is that it was coming together.

[00:16:41] EV: Yeah, I mean early days it was pretty wild. The first summer when we started up when we just left McCann was the World Cup the last World Cup. So, I guess what we will be coming up in four years probably it is in next summer. So, we're watching a lot of World Cup

games and trying to figure out the brand and we didn't have a name at that point instead we're watching the World Cup it was summer in New York it was beautiful and hot out. Watching a lot of soccer and trying to come up with sort of the concept and for us, we knew we were in dark in social impact and kind of broad strokes idea around it.

But I think it really, it crystalized around this combination of science and creativity and trying to understand patterns of human behavior and ideas that sort of capture the sort of zeitgeist that can move people's behavior in one way or another and that idea of Emergence was really the genesis of that understanding how patterns come out of very complex also a multifaceted interactions between a lot of different people, a lot of different units.

I mean, I think that really resonate with us and it ended up being a kind of driving force behind the work that we were doing which was we always wanted to have a lot of data if you will, a lot of sort of points of contact or context for all of the development. So as we started working through different project one of our first clients was the University of Calgary this group called ICDC Interdisciplinary Chronic Disease Collaboration.

They do a lot of work on chronic disease, hypertension, and heart disease some things like that and so they brought us on to do a multi-year, long term behavior change trial up in Canada and so that was really one of our first big project was to work on developing this behavior change platform based on the kind of branding communications marketing approach. So, we ended up going out and doing a bunch of ethnographic research with patients out in Canada, working very close with the physicians to understand what were the clinically relevant pieces of information that they really wanted the patients this sort of people in the trial to understand and then creating a brand which is this brand Moxie that we created.

Again, sort of trying to find something that would resonate within that cultural context that we are looking at just elderly over 65 patients with a lot of health issues to help them to be compliant under medication. So, we've been working on that for over three years and that's one of the sort of long-term contracts, long-term projects that we had. It's been really exciting because we really been able to see it go from us sitting and watching the World Cup and getting a call from these guys who are friends of Raj's and to talking with these people, to creating the brand, to

launching the platform. Now we start to see we're getting this qualitative studies back and we're getting data from the platform and it's really changing people's lives.

It's literally getting people to stay on their medications to change their diet and exercise and it's doing that over a long period of time so that's been one of the really rewarding ones that we worked on where we've been able to kind of see it grow along with the company in some ways. I think our thinking has kind of evolved as we worked on it as well in terms of seeing the potential to kind of apply this approaches to other areas and other health conditions. So, that's been really interesting. I'm not sure that really get so much talking about that.

[00:20:33] BOK: Absolutely, that is a brilliant story and indirectly this topic is so interesting maybe because when you talk to I guess traditional agency owners and agencies they talk about success in terms of “We made a lot of money, I built a great team, we won this award” and whatever.

And, whereas when you're talking there and I can hear the sort of excitement and interest, and passion in your voice in talking about changing people's lives and it just seems to be a whole different set of and criteria for measuring success.

[00:21:04] EV: Yeah, I think that's true and frankly when we did start it up I think we were – neither Raj and I are particularly any we got used to social media. Growing up social media experts by any means. I think we were a little disenchanted with a lot of the metrics of agencies which is impressions and clicks, and views, and social media engagement. I think there has been a kind of race to the bottom in that sense and we really wanted to do and we had – while we were at McCann we had a chance to work on a number of projects that kind of gave us the sense of where the potential way and to really focus on changing behavior.

And so, that became really a driving force behind a lot of work to be done. I mean we still do a lot of brand work where we're developing brands for new initiatives but I do think at the end of the day that's probably the sort of two or three core things that we really work on, is trying to create brands that really reflect our own values to some degree but to your earlier question.

Also, reflect the values of the organization and in a way that's coming really resonate with their audience or with their stakeholders, or their customer depending on obviously some of these groups don't have customers. So they're kind of, they're selling something a little more intangible or they're selling their impact, or their public engagement isn't a really priority to a lot of these. What they really need to do is engage the UN or Mayors of cities. There's a lot of different stakeholders out there who are different from traditional sort of commercial customer-based work.

But, yeah, on the behavior change side I do think that really clicks for us because you get to use the same tools that we use to sell Coca-Cola and Nike's. We use the same approaches that we're using them to make people healthier. Our health people make themselves healthier ultimately and I mean Moxy platform is very much about towards empowering people to help them make themselves healthier overtime and to better understand their health conditions in a very non-paternalistic, non-patronizing way.

So, that's been really, really great in terms of being able to actually do that and then I think on the other side is more broadly I don't know if you saw the ACLU work that we did that you know a big campaign for the American Civil Liberties Union just after Trump was elected around the first amendment, which this protection for his speech and press, and protest, and freedom of religion.

And so, we did a bunch of public, fairly high-profile, billboards of the first amendment translated into Arabic and Spanish. It was up in Time Square. It was down in D.C. I mean to me that was really resonant as well. I have a lot of people react to that and just talk about how that idea really sort of encapsulated a feeling that they had at the time. So, for that one it's a little bit less about behavior change and it's more about kind of either perceptual change or like finding an idea that kind of encapsulates or crystallizes the most powerful things or issues at that time.

I think that, that one was really exciting because it felt like it just kind of clicked to being the right expression of the right idea at the right time. And again, it did very well on social media, it got picked up it's in a book now about the design of descent which has been really exciting but ultimately I think it was the reactions of people to that sense of something that really feels right,

is again I think it is in terms of the kind of work that we're trying to do that sort of seeking to achieve that's really what matters to us.

[00:25:12] BOK: And do you measure, I mean that both of those are really – I find it inspirational the idea of being able to do that kind of work not just actually doing it but have bringing that professional expectation experience you have and sort of tackling I guess tough problems like that. But, how do you personally measure the success of that or it's difficult because before you mentioned sort of the very traditional impressions based measurement because while I think all of that it's just because an easy thing to measure where is what you're talking about is a much deeper more difficult thing to actually to quantify.

[00:25:49] EV: Yeah, it is and I think that's a good question. I would say to some degree it shouldn't matter and I'm going to qualify that to some degree which is that, I think they're different campaigns and different pieces of creative work that could be done for different reasons. I think some of them are done for very specific things, it could be fund raising. It could be expanding your mailing list, things like that very tangible and practical.

And, I think metrics like that absolutely you should engage and use fully for things like that because that is exactly how you should measure whether you're, you know, we just hosted the first Smart Cities Conference in New York City.

For us the metrics that mattered were ticket sales and sponsorship dollars that came in and very, very tangible, very easy to measure, very challenging but very hard and fast because we are sort of co-owners of this conference and we're hosting it with another group and so in that sense it's very practical, there is a big idea behind the conference that I think was very much similar to what we're just talking about in terms of values and brand that in terms of the execution and the roll out you have to get into that the weeds of all that. I think what you're saying makes sense. I think that it's similar to some brand work, right?

Some brand campaigns think different for example. They are not immediately about selling more Apple computers. They're not about moving more boxes. It's about putting idea in to the public consciousness in a way that's going to resonate. I would say Superbowl ads are like this to a large degree. There are about finding something that resonates at this moment and capturing a

feeling and ideally putting that into the minds of millions of people and then sort of seeing how that unfolds. I think that's part of why the Superbowl is such a great platform for those sorts of ads that are pretty conceptual and are like very high level sort of brand campaigns.

So, yeah, to some degree I would say I like to think that you can always have that big idea behind of all the work that you do and you know that there is something that is very executional and very practical. We just need to get people to buy tickets to this thing. Probably need to raise money through a fundraiser or whatever it might be.

I think all of those things are more effective if there is a really truly creative big idea behind them. That's not always possible but I think it's worth aspiring to.

[00:28:39] BOK: Yeah, which ties back to what we were saying before about values and that what a big idea is coming from the values.

[00:28:43] EV: Yeah, exactly and I think you have to put work in to not to figure out what your values are because I think everyone has the values. It's in terms of being able to express those values and to put them in some sort of executable form, right? I mean that's what so much strategy work is about is really understanding the ins and outs of what an organization does and then distilling that down into something that clarifies and expresses it in a way that is clearer and inspiring or provocative, or interesting in some way. Then all of the rest of the executional work is just sort of flows out of that rather than just kind of doing things and then hoping or assuming that the values will be expressed through that. I think you have to be very intentional and thoughtful about it.

[00:29:40] BOK: So just to change track very slightly to talk about as Emergence in the agency has kind of grow or more mature I guess it was three years of its life. What are the current challenges or complexities with agency as it is now?

[00:29:55] EV: Yeah, that's it good question as well. I would say that challenges are challenges that our business have which is cash flow and predictability of business and cycles of contracting and things like that. It's very challenging to do project based work and then it's hard

to hire against project based, unless you have a sufficient volume of it. Initially that was fine and because we are just to some degree we are figuring out how we are going to do all of this.

Overtime, I think that's become more of a pressing challenge because in order to scale up, in order to have more full time staff as opposed to freelance or part time, which is ultimately what we want, you need to be able to have that predictability and that's really hard in the space.

A lot of contracting cycles are really long from initial conversation to actually closing something can take six months sometimes a year, so that's hard. And then, I think there's also just a standard challenges of creative work which is, creativity is somewhat subjective and it's always challenging working with clients and we always find solutions. But I think adopting and being able to bring the right people to the right project at the right time is really challenging again in that sort of project basis because with a large agency, you know, if you're working on certain angle on a concept let us say and it's not getting anywhere, you bring in another team.

You ask for another creative team or you bring in a different designer and you just have that pool pretty available in a large agency. I think for us we do have a good pool of talent but there is less of that ability to have a bunch of people kind of able to be moved around on to different projects as needed because we have to sub-contract various different things as we tackle different projects. So, yeah, I think the scaling issue, the predictability issue those are all problems more challenges if you will.

And then, I think honestly digital is always really hard like I would say the building and dissemination of websites in this day and age has become both dramatically more complicated and dramatically simpler than it ever was and caused a lot of problems because I think because of things like Squarespace and Wordpress and stuff like that there's pretty much a perception that I will just "Throw up a website." Again, there's a lot of like downward cost pressure on that but the reality is that actually decent websites are quite expensive to build and they take a long time and the ins and outs of them are always dramatically more complicated than after what of expected and neither of us are digital experts.

We know some things but I think that's proven to be a very challenging of execution in particular kind of going from strategy to brands or strategy to campaign concept and then this sort of

execution and the actual of it is always proves to be the most challenging. But you know those are pretty standard problems for most small business.

I think maybe to kind of spin off that question what we're finding is a really interesting and potentially exciting opportunity is that as a creative agency we're starting to see that a lot of the things that we develop are potentially business ideas in of themselves. This possibility of kind of operating as an incubator if you will or operating as a kind of group that develops and then launches interesting platforms or ideas, or businesses, or solutions out in to the world that's proven to be really interesting. In terms of this conference that I mentioned as well as the Moxie platform which we're lurking in rolling out in the U.S.

[00:34:16] BOK: I like the fact that you segwayed my question because that was going to be my next question. I guess I had to rephrase the question and that is what is the future of Emergence?

[00:34:27] EV: That's a good question? I think we'll always this core of doing strategy and creative work and I certainly think there is a lot of potential for us to keep growing that and keep doing that I think from a design side. I feel very proud on the work that we've done on branding and things like that. I think there's a lot of room for growth and improvement on digital which would be really exciting for us in terms of being able to more fully bring to life the kind of ideas that we have. That's just a challenging thing and as I said it tends to be more expensive than we always anticipate, so figuring that out I think that's exciting.

I think this final piece which is really the kind of out cold an incubator for lack of better for term for now but this ability to treat client opportunities is not just client opportunities but as actual partnerships, where they have a problem that they're looking to solve and we have a lot of really smart creative people with deep science backgrounds and subject area expertise in public health or in clean energy or whatever the thing maybe and we're able to combine the kind of creative approach or creative lens with that rigor.

I think that has a lot of potential for us to build in to something that can really act as a kind of an organization that starts to incubate and then spin off various different organizations every time that really provide creative or noble solutions to interesting problems that come our way.

[00:36:09] BOK: Wow, that is very cool. Thank you so much, unfortunately we're starting to run out of time but the final question just for anybody whose interested in Emergence or wants to follow up yourself and find out more about the work you do, where can we point them?

[00:36:23] EV: Sure it's emergence-creative.com.

[00:36:27] BOK: And thanks again Eric, I really appreciate your time and I know that I enjoyed talking and hearing what you had to share. I'm sure the listeners as well.

[00:36:33] EV: It is my pleasure. Thank you for having me on.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:36:44] BOK: You can get all the links and notes from this episode on happyporchradio.com where you can also find out how to send us questions, feedback and get involved in the conversation about this series. If you enjoy the show, please share with anyone else who might enjoy it too. Thanks for listening.

[END]