



SEASON 3

EPISODE 11

[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]

[00:00:44] BOK: Hello and welcome back to Happy Porch Radio. My guest this week is a founder of the incredible Matter Unlimited, whose mission is to amplify the power of brands and organizations to drive growth and positive change in the world simultaneously. Rob Holzer founded Matter Unlimited to drive positive lasting change in the world by leveraging the power of advertising, digital marketing and branding.

In this interview he shares the start of that journey as well as his vision for the future. Inspired by his passion for sustainable impact, Rob is also heavily involved in a number of other inspiring organizations and we touch on that at the start of our conversation.

So, let's meet Rob.

[00:01:31] RH: Hi. I'm Rob Holder, I'm the founder and CEO of Matter Unlimited.

[00:01:35] BOK: Awesome, well welcome to Happy Porch Radio, it's really great to have you here.



[00:01:38] RH: Thanks, good to be here.

[00:01:40] BOK: So, just before we start talking a little bit more about Matter Unlimited as you know this season of Happy Porch Radio is all about value driven agencies. But before we dig in to that, I know you're involved in long list of different schemes and organizations and things like this.

[00:01:58] RH: Schemes? Lots of schemes.

[00:02:02] BOK: So I'd sort of love to hear a little bit more about the work you're involved in outside of initiatives or outside of Matter Unlimited.

[00:02:12] RH: Okay, you mean in general.

[00:02:14] BOK: Yeah, because I noticed there's a couple of things that really stuck for me, one was Shared Value Initiative.

[00:02:20] RH: Yeah, I think that through our work we start to, you know we start to get asked and pulled in to different things that are very, very interesting and related. I think when it comes out to organizations that are important to me and important to the company, you know, I'm a very big proponent of communities, communities and individuals, entrepreneurs like-minded people that are doing great things in the world.

I think the shared value initiative we became kind of involved with that organization when they got kind of got started, it was through our relationship. We were the agency for the Clinton Global Initiative and they launched the Shared Value Initiative at CGI's annual event, and so when I heard about it I contacted them right away because Michael Porter, you know, was certainly was an inspiration when they started Matter Unlimited. He's a Harvard business professor who kind of coined the term, "shared value" and wrote an article in Harvard Business Review that was very seminal about purpose in companies and balancing financial success with societal value.

I mentioned that I have an agency that was focusing exclusively on this kind of work and they said that they are in the process of putting together a group of organizations that are focused on that type of work. So, it's a great organization, glad to be part of it. I think that you know personally and then I mean Matter itself we're involved with them and other different organizations and communities. Summit Series is a group that I am very close to, you know, which is a group of really outstanding entrepreneurs and people who are looking to kind of come in together, collaborate, talk about the issues of the world and hopefully impact the world at a higher level.

Also, the Suzman Foundation as an organization called Reality which I've been a part of for a while which focuses on helping to inspire and bring together the next generation of change makers to repair the world in many ways and to work on issues of impact. So, I think there's a lot of organizations that are doing great work and we love being a part of and I feel really excited and jazzed to be asked to these things from time to time.

[00:04:44] BOK: That's really interesting, you used the word “community” several times there. It's really interesting to me that the people I'm speaking to for this season is very often very awkward looking more than just focus on the agency and my question to you is, I guess what you are implying there is that you got this — you personally have this purpose or this values driven this framework, you know, you want to get involved and you say, “We better the world and help young change makers get involved in these broader initiatives” and is that something that for you is very closely integrated with your work with the agency?

[00:05:22] RH: Yeah, absolutely. I think that's the reason I started Matter, you know I had an agency before Matter that was a branding agency that started off as a digital agency and become an integrated agency and we grew and we have a lot of success in building brands. I eventually sold that agency to a larger network and when my ten year was up there, I was thinking about what to do next. At that point my own value system had been shifting personally and through, it's just through life and personal experience. I wish shifting, you know what I found to be valuable and then when faced with the idea of how I'm going to spend my time next at work. I think when you successfully sell a business and for some crazy reason people think you're smart but I think a lot of it was just circumstances. Yeah, I did some decent things and had some decent moves.

You know I have a lot of options of things that I was going to be able to do or could get myself involved with and for me the most important idea was how do I integrate my work with my personal values system and trying to be in of service was kind of how I was thinking about that. I was just thinking “Well I know this business really well and I'm really soon to be good at it so instead of trying to jump in to something totally different. How can I reframe marketing and advertising and use and leverage that very powerful tool to have impact.” That's when Matter was really dreamed up.

[00:07:06] BOK: Very powerful. And do you think that – or was there is a conflict before that point? You know when you have that space after selling and the space for opportunities or to look for something new and different. But were there any conflicts or was selling the agency and moving on a trigger for that? Or is this something that was kind of bubbling in the background before that?

[00:07:25] RH: Yeah, I think personally you know going through different hardships in my life and losing a dear friend to cancer. Or like going through the process of just life as you get older and I think also looking at the context of the work, you know having been involved – we had a lot of fashion and luxury clients that Stirrup which is the previous agency and I sort of reached this point where I wasn't connected to the output anymore. I didn't really want to plead in to a system, of just kind of over-consumption that I felt was kind of at the root of some of the problems that we are facing in the world then advertising and marketing does develop that.

It's a very powerful weapon and we change behavior for millions of people everyday. That's our job and I had worked on it a couple of projects with Stirrup that were very inspirational. One, being working with G.E. for seven years on eco-imagination, which is their initiative to develop a business unit of sustainable products. Launching a big company like that really transformed this brand around his initiative and was very inspirational and very rewarding to be a part of as their digital agency on record for all of those years.

That really got me thinking and also in 2008 our agency was behind building Hope Of Change for President Obama when he was running in his first election and part of the group that has putted together the “Yes, We Can” video during the primary which is really seminal in him

getting denomination and moving a lot of people and rallying a lot of people in his direction. So, I started to see, “Okay, well what we do really has a lot of power to effect change.” It got me thinking that, “You know could be possible to have an agency that only this kind of work and that could I make successful.”

And if I did it successfully, that would serve as a model to the rest of the industry to show some of my peers that might be feeling the same way, that they can do their work but they can do it in an entirely different way.

[00:09:43] BOK: So in those early days of setting and moving towards setting up a new agency, what was different about that process and about that building a team and setting up something new – what was different if you're saying you're solely focused on this aspect?

[00:10:01] RH: Well, it's hard, it's already sort of narrow down to – well first of all service-based business is a unique animal and having now done it for, this is my 28th year running agencies, it's a really particular kind of animal. It's a very people-centric business so you need talent at high level at high cost and you need to develop clients very quickly, you need to get people to really believe that you can provide them service, it's competitive, it's more competitive now than certainly it has ever been, there are so many agencies. I think when you narrow down to having a particular focus, that's a good thing because it gives you some kind of differentiation.

The problem is what I did was choose an area and a discipline and a focus that just completely really didn't exist and when you're that far out in front of things, it's really challenging to convince clients that you are the organization that they need to do the thing that they need to do. I knew that if we compromise on you know the type of work that we took like say, “Okay we're going to be this purpose led agency but you know we'll do some of this other stuff that really isn't really purpose led on the side,” then our brand really was of no value really.

No intrinsic integrity in the mission that we're trying to do. So, it was hard and I think it's interesting because it's kind of a repeat of what happened in my first agency. In my first agency we decided that that was really silly, that I had an agency on one side and a digital agency on another side, and we're two different things because the world was working differently.

So, we started calling ourselves an integrated agency and this was in like in 2000 or 2001 and people didn't understand what that meant. So it was hard for companies to put us in a box where they can hire us until finally a company did take a shot in us and then the whole world turned to our direction and that became what a modern marketing agency is.

I think with purpose and, you know the purpose led economy, as I would like to say – six years ago people really didn't see that and they didn't really, they might have wanted to believe it but there was still a lot of unprovenness around that being a real business driver and that was the struggle in the early days is finding our footing within that and convincing clients that you know “We can really help you with an agency to figure this stuff out” and you know luckily the world is a very different place in 2017 and almost 2018.

You know, the world is moving our direction again and you know luckily we struggled to those early years and we been able to put up together some great client relationships and great work behind it that now positions us in a place where companies really see the value, and the unique value, of what we are offering and our specialty, that's a tough place to be when you're trail blazing.

[00:13:20] BOK: And, you were trailblazing but you also had the previous experience where you're coming to the beginning of that journey but with the skillset and experience of running an agency so –

[00:13:30] RH: Yeah, sure.

[00:13:30] BOK: Even with that experience you're describing it to being tough.

[00:13:33] RH: Yeah and I think that's huge leg up because you know kind of I had known and a bit kind of the stages, you know the stages of developing and growth, and also what it might take to get it going, to get it off the ground. I think when I first started with my first agency I had no idea about anything. So it does help.

It's still tough, I think I was able to leverage relationships and networks that I built up over the years which is great but it's still tough work to try and execute.

[00:14:11] BOK: Yeah, so you've kind of gone through that journey twice that tough start up, you know and trailblazing your journey that you're talking about. I don't mean start up and I mean starting up. What was different? Apart from that you had done it before, was there anything different the second time around because you kind of had this extra – this slightly different motivation, the purpose led part?

[00:14:33] RH: Yes. I think that one of the – and this is also the great gift of doing this work and it was a bit of my hope but I didn't quite know how much kind of what would happen until I got in to it. But, ultimately I think the learning curve of understanding the world that we operate in was something that I was extremely excited about but also took a lot to really – and it was just really time and dedication and kind of pursuit of for lack of better words, that world of social impact, the world of humanitarian development work happening.

The understanding of the players and the way things happen in the world was an education process for me and for all of us in the company. I think that when you say “What's unique about Matter,” it really is this piece of understanding of “Well we have an understanding of brand and we have an understanding of culture and those are things of agencies need to have but we also have this third component of understanding the world of social impact that we layer all of this things together to have a unique perspective and point of view in the world.” That was developed.

So, that was something of a learning curve that gives us this unique perspective but it was also extremely exciting and I feel one of the great values of doing this work is now understanding time but in a deeper way how good work happens around the world and that is something very, very different and I think necessary in this work where as you know these days there are a lot of agencies diving in to the space.

I think that when you see the work coming out there's a certain, not in all cases, but there is not as much depth to the marketing efforts and maybe you can kind of peg words the organization don't quite understand at a certain depth, you know. The way the organization is trying to impact the world. So, that's a great learning and great support.

[00:16:55] BOK: So, do you have an example that you're talking about that sort of learning which is kind of different from the technical skills you know of the sort of industry, general skills. Do you have an example to bring that to life?

[00:17:10] RH: Yeah, I think with our recent work with Merck, with the Merck For Mothers project is a great example. I think there is a way to go to work where you can just dive in and look for the big idea but I think with that organization what we wanted to really do is to dive in and have a real deep understanding of number one, why did this company do this, it's a \$500,000,000 10 year commitment to end maternal mortality. The company doesn't sell any drugs in maternal mortality in that issue, they took on this issue expressively because they wanted to effect something with their skill and growth but they didn't want it to be perceived in trying to just sell stuff.

And, that was a big story when the organization came to us they are really looking for marketing and content. "Make us something to kind of tell the story" but we said "There's a big story here that we have to get to the bottom of it, you know, people just don't know that as an organization that you're doing this which is amazing." Then whose the audience and who are we trying to move and kind of getting deeper in to the why of getting in to this work. And it was really important before we figured out what we're going to make and so we did some deep dive on the strategic level with them to understand what this mission meant and developed a real platform for them on which we could create creative execution.

Which would include eventually a virtual reality film that we did to help global health workers that they can leverage to influence people all the way to the brand and from film which should be much more public to kind of encapsulate the emotionality behind this initiative and why they're involved in it and how partners were coming in to the table to solve the problems.

So, I think our sensitivity to dive in deeper in to the issue and understanding how the organization work with other partners and governments around the world and what they were ultimately trying to achieve allowed us to deliver or resolve that really spoke directly to this audiences that we have identified that they wanted to reach. Versus just making you know coming up with a big idea of like something and putting out some creative work behind it.

I think that, that's ultimately that's the kind of work that we want to do, we're finding ourselves more and more in that position where we get the chance to do it with great companies.

[00:19:48] BOK: Oh, yeah, that's outstanding. So, you're describing that journey with these types of clients. How does that work internally with the work culture? Is the only word that I can think of to ask this question – but how does that internal team dynamics feed into things like recruitment and that sort of, the way things are operating internally?

[00:20:08] RH: Yeah, I think luckily we're not a giant agency with hundreds or thousands of people, we're a small team and our organization really works across the disciplines in a very collaborative way. I think we break – any project that we're going to get in to, any client situation that we're going to get in to we're going to collaborate internally across the disciplines. So we have the creative lead who is sitting very closed to our strategy lead, who sits very closely with the account lead and ultimately the production lead.

So, those four people – and there is technology involved we'll have a tech lead but the collaboration amongst that group in a really tight way is extremely important where there isn't just one group and we don't just say to the creative team, “Okay well here's the brief and you go think about it” and that's it.

It's working together. And our strategy group brings in that kind of the research, the insights, but also the insights into the social impact space which it just so happens we've been doing a lot of work in for many years. So, there is a body of knowledge that's kind of built in to us, you know around that understanding of who the players are and what's been in the past. What are things that are coming up in that particular issue space. What are the organizations that we're working on, who are partnered and who can come to the table. So, that strategic layer is very deep here I think sometimes it's not as deep where they are just looking for what's the creative insight that will allow the marketing to work.

So those people are working very closely with the creative team and then the account team is really a group that understands the client and our clients are non-profits and foundations, high net worth individuals as much as they are a brand. So what really is important is to understand the goals of the organization very deeply, so those things work together and then ultimately the

production pieces, the nuts and bolts pieces of “Okay now that we have this can we really get this idea done with the budgets we're trying to work with.” The great thing with us is that we leverage a network of talent globally that are amazing creatives.

Whether they are film makers, technologists, you know all different types of people that make stuff that we bring to projects to kind of work with us collaboratively. So, I think the process exists in a lot of agencies like this but I guess it's just about that strategic layer that marries the creative layer and it's very, very tight here, that's probably a bit of difference.

[00:23:06] BOK: Yeah, that sounds really cool, and how do you choose clients and projects to work on, do you have a very clear set of – within the team, “This is our values, this is the type of project.” Or is it a much more case by case gut call.

[00:23:21] RH: Yeah, I think it's case by case. You know we have turned down work I think through the years a number of clients and projects that would've been lucrative, would have been great but ultimately, we couldn't work on and it is case by case. I mean our perspective is we will speak with a wide variety of organizations, you know, we don't come in with prejudices right off the bat. But I think that we really want to look at the work that we're being asked to do and look at the organizations motivations around that work and certainly if we think that there is what we sometimes called “good washing” or “green washing,” we will walk away from that work because we don't feel like it would be in what the organizations best interest or our interest to get involve with the work.

That's the case where organizations are sometimes just kind of putting lipstick on a pig and trying to make something bigger than it is or it just doesn't ring us through. But those cases are pretty far in between. I think sometimes it's just about that we can't feel like we can't do the groundbreaking work that would move the meter for the client and then we might turn the work down. But yeah, it's pretty much case by case.

[00:24:42] BOK: Within your team, do you need to work to keep people's values aligned and to keep the team interested. Or is there a challenge of people pulling in different directions or having different motivations outside these very focused values?

[00:24:56] RH: I think they're pulling me back all the time, honestly. I think again it's hard as this leader and runner, when you're trying to run a business and grow it and scale it, to sometimes – I lose perspective. I think there is a reason why people are here that Matter, there's a reason why people have joined this agency and a reason why I think every week we get a lot of calls and letters from really talented people to want to see about working here or what it's like to work here, how we started it, etc.

I think there is a motivation from people who reach a certain point in marketing and advertising and they want to know what they're doing it for, they're tired of doing this kind of work to sell more widgets to more people that people don't need and they reach a frustration point.

So, my team is extremely passionate about what we do and really dedicated and even on their own lives we encourage everyone to be out there in the world and doing work that is doing something and they all do.

I think it's more of they are keeping me on top of others. What our mission is as much as I'm trying to do that with them. But it's a pretty natural thing, as I said maybe six years ago when I started it is harder to – we were kind of scrappy and scrounging and stuff. I think now we get to look at some really amazing work or potential projects and with amazing organizations. And companies themselves are going through big, big kind of gut checking transformations that are exciting. I think everyone is excited about the work that comes across our path.

[00:26:48] BOK: Awesome, I want to tie that back to something you said earlier on where you had – you were very clear when you were starting the agency that you wouldn't compromise on in terms of the type you work you take on you described that as basically completely destroying the reputation or the image of the company.

Do you think if you hadn't been that strong and definite at the start that you would be where you are now? If you were for example taking that compromise of you know “Hey this one is going to earn us some money, we need the money to get through the next six months.”

[00:27:18] RH: I mean you never know the answer but yeah. I think ultimately, you've got to believe in what you do and you've got to stand up for what you do, that's it. I think I did that with

my previous agency too and I think we did great stuff. We wanted to be a really creative first agency but I think with Matter it's a bit different. If we're really going to go out there and say that we are walking, you've got to walk the walk. And that for me it's really important in this work and I think we've heard it through the years that our clients have hired us not only because you know for our capabilities but expressed that our values align with what either their aspirations were, what they were doing.

I think more and more this is where the world is going. People want to work with people that they like but I think they wanted to work with people that they feel are aligned with their values or who are offering something as a perspective and everyone wants to work with people with integrity. So we hope and strive to hold the line on things, even if they're difficult.

I think you got to do that and I think there is really at the end of the way there's no point in saying your something and then not acting like it. So, even it has been hard sometimes along the way it doesn't – to me it doesn't matter to just - it's really been more about our meta mission I would say here. Which is to really have impacted scale and make a positive dent in the world in some way with what we have as talents. So I think that that's mostly what we're after so if we're really after that we can't compromise on the work.

If we had done that, yeah I think people could – I never wanted to point at them and say you know that they're kind of full of crap. They say they, do this but they really do that and that was never something that I wanted to happen with us.

[00:29:15] BOK: Yeah, behind it it's quite inspiring that you're so very clear and strong in it. What's the future? What's next? How do you measure this on going success of this meta mission that you're describing?

[00:29:25] RH: I think it's really our company is reflecting our mission, our mission is taking hold of the world the kind of clients that are calling us, the kind of people who want to work with us is a reflection of you know whether or not we are successful in what we do and we're feeling it now which is great. We have momentum and the world has turned in in our direction as I've said and I think you know I don't have those educational meetings anymore where I'm trying to convince

someone that you know the world has moved in to a purpose-lead economy and that companies don't have the luxury of standing on the sidelines anymore.

I think it's very clear, I think the current president of America has even has pushed us closer to and made it more relevant and more urgent. We have some real challenges in the world and companies have such power to affect change at scale and if they want to stay relevant and innovative, which is the heart and blood of being a long term thriving company and organization, you have to innovate and you need the best people to do that and more and more younger people don't want to work for organizations that don't represent their values or have a real north star to them. So, it's no longer a luxury, it's not a side activity, it's not a corporate social responsibility or reputational exercise.

It is brand centric and business centric to really figure this out and get your company align with your values and community and allow people to understand that clearly. So, that's where the world is now so we get to just kind of dive in deep with it which is better than having to go through the exercise of convincing people that this thing is actually okay.

[00:31:23] BOK: Yeah, yeah and with Matter does it feel like you said that you're breaking ground maybe as when the agency was starting but now it feels like – do you have a vision of what the next six, eight years will be like?

[00:31:40] RH: Yeah, I know I always said that another part of my own personal mission was that if I can prove that I can create a successful agency like this that only worked on that purpose-led work that other people would start them and then it would help people within our industry and transform the advertising industry in some way. I see that a little bit and I don't know if it's just us there's other people in it but I think that there is certainly marked agencies doing what we're doing.

There's even big agencies that are opening up divisions and talking the talk that we're talking. So it's having impact and for me you know, the next couple of years, the focus here now is that we're building long term relationships with clients and we're growing. We opened up an office in San Francisco this summer, so we have an office on both coasts and scaling the teams both in New York and San Francisco is a focus, and potentially looking at operations elsewhere

depending where the clients take us. But, we're also looking at things differently because we are now invited in to some pretty rarefied rooms on issues that we care about so really even thinking about platforms around some of the big challenges in the world and who can we bring around the table on this issues whether it's brands or non profits, NGOs, organizations, talent, culture.

How do we kind of develop and help orchestrate really impactful initiatives around these challenges to help communicate them better and has some positive movement in the directions we want. We're kind of looking at things a little bit more like that versus getting higher that's an agency for a project and so we see us getting more involved with longer term efforts. You know we're doing that with maternal mortality, where doing that with President Obama and we have been through the past two years and now it's the Obama's Foundation on My Brother's Keeper.

Looking at opportunity gaps in America for young boys and men of color and how we can move the meter on that, we're involved in poverty projects, we're involved in climate change in a big way. So I think for us it's looking at this issues and seeing how can we take what we know and help kind of herd cats and develop great creative ideas and rally people and create some impact there that's ultimately what we're going to focused on, certainly for the next perceivable future.

[00:34:19] BOK: Oh yeah, as I said before, inspiring. Thank you so much for your time today I really appreciate that and sharing so openly about everything that you on the agency is doing. Very final question for our listeners who want to find out a little bit more about the agency and the work that you personally are involved in, where can we direct them?

[00:34:37] RH: Yes. Certainly, our website which is makethingsmatter.com and following us on social media certainly helps it's @matterunlimited personally myself is @robmatters and we would love to hear from anyone, whether it's people who are looking to work with us, to collaborate with us and clients that are looking to have real partners in the room. I think ultimately at the end of the day we struggle with the word "agency" because you know our relationships run really deep where we think all the time we're working on the same side of the table as the people that we work with and we're in it for the long haul. So, anybody who is interested can just give us a call or reach out.



[00:35:22] BOK: Outstanding and as usual those links and social links will be in happyporchradio.com on the show notes. Thanks again Rob, I really appreciate your time.

[00:35:31] RH: You got it, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:35:37] 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.

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