

## **SYPartners**

### **Leading into the Unknown**

#### **Episode 1— Stephen Friedman, Former President of MTV: How businesses can begin to embrace social impact**

**Narrator:** [00:00:07] Welcome to Leading into the Unknown, a podcast by SYPartners featuring stories from leaders we admire about creating the path forward in complex times.

[Music]

**Tom Andrews:** [00:00:20] Today I'm joined by Stephen Friedman. He's formerly President of MTV, where he created the MTV Social Impact department. He won Emmy and Peabody Awards for social impact campaigns, and he spearheaded MTV's transformation into a cultural home for Millennials with shows such as "Teen Mom", "Catfish", and "Jersey Shore", I believe. Stephen, welcome to our podcast.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:00:45] It's great to be here Tom.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:00:47] So Stephen, I have to believe that people were coming to MTV not to be preached to, or even to be educated. I presume they were, you know, they're tuning in to be entertained. How on earth did you sort of bring in this factor of actual social impact? What was the magic you did there?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:01:05] It always had to be about entertaining because if you ever veered into didactic lecturing, the audience would change the channel. I knew we were never PBS. Our mandate was to entertain. And so, what I learned and one of the key things that has come back time and time again is this notion of listening, letting go of your assumptions that you understand, and deeply listening to the audience and there's a phrase that I heard when I first got to MTV, that we worship at the altar of the audience.

When I got there, and this was in 1998, as we started listening to the audience we started hearing issues of concern about safety in schools and the world wasn't talking about this but young people were saying like, 'We have friends that are having issues.' And there is a need to talk about this but no one was really talking about safety in schools or gun violence, it just was not as common. And by listening to the audience we built an entire campaign. The first campaign I developed there was fight

## **SYPartners**

for your rights, take a stand against violence. And we did a show with the American Psychological Association. We had to partner their research with the producers, who understood how to talk to the audience and tell stories. Tell stories of if your friend is depressed or if your friend is feeling angry, how do you deal with that.

It was tragic at the time, but we had just finished the show when we got word, we were about to launch the campaign, that Columbine had happened. One of the biggest school shootings in our history and the next day we were able to put that show “Warning Signs” up and we did a thousand forums over the next six months with the American Psychological Association using the show. And so it is seared in my memory—by listening to the audience, we were way ahead of the cultural curve and could provide something of deep need and use for the audience.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:03:08] When you say listen to the audience, what does that look like? Practically, what does that look like?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:03:14] At MTV, there was a huge investment in research. And so there was a team that would do ethnographic studies where the team would spend weeks hanging out with the audience and they would see what's going on in their lives. It was really in-depth listening. When I left MTV there were probably 40 people in the research department. You don't need a massive team, but I think by really listening it enabled us to hear weak signals in culture, which I think enabled the brand to really be out front on topics that the audience knew about but the rest of the world wasn't talking about.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:03:49] So relate that for me to, say, other organizations that are not in the entertainment industry, for example. Businesses where I'm a leader, I see what's going on in the world, I care about playing some role in society that addresses some of these issues that are affecting my colleagues, my employees, depending on your role. How does this kind of approach actually work within a business or an organization?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:04:17] Well I think tapping your employees and truly listening, because you rarely see that. You see the hierarchy reinforce a silence and a lack of communication.

So, reverse mentoring. We tried this at MTV and it was simple, any organization can do it. We matched some of the youngest people on the staff, and we partnered them directly with heads of

## **SYPartners**

departments and divisions where they were really the mentors, they were advising them on what they were listening to, what was bubbling up in culture, in conversation.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:04:59] The younger employees were mentoring...

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:05:01] Exactly. The younger employees were mentoring the senior ones, with the clear goal of understanding what is happening in the organization, but also, what's happening in culture, what's happening in the community that can help really be great insights for the leaders, for the product you're creating. It becomes a very good way not just of getting the insights, but also bonding the organization in a way that is reinforced by this sense of, everyone's opinion matters. And you get great insight but also a deeper sense of community within the organization.

I mean to give you one example, so my mentee, young man named Jose Iniguez said, 'You know, you've got the Video Music Awards. It reaches hundreds of millions of people. You give all of these awards. Why wouldn't you do a video that has a social impact message?' He understood something that was innate to the younger audience that we just never thought of. And the first year we did it, Lady Gaga or Taylor Swift won that year, and it was the award they said afterwards meant the most to them. And so here was this award that bought great cache in a whole new category, and artists felt the greatest sense of purpose when they won that award. And so that was a great example of my mentor advising me in a way I don't know that would have ever bubbled up.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:06:37] So presumably you could take a fair amount of creative risk when you're working at a place like MTV. If you're working at a business in corporate America it seems riskier to confront any social issues, even as there seems to be an increasing demand on the part of people in general, employees, colleagues, society at large. Should business leaders actually take a stand on social issues?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:07:02] I believe if you look at kind of the brilliant call by Larry Fink at BlackRock, I think what he was channeling there is a deep sense from the broader audience that we all have a responsibility beyond our product, beyond our profits, especially with the younger generations. There is an expectation that you are doing good in the world. And so, I actually think the risk is to not consider it. But I think you really need to do the research. To wade in too quickly, I've seen too many brands want to make a stand and they're, it's not well interrogated or researched and

## **SYPartners**

it blows up in their face. The groundwork that needs to be done to make it credible to make it long-lasting is critical before you take the next step and go external with it. Especially with Millennials, commerce is a form of activism. So if commerce is a form of activism, it is a risk not to play in that game.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:08:08] What do you say to a leader who is willing to listen and willing to act on great ideas and insights from a younger generation that are topical, but who is just afraid of, you know, putting their foot in it and getting into trouble. I mean it is difficult to take a stance on social issues if you're in a business.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:08:31] I think a leader that is contemplating taking on a social issue, that may be polarizing... the first thing is understanding as many angles as possible about the topic, because I think there are many polarizing issues that you can find a way in that is not going to be partisan or complicated. And this is what is often missing in organizations. There is not an understanding of: Where do you go for the information? Who is the non-profit partner? There is always a way to find an angle in, there is a way to take a first step and that's critical to begin the process because many of these issues are seemingly intractable and can cause paralysis if you don't find what is that first step that you can bring the organization along to begin to have an impact.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:09:28] So is the first step trying to understand the different perspective? Was like finding the right partner to advise you who's non-partisan is what you're saying.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:09:37] Exactly. We would never begin a campaign without a deep understanding of it because having an encyclopedic sense of what the problem is often inspires great creative ways to approach it, because there are so many nonprofits that are out thinking about this every single day. Bring them in.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:09:55] These are big words—societal impact. How do you know you're having impact?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:09:59] I think it depends on the issue or the cause. And when you are talking about behavior change, it is helpful to go into any campaign and figure out what are potential metrics of success. It starts with the research, understand what is the goal, what is the ambition, and what are going to be the incremental steps that can help get you there.

## **SYPartners**

So when we did a campaign on sexual health, on STDs, we partnered with the CDC and Planned Parenthood. We did pre- and post-surveys and we found out after we launched this big media campaign we saw spikes of people getting tested for HIV and AIDS. That was an amazing accomplishment because we were changing behavior.

A show like “Teen Mom” and “16 and Pregnant”, which people think is the worst thing wrought on culture, you know, in the last few years. The backstory on that, is when I was pitched it, the Pro-Social [Social Impact] department said, 'Teen pregnancy is at historic highs.' And so we decided we were going to partner with the National Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:11:06] Our goal in that was to do no harm. And we realized there was an opportunity to change the narrative and make young people in particular understand: you're giving up your childhood, you're giving up your innocence if you have a kid. And so if you've ever watched “16 and Pregnant” or “Teen Mom”...

**Tom Andrews:** [00:11:23] It's not glamorous.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:11:24] It's the opposite. So that was our goal. It wasn't anything beyond that. But researchers start looking at the impact of the show. They started looking at the narrative, the conversation around these shows. Outside researchers were able to conclude that a third of the decline of teen pregnancy was due to those two shows, which blew us away. And I got the call from Nick Kristof of The New York Times saying, 'Did you plan for this?' I was honest, I said, 'We want to do no harm, and we could have only done that in partnership with the National Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy.' And so here was an example of what could have been a crisis and a problematic PR issue, which actually is doing great good in the world. That came from understanding what the issues were, a great partnership with a non-profit, and then an external group giving us those results.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:12:24] Who do you think in particular is doing a great job with this right now, who is inspiring you?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:12:29] Patagonia has taken risks and chances and by being true to their purpose, I think they have an even more fervent fan base, but they are not afraid of taking on the government.

## **SYPartners**

**Tom Andrews:** [00:12:42] They are suing the government over the Bears Ears National Monument.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:12:44] Exactly. They have consistently put their money where their mouth is, and in this complicated age people are yearning for that sense of authenticity and consistency.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:12:55] Any leaders in particular who are inspiring you right now?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:12:58] Certainly Howard Schultz is someone that is incredibly impressive. I mentioned Larry Fink as someone who is using his powers for good. Paul Polman and what he's doing at Unilever is incredibly impressive.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:13:12] Stephen, I want to hit you with a quick fire round now. Let's go for it okay, it's just gonna come from the gut, Stephen.

[00:13:19] How do you keep yourself sane, and fit, healthy through what must be a pretty occasionally challenging job?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:13:31] I walk a lot. Like eight to 10 miles a day, and to work, back, and I listen to podcasts as I'm doing it, and there is something soothing about that, something meditative about walking.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:13:46] What is the one thing that today's leaders would benefit from having more of?

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:13:54] Empathy. I think the leaders who have been the most visionary, certainly in my life, are those who listen, deeply listen, and I think empathy enables you, opens you up, to hear things that you generally miss when you are a leader, and called on to make quick decisions. Having the calm and the reserve to listen, to truly listen, is a superpower that is underutilized.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:14:27] Is there a particular technique that you have for being empathetic, for accessing your empathy?

## **SYPartners**

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:14:34] Reading great fiction enables you to walk in other people's shoes, and you start listening, and that listening expands your sense of the world. And so while I read nonfiction a lot, I kind of luxuriate in great writers, and there's this great poem called "Cynics and Optimists," and it ends by saying an optimist always has pockets full of poetry. And that sense of getting out of yourself by listening to words that kind of transport you is a natural building block for empathy. And now the studies actually prove that that is in fact the case.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:15:20] I love that. What a lovely way to end. And thank you.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:15:24] Sure.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:15:24] Thank you so much Stephen.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:15:26] Great talking about this, it's a topic I care about.

**Tom Andrews:** [00:15:29] Pleasure to have you on the show.

**Stephen Friedman:** [00:15:32] Excellent!