**Forsythe Entrepreneurial Center**

Founder Stories: Founder of Hello

Presented by Paul Earle

Paul Earle: Hi, I'm Paul Earle, principal of Earle & Company and a faculty member at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Welcome to season one of Founder Stories produced by the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The mission of Founder Stories is to provide you, the listener, with a deeper understanding of entrepreneurship, engage and entertain you along the way for sure, and perhaps even inspire you to become an entrepreneur yourself.

Paul Earle: Our guest in this episode is a doozy.

Craig Dubitsky: Hello, I'm Craig Dubitsky and I'm the friendly founder of Hello Products and we make naturally friendly oral care.

Paul Earle: Craig is more than just the founder of Hello, the startup that makes toothpaste and such things and is growing like gangbusters, giving famous incumbents like Crest and Colgate a run for their money. He's also the brains behind other things too, like EOS, the golf ball shaped lip balm. More on that later. And earlier was a major contributor to Method, the beautifully designed line of cleaning products. Craig is a real pioneer in the world of consumer products innovation and tells us his story.

Craig Dubitsky: So I started Hello about seven years ago, now. I'm the founder but without this whole team none of this will be possible. So I always like to make sure that I acknowledge that, that without having a whole bunch of amazingly talented and passionate people we'd be in big trouble.

Craig Dubitsky: So I had this idea for Hello, it literally hit me pretty hard when I noticed that I saw pictures of extracted teeth on a lot of the products that were in the marketplace. And it just struck me as really odd that the vocabulary of the category was ... the visual vocabulary was scary, pictures of extracted teeth. But the other parts of the story, the narrative of oral care were all, to me, around fear and shame. Like if you aren't whitening, you are frightening. If your breath wasn't minty fresh all the time you weren't going to get the job. And the dentist was going to hurt you if you didn't use this product. You're going to get drilled, filled and billed.

Paul Earle: Craig talked a lot about the entrepreneur's not so secret weapon, emotion. Great new ideas are ones you can feel not just in a tactical sense but in your belly also.

Craig Dubitsky: And I think a lot of what makes entrepreneurs entrepreneurs is that they feel something very intensely. And they are channeling that feeling at being empathic and feeling what other people might be feeling as well. And figuring out new ways to express solutions to those feelings. The feelings are in fact kind of negative.

Paul Earle: He actually saw multiple problems to solve in this space. As you hear Craig talk further, ask yourself, what are some problems out there that you might solve?

Craig Dubitsky: Nothing seemed right to me in the category and a lot of the ingredients, as I spend a little bit more time learning, and even literally immediately thinking about the category, they were ingredients or just didn't seem to make a lot of sense to me. And the fact is we're putting these things in our mouths and if it's going in your mouth, it's going in your body and it just kind of scared the crap out of me to be honest. So I thought there's got to be a better way. Nothing seemed friendly in the category and that's how the word Hello sort of came into being as the concept for a whole brand and a whole language around how we could talk about this kind of stuff. Like personal care and trying to make it personal again.

Paul Earle: And away they went. From humble beginnings and a few early twists and turns and other adventures, things are looking really rosy for the business today.

Craig Dubitsky: Hello is the fastest growing oral care brand in America, which is really crazy for us to think about. We've recently jumped from about 19,000 doors of distribution to over 41,000 doors of distribution including Walmart and Target where we have the number one selling natural toothpaste and mouthwash, to all doors of Dollar General where we have the top selling oral care product in the store, to all doors of Whole Foods, Ulta. You know, which is kind of an alternative channel when you think about it compared to where other people buy most of their toothpaste. And obviously online Amazon, I think depending on the day, and the hour, or the week we have either the number one or number two best-selling kids toothpaste.

Paul Earle: But don't for one second think that Craig is getting too big for his britches. Humility is a hallmark of every great entrepreneur I know, and Craig is no exception.

Craig Dubitsky: And I say all this, and I can sort of hear it in my voice, I hope you get the sense I'm smiling. You know, there's a lot of not disbelief because we've worked really hard, but just a lot of just genuine... I hate to say we're humble because it doesn't feel right to call yourself or your company humble, just feels kind of funny to me. Were so grateful, that's the better word.

Paul Earle: What's past is prologue and in that vein, Craig and I talked about some of his earlier rodeos.

Craig Dubitsky: Well, I've been an entrepreneur my whole life, before I ever knew what that word meant. I've always somehow managed to have some kind of a business, or a concept for a business, or a way to recognize an opportunity and go for it, or feel there was a gap that needed to be filled in and go for it. So literally as a kid I had a lemonade stand, a car wash, a car wash and lemonade stand put together because I had a captive audience while I was washing the car. I could sell you lemonade, a window washing business. I had a trucking business in college, taking people's stuff back and forth to school. I had a food business open seven nights a week in college, a carpeting business for dorm rooms in college. I mean I just never stop.

Craig Dubitsky: And then I was a trader and you know, commodities trader, and a currency trader and a derivatives trader. And I just saw discrepancies and everything. And fast forward, I've really always loved design and how things make you feel, that's what I really cared the most about.

Paul Earle: Craig talked about his role at Method, the iconic cleaning products company that really was a trailblazer in its use of design as a differentiator. Listen carefully because there's a playbook that is starting to develop here and you can use it too.

Craig Dubitsky: So fast forward, I was very lucky and I met the founders of Method, a household cleaning products brand, when literally there were two guys mixing products in their bathroom. I loved, love design and one of the co-founders of Method loves design probably as much, if not more so than I do. And we bonded over some consumer packaged good that never made it to America, that was British. And we realized we had the same fascination with packaging and design.

Craig Dubitsky: Fast forward, I ended up leading the original investment in Method very early. I was on the board of Method for about the first five years or so and just really appreciated their vision, which was that you could bring design and natural ingredients to these everyday things. To me, that changed everything. Full props and love and deep appreciation for my early exposure to the Method guys, because they're incredible people. And this was, you know, at this point, this is going on like 18 years ago or so. So this was very different than at the time. People weren't necessarily looking at things in quite the same way.

Paul Earle: But he was just getting going.

Craig Dubitsky: Anyway, I then went on to start another company. I had a co-founder, we started this company called EOS, which is primarily known these days for a lip balm. That's a spherical shape lip balm in particular. There's a stick that I have lots of stories about designing and working with a sculptor around the stick and the sphere. And working in clay with a sculptor. And everyone said, kind of like with Method, you know, "Oh, they're cleaning products, nobody cares." But my thesis is that people care about everything. There's nothing that people don't care about. Making a lip balm that was an organic product since the average woman eats about five pounds of petrochemicals, that was really important to me. Making a product that was really find-able in a woman's purse. Like literally I'm obsessed with haptic response and what do things feel like. You have all these other senses, right?

Craig Dubitsky: So I like to create things that delight all of them. And you know, how things taste is really important, but how things feel in your hand? And what EOS, the big idea was to me saying that a woman could stick her hand in her purse and just through touch identify it as EOS. And obviously the fact that it's 100% natural, 95% organic lip balm. It can't be 100% organic by the way, because you don't know where the bees have pollinated.

Paul Earle: Back to that playbook. Soon with EOS establish as a big winner, Craig was onto the next one.

Craig Dubitsky: So I had a deep involvement with EOS and very proud of that product, and the fac that people also really, they spark to it. You know, it triggered something for people. Which is lovely. And then I started Hello. And I've been around other brands too, whether it's Boots in the UK helping launch that brand and that range of products on the US, to Popcorn, Indiana, which is a snack food company. Lots of things that I've been very fortunate to be around; really passionate and really capable founders and folks who love product and brand. It's fun. It's a great.

Craig Dubitsky: field. And if you're going to be an entrepreneur creating everyday stuff, like things that people can use every day for me has been a really fantastic experience. You know, it's not academic it's very practical to create things that people engage with all the time.

Paul Earle: Craig and I talked about how to find opportunities. Where we do big ideas come from?

Craig Dubitsky: I'm out and about and I'm always listening to people. I'm always looking at what people are up to. I'm trying to pay attention to as many nuance things as I can. And then trying to figure out like what would I like to have in my world that I don't have and how can I find that or make that? I don't think it's wrong to say I'm average, you know. There's nothing wrong with being okay with that, and I am. I'm like, you know what, if I like something or if I feel something's missing, chances are I'm not the only one who feels that way. And most people don't seem to want to step up and take the risk. I view it as more of an opportunity that you're going for, not a risk that you're taking to go create the things you want in the world.

Craig Dubitsky: Right? So, I think everything is art. Someone designed everything. And there's no idea that's a bad idea, there's just bad execution. So every idea you have, you might be like I like to say... Someone who said this to me a long time ago when I was a trader, they used to say, "Oh, in trading you're never wrong, you're just early." Sometimes it's really painful to be early, but it's the same with ideas you know. You could feel something right now, you could sense something, you could see something, you can tell there's a vibe, there's something going on, right? There's a frequency that's humming out there and not everyone's picking up on and you might be.

Paul Earle: We talked a lot about what the job of an entrepreneur is like. It can be lonely. And one of Craig's most important pieces of guidance is it doesn't have to be.

Craig Dubitsky: Do everything you can to surround yourself with people that can help you make that real. By real I mean, real in real life and then real also as a business because just because you can make something, it doesn't mean it's going to be a business. So you need to also surround yourself with the folks that can help you make it real, yes but help you make it profitable, and expandable, and desirable. and what's so magical about the world we live in today is that that kind of stuff is possible. If you could dream it, you can make it real and that wasn't always the case.

Paul Earle: Timing is everything and now is a great time to start something new. Thanks to a more networked world and an abundance of resources out there.

Craig Dubitsky: I don't know doesn't exists anymore. Or it shouldn't because now you can go and use the search engine of your choosing and find just about anything or anybody or LinkedIn or whatever social platform you like or researching platform is best for you and you can get to anybody.

Craig Dubitsky: And I think it's about how we behave after that and how much passion we bring to something and how professional we can be about it. And never waste anybody's time so that you can... if you get to somebody who could be meaningful, who could be impactful for your idea, helping you make it real into the business, getting those folks to believe in you and the idea and want to join it. Again, join, not just help out in some perfunctory way, but like really get to deeply feel something. And you find those people, "Oh, I can't raise any money." Well then you haven't presented your idea in a cogent enough way because now there's a million new ways to raise capital and it's about the meritocracy of the idea.

Craig Dubitsky: It goes back to the essence of the story. So if you're creating a business, like what's the story? Why does that need to exist? So getting that story right and making sure it helps people feel something, that's the magic.

Paul Earle: Magic. Yes, in business you need a little abracadabra. The rational case always matters, but so does it irrational. And that gets back to the theme of emotion. How does the idea make people feel? How does it make you feel? Craig and I wrapped up our conversation by talking about entrepreneurship writ large. What are the benefits? What are the challenges? He has a lot of perspective. No surprise there.

Craig Dubitsky: The pros to being an entrepreneur are that you, in a sense, control a lot of your own destiny. And there's a lot to be said for that. The reality of it is, you probably don't control all that much of your own destiny but it sure feels like you do. Right? So you can set your own hours. You know what your hours are when you were an entrepreneur? 24/7. So as long as you don't mind working all the time. That's... Like the pro is, it's never going to feel like work because if it's your thing, you're only doing it because you love it. And if you love it, it never feels like work. You're just doing this thing you love. So that's a big pro. You get to do what you love. That alone is worth everything because otherwise it's a J-O-B, right? So who wants a J-O-B when you can do something versus doing something you love?

Craig Dubitsky: And by the way, one other thing I'll point out about being an entrepreneur, you can be an entrepreneur and work for someone else. You could be inside of a big company and still be an entrepreneur. Entrepreneur doesn't just mean, Oh I found a garage and I have this idea and I'm going to work in my garage and make these things. That's certainly one way to do it. And it's been a very famous and really successful way for lots of people, but you could be an entrepreneur... I think anybody with an idea who helps make that idea real and brings it to life in a way that's functional and practical and profitable, you're an entrepreneur. And if that means you do it inside the construct of a larger organization, so be it. That's totally okay. So again, big pro is you get to do what you really love and what you're really passionate about and it'll never feel like work no matter how hard you work at it. That's a pro.

Paul Earle: So there's a lot to like about this racket. Craig has a few cautionary tales too and they're well worth contemplating.

Craig Dubitsky: The negative is there's a deadline every 10 seconds. I jokingly say that when you're an entrepreneur, every day is Monday and I like to say everyday is Monday and I'm late. So there's a lot of tension that comes with that that you have to be comfortable with. And if you're in any kind of a relationship, it's very, very difficult because you're in this relationship with your idea and it's all consuming sometimes because it has to be. You have to live it and you have to get other people to live it and love it as much as you do. And that takes a lot of energy, a lot of actual physical energy and a lot of psychic energy and emotional energy. So you have to make sure you leave space for you to share and really important emotional things with other people in your life. And sometimes that isn't always the case.

Craig Dubitsky: So the big negative is it's all consuming. You didn't want anything to get in the way of your relationships with other people, whether those are intimate, committed relationships, who are just professional relationships, you know? So being an entrepreneur, it's also about managing feelings and emotions of other people. And you got to be very aware when you're in this kind of realm what you're up against.

Paul Earle: Is entrepreneurship for you? Craig breaks it down.

Craig Dubitsky: And what I would say is as someone who's been around this stuff now for a while, and I've also worked within some big companies too. And I'm not anti-big company, I think the dirty little secret is every startup, every small company wishes one day to be a big company, but maybe not without the baggage that might come with a big company that people think about. I actually think big companies are incredible. Their organization. It's a really interesting word, like they organize people and ideas and produce things, and that's really cool. So how do you do that and stay true to your idea? That's the tricky bit and as entrepreneurs, I think the thing to really think about if you're a would be entrepreneur, is how are you going to feel if you don't go for something that gets you excited?

Craig Dubitsky: Like I personally have no fear of failure. I only have fear of not trying because if I didn't try, I feel like I've really failed. So like why not try? And there are degrees of trying. Doesn't mean you have to quit everything and sell everything you've got and go into debt. Like there are ways to try and still alleviate risk. And I think regret is a horrible thing and you'd hate to go through life and say, "You know that idea I had for this idea where no one would own a car anymore, you could just use your phone and click and a car would come get you and drop you off". Like, what if that where your idea?

Craig Dubitsky: By the way, I actually had an idea like that about 12 years ago and people laughed at me. I said, "You know, everyone's got a phone and GPS. I know who you are, where you are, where you're going, where you want to go, where you came from. What if I never had to buy a car or get in a taxi? I could just use my phone, get where I want it to go by cars that are already on the road, people that are already heading in that direction?" And everybody laughed at me.

Paul Earle: You may have heard of Uber. To be clear, Craig is not the founder of Uber, but he could have been.

Craig Dubitsky: You'd hate to not try things and say, "Oh my god, I had this great idea and that could have been me." Like, could have? Could is a word and should, those are also, I think, horrible words. You should do that. Like you should? I should have done that. Oh, you'd hate to look back and not be happy. So I think if you have an idea, go for it. What do you have to lose? You're going to learn a lot, right? You're just going to keep learning. So even if it fails, hopefully it doesn't fail miserably. And if it does you're going to learn a lot. And think of the failure it would have been if you didn't even give it a try. So I'm a big proponent of trying. Just try. Even if it's a baby step, try. Because you're going to learn so much and you won't have any regrets in life.

Craig Dubitsky: Life's too short. You don't need regrets. Nobody needs regrets.

Paul Earle: That's darned right. Words to live by. Our conversation concluded by talking about the soft side of innovation and entrepreneurship again.

Craig Dubitsky: If someone feels like they've been touched by something or thought that someone was so thoughtful that they designed something with them in mind or feels that way. Feels, feels, feels that way. It elicits this emotion. That's the magic.

Paul Earle: There you go, magic indeed. And so concludes this Hadley Founder stories interview with innovator and entrepreneur extraordinaire Craig Dubitsky. I hope you felt something just the way consumers of all Craig's products do. I know I did. For more insight and inspiration into the tantalizing world of startups and innovation, make sure you check out other interviews within this series. Thanks very much for listening and talk to you again soon.