

"Growing the Good": World's Finest Chocolate Brings Smiles to the (Masked) Faces of Healthcare Professionals

DAVE CASPER: Welcome to Growing the Good. I'm Dave Casper, head of BMO's North American commercial banking business. We're working with our customers to help them through this incredibly volatile times. They're stepping up in so many ways, helping to keep commerce moving, and keep people safe. I have the pleasure of speaking with a number of CEOs running businesses in a variety of industries, hearing their personal stories about the challenges they're facing, and some of the very innovative ways they've adapted in these uncertain times. Today, I'm speaking with Ed Opler, CEO and owner of world's finest chocolate, based in Chicago, Illinois. Welcome, Eddie. Thanks for joining me today.

ED OPLER: Absolutely. Thanks, Dave.

DAVE CASPER: World's Finest has a really long history, manufacturing chocolate, and supporting the schools and the youth organizations. For some of the people that are listening, can you give them a little bit more info about your organization, the products and your mission?

ED OPLER: Yes, World's Finest chocolate has been around, we're celebrating our 80th year, we're largely known for the products that kids sell for raising funds for schools and youth, athletics, churches and things like that. Ours are the chocolate bars that are the white bars with the silver foil. We've been focused largely on that until now. But fundraising is about 80% of what we do. And that's been kind of the core mission for us. And it sort of flows through through the DNA of world's finest is helping people raise money. Last year, we sold about 250 260 million chocolate bars in the United States to help people raise money, and they raised close to \$150 million. So it's kind of a great place to be we make chocolate, and we think we make great chocolate and beyond that we get to get to help people do the things that that they want to do with their kids.

DAVE CASPER: You do make great chocolate. And the best thing about it is when you buy one of those on the street, you get to eat it, and you feel good about it. So let me ask you, though, you been in business for a long time, but this COVID has caused you to pivot a little bit in your fundraising efforts.

ED OPLER: You know, we were middle of March like everybody else when things really started to unravel for our traditional business, which has been through the schools largely across the United States and Canada. And when everything grinds to a halt very quickly, and suddenly, in the middle of March, our business basically went from you know, run it in 120% of prior year to negative. And so after, you know, a short period of time sulking and feeling a little sorry for ourselves, we quickly jumped into action to try and see during this, you know, unprecedented time, at least in my lifetime. And I think almost everyone's lifetime now. And we decided to jump in and create a program where we could do some good to keep our employees engaged is something special for those who are really dealing with COVID directly on a day to day basis, which was obviously in the hospitals and other frontline workers like police and firemen. We created a program where we would donate a million chocolate bars, out of the gates across the country and to different hospitals. And so far, we've donated about 1.5 million bars, and with another million kind of ready to go. And we've done that in partnership with consumers. But we went out and through our friends, family contacts and current customers went out and created a program that we call chocolate for healthcare heroes. And that program is basically the ability for someone to order a case of our chocolate which includes 60 bars or 30 products depending on which one you buy for \$60. And in addition to having that delivered directly to your house, we will then donate another box of 60 bars to health care workers across the country. So it's been a real fun thing to see. And very special thing to see the faces in under mask of health care workers, the nurses, the doctors, the police and firemen who and paramedics who are dealing with this everywhere. And so that's just been extraordinary. I've kind of compared it to thinking about what would happen if someone gave everybody \$1 I think you might have a lot of nurses and doctors saying Why are you giving me \$1 but when you give someone a chocolate bar or \$1 chocolate bar, they light up and go crazy and scrounge around for their favorite product in the box. It really has helped lift the spirits of our employees to know that we're doing something good during this this tough time for everybody.

DAVE CASPER: And I love the fact that you said you know we sat around feeling sorry for but it didn't sound like it did very long. And and they also have the ability to not even eat the candy by yourself and double the donation.

ED OPLER: So then that that's exactly right. Yes, about about half of our people who have gone on to help have done exactly that, which is just to say, instead of coming to me, while I'm sitting at home, needing to eat a little bit better, I'm going to send out 120 bars instead of just 60. And that's been a positive as well to have that option for folks. And and, and really, people have jumped in, and it's been been a great success and something, again, we're trying to, you know, keep the wheels turning, get our employees back to work and feeling forward momentum when otherwise it would be pretty much ground to a halt. So we set out a big bar to eventually give up to 10 million chocolate bars away. That's the goal. And you know, like I said, probably by the end of the next few weeks, we will have donated about two and a half million and then we'll just keep plugging along as things go and, you know, get to get to that number. And it's really just been inspiring. I've been to maybe eight or 10 drop offs myself at hospitals around Chicagoland. And it's extraordinary what a little chocolate bar can do to raise the spirits and just give people a respite in an otherwise hectic and challenging time.

DAVE CASPER: Thanks for doing it. Thanks for taking a few minutes to do this. And hopefully we'll see you somewhere soon. Let's, let's open it in person.

ED OPLER: Exactly. I look forward to that day when we can shake each other's hands again and see each other in person without a doubt.

DAVE CASPER: Thanks a lot, Eddie.

ED OPLER: You bet. Thanks, Dave. Talk to you soon.

DAVE CASPER: Thank s for listening to Growing the Good. I hope you'll join me again for another conversation. Until then, stay safe.