

Frank Muller Podcast

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Frank Muller

A Announcer 00:01

Welcome to The Michigan opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.

E Ed Clemente 00:28

Hello, I'm Ed Clemente. I'm your host today. And we're fortunate to have Frank Muller, he is the CEO of Exlterra. Welcome to the show, Frank, appreciate it.

F Frank Muller 00:38

Thank you for having me today.

E Ed Clemente 00:40

Yeah, no, I'm excited about this, because we do have some exciting topics that you're doing over there. But let's kind of, you meet somebody you know, at an event they don't know what your title of your company is. What do you tell him you do?

F Frank Muller 00:56

Well, saving the planet is a bit broad maybe? No, thank you. We Exlterra, which stands for Excellence for Earth is a company that is 100% dedicated to rebalance all those problems we

Excellence for Earth is a company that is 100% dedicated to rebalance all those problems we have with environment on our planet. We started many years ago, by addressing stormwater issues with changing the way we drain water by using a technology that is completely different, works much better than drainage, but the most important part is actually highly ecological. It doesn't disturb nature, like like drainage does. That's one example we have over several other technologies and our DNA or is really about bringing simple technologies that work with the environment that uses the renewable energies of this planet to operate.

E

Ed Clemente 01:56

And you personally, you come from a background you were born in Switzerland, which I find fascinating because you speak four languages at least that I know of. And I just find that so fascinating as an American, because most of us only know one language. But I know that your company has been doing some extraordinary things. And that's how I first heard about you was through RJ King who does dBusiness and he wrote a book about your partner more about both of you, I can't remember. But you want to explain what that was about a little bit?

F

Frank Muller 02:31

Yeah, RJ King met my partner, approximately 10 or 11 years ago and he was quite intrigued by his vision, and by his ability to see things in a way that nobody around us is seeing. And basically, over time with delivering on his promises, Andrew really caught RJ's attention more and more to the point where RJ said, your life is actually already an adventure. You're not very old yet, but still, it's worth a book. And so they sat down together many Saturdays over a couple of years. And then this April, last last year, RJ published the book called Grounds for Freedom, Saving Chernobyl, that tells a story of Andrew Niemezyk which is born in Poland, but now US citizen, lucky for him and escaped the communist bloc. The whole life story is somebody that never stopped in front of adversity. Never.

E

Ed Clemente 03:36

Yeah, and I know I got to meet him with you on the pre-call once and I know he sort of is he more of like an engineer? Or? What is his? Yeah, I know, he's got some good expertise, but I wasn't sure exactly.

F

Frank Muller 03:50

Well, it's uh, you know, he can't say he's an engineer because he doesn't have an engineering degree. However, we have dozens of engineer coming here to our facility and often approach Andrew. So no, Andrew has this unique ability to to have this strong intuition, he calls it I'm in reality, okay. That's the words he using to say, for me, what matters is not the explanation, it's not the theory or the hypothesis, what matters to me is to deliver. And that's the key. So deliver means what? Delivering means I see a problem, I do my analysis. And I act in a way to solve that problem. And solving a problem is not something that many people can do in this world. We can very often put the problem from A to B, or hide the problem or diminish the problem. But actually solving a problem is something that very few people on this planet can do.

E

Ed Clemente 04:55

Why don't you explain the Chernobyl angle on this because I have to tell you that that's how this all started is when I saw RJ's book, and Chernobyl's sort of the headline, I just was just in Chernobyl two years ago. And I know you know how rough that place is. But what you guys are doing is fascinating. Can you explain it?

F

Frank Muller 05:14

Sure, we, we developed a technology called NSPS, which stands for Nuclear Separation Passive System. We developed this technology a few years ago. And we were thinking like, because it is so novel, because it is so unique, where can we demonstrate, where can we have our proof of concept to show the power of this technology? And as it addresses many types of pollutions, quite naturally came to us say, well, the worst pollution in the world is radioactivity. And there's one great example of a radioactive problem that most of the people that are forty years old plus know about still very well, because they, they probably remember where they were, where they were that day on April 26, 1986. And we said, we need to demonstrate NSPS in the exclusion zone in Chernobyl. And because not only will we have a very strong impact in terms of media, of course, attention, but most importantly, that site is monitored since over 35 years, with complete data, they know exactly every inch, square inch, how much radioactivity is there. So we would have a very objective and clear 'before' situation, and 'after' situation that we can monitor. Plus, most importantly, you have a several agencies working on that, in the exclusion zone, amongst one is called amongst them, one is called SSE Ecocentre, which is the one we worked with. SSE Ecocentre is responsible since more than 20 years to monitor basically all the radioactivity in the exclusion zone. So they have a lab, they are certified. So they were the right partner to be establishing the baseline and to work with them towards installing our solution in the ground and demonstrating that it works.

E

Ed Clemente 07:15

And I think the thing that's even more interesting about that is how you can extrapolate that to a lot of other different situations, right?

F

Frank Muller 07:22

Correct. So we did the installation in Chernobyl, on a piece of land that is 2.5 acres in surface. So we started installation in November 2019. And it you have to imagine we are installing polyethylene rods into the ground that have a specific shape, okay. But those rods those are are not all the same length and they are not all at the same depth. There's basically all those various units that are individual units, once they're installed on the ground, become a system, they become a deactivator of radioactivity. And so that took almost a year to install, we talking about 4,840-some of those rods into the ground, one by one, some all the way to 56 feet deep. So it was a very big task because it necessitated also a lot of precision. But that's now done.

And we were able to announce the year one results. So after one year, we were able to announce results, which were for us, of course, very exciting, because we have already started to diminish reactivity in ways that are not possible naturally.

E Ed Clemente 08:48

How does that play for the future of nuclear energy? I know, you've got some, you know, specific ideas like what do you think you're gonna be able to use this for?

F Frank Muller 08:59

That technology does not only apply to the nuclear energy, however, we would like to immediately offer our solution to the nuclear industry, because it is a way to address many sites in the world that are radioactive. But it is also a way in the future to protect zones around nuclear power plants for any eventual catastrophe in the future that can be immediately absorbed with our system. So, we are just here with a tool for the nuclear energy industry, and we will we want to partner with them to offer them that solution to increase the safety of the world.

E Ed Clemente 09:46

Now you're based out of the Detroit area, right, but you have clients all around the world, right?

F Frank Muller 09:52

Correct. We do have offices here in Hazel Park, Michigan, we have offices in Geneva, Switzerland, we do have offices in Poland. We do have business activity in Japan as well. We are basically now increasing our international footprint, and most importantly, our products and our machines to install our technology in the ground are manufactured here in Michigan in Hazel Park.

E Ed Clemente 10:22

And and you've got quite a few patents as well too, right?

F Frank Muller 10:25

Yes, our our company is all about inventing the tools of the future, protecting them with patents, and then bringing them to markets with companies that are already active in the field of environment, in the field of construction, in the field of remediation. So we are partnering with companies and instead of reinventing the wheel and trying to do everything ourselves, no, we do invent the technologies and we basically bring the opportunity to companies to then install it into the ground at the various places we are installing them.

A

Announcer 11:08

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E

Ed Clemente 11:24

Do you have like certain partners beyond nuclear that you're wanting to work with, like you said construction, but you know, the thing that attracted me a lot, is I did a lot of brownfield work prior in the legislature, but I think the best thing we can do as society somewhat is to make sure we don't build more brownfields, and we fix the ones we have. So we don't have to keep expanding, right?

F

Frank Muller 11:47

Sure. Sure. Look, there's there's two avenues here that we are currently exploring. First of all, there's the political sphere, where we want to basically make our politician aware that there's something, there's a solution now that is extremely simple, and extremely safe, that can be used to start to clean up sites. And, you know, you can imagine we have many of them in Michigan as well, unfortunately. And that land once it's cleaned, and when I'm talking cleaning, I'm talking about a few few years, and it's cleaned, that land can be reused. Okay, so the political sphere is important, they need to be aware of that because of course, when we talk about environment, it's never only private companies taking care of it there's always an involvement of any municipalities or government, whatever. So those people are now in the process of being informed, okay. And then on the on the business side, if I can say so, we want to partner with either remediation, soil remediation companies, or construction companies that can see that as an opportunity to expand what they're doing, and actually bring the solution to their clients and start to solve problems in a way that has never been done before.

E

Ed Clemente 13:06

Yeah. And I'm hoping that the MEDC can help you in some of that pursuit soon. I know, you've had some contacts with them already and hopefully, that'll work out for you.

F

Frank Muller 13:14

The MEDC has always been very supportive to Exlterra, always since the beginning. They have identified us very early on as a really big potential. And now we start to deliver, so now it's exciting, of course. But yes, MEDC is a great, how can I say, a bridge builder, a connection builder, and that's the key the MEDC is not here to make my business, but they can help me to put me in contact with the right people. And that's fantastic.

E

Ed Clemente 13:43

Ed Clemente 13:13

And one thing, too, we didn't mention about you, but you're actually an Honorary Swiss Consulate, is that correct?

F Frank Muller 13:51

Yes. I'm the Honorary Consul of Switzerland in in Detroit. Correct.

E Ed Clemente 13:55

And I mean, so that's not like, you do it, but you got your full time job. But you just sort of help them out whenever there's issues involving Switzerland or what does the Honorary Consulate kind of do a little bit?

F Frank Muller 14:06

Yes, it's an honorary title. For me, it's quite natural that when a country wants to give you gives you his trust to represent presented here in Michigan. I mean, for me, it's a huge honor, obviously. So I know, my family is maybe not so happy about it, but I don't count the hours for that. But they also are very supportive, because they understand that at any point in your life, when you can give back something, it is important, especially for your country, and I'm very lucky that I grew up in Switzerland. I found a lovely wife in the US that is from Michigan. My kids grew up in in Switzerland, and then we moved here 11 years ago, and we enjoy beautiful life in Michigan. So I mean, now I can be the one representative representing Swiss, you know, interests here in Michigan, helping Swiss citizens or Swiss companies, but most importantly, a little bit what the MEDC does with companies. I also build bridges between Michigan and Switzerland. And that's something that, for me is a natural thing because I've, I've always been somebody that that likes to do that. So that function as Honorary Consul comes very natural to me.

E Ed Clemente 15:23

Yeah, and your background was in banking, right? Or finance? I can remember exactly.

F Frank Muller 15:28

Correct, correct. I, my first 15 years of my career, but professional career were spent in various banks in Switzerland. And that time enabled me to travel a lot in the world. It enabled me to keep, you know, speaking all the languages I've learned, and not forgetting them and so I'm very thankful for that. But eventually, at one point, I was, I told my wife, Natalie, something has to change, I need to see explore something more. I and that's why we decided to come to Michigan, it was a natural choice.

E Ed Clemente 16:03

And you know, one of the questions I normally ask, but you gave me a good answer in our pre-call. I said, you know, what other disruptors do you see? And you said, we are the disrupter, right?

F Frank Muller 16:14

Yes, we are. And I use that word with all the weight it comes with. You know, everybody always talks about disruptive this disruptive that. What we do, we actually not disrupt the business model, we actually disrupt the way of looking at environment and solving environmental problems. And although it sounds extremely fancy, it comes with a very difficult task of moving mentalities, of having people accept the fact that with our solutions are so simple, we can solve such huge problems. And so it is not from one day to another, that we're able to break those mental barriers, because we are not something that is taught at universities or colleges. We are completely outside the box and we do partner with now a lot of colleges and universities that are now with us. But it took us a long time to basically show the people what we do work, we understand how it works 100% and we can guarantee the results, which is the most important at the end.

E Ed Clemente 17:31

Yeah, and I think too, your location here is pretty critical to a state like Michigan, because we were the biggest manufacturing sort of epicenter, since like the 30s, you know, maybe even earlier. So, you know, with that comes some legacy challenges, but also sounds like there could be a lot more opportunities with your science that you guys are putting in the ground, to create new opportunities that people might have ignored for a long time.

F Frank Muller 17:57

Absolutely, there's, there's going to be, first of all, we, as you say, correctly, we are in an ecosystem here where production, manufacturing is the DNA of the area. And this is something that I absolutely love. And I discovered when I moved here, I was in the service industry for many years, I had no clue what it means to manufacture something. Now I can say I know what it means, and it's fascinating and it's absolutely exciting. And so we will develop many more things in the future, not only on the environmental side, also in the field of hydraulics, and in the field of materials. So we have a pipeline that is pretty full. And so all those things will have a strong impact. And I can tell you now already, it will have a strong impact on the car industry.

E Ed Clemente 18:46

Ah, good to know, I will look forward to that. Also, just a little side question because your answer will be interesting too, but if you could go back and talk to your high school self or to any, I'm thinking of a career, what would you suggest? Because you had a couple different careers now.

F Frank Muller 19:07

F Frank Muller 19:05

I did have a couple of different careers, correct. I was, I have to be very honest with you, I was never a good student. [You're talking to one too.] And this is maybe why I decided to always explore new things because for me it was difficult to put me in a kind of a box. And so I was an average student that crawled my way through all those years of high school and stuff. But at the end of the day, I need to also explore things by myself to understand them by myself. And so, but that's my nature, you know, I have three kids, my first kid, he's a very academic person, he wants to become a doctor, fine. Well, my second kid, he's not so much liking school, like he already told me I don't want to go to college and say, okay, it's okay not to go to college. However, you need to learn a skill that makes you unique. Because what matters is the excellence, it's not about the best grades, whatever, what matters is that you deliver results that other people are not able to do. That you need to be very strong in what you do, and honest, that's the key, with yourself with your employer the honesty is the key. When you realize you're not at the level you need to be, you need to work harder. And that means honesty with yourself.

E Ed Clemente 20:23

Well, this last question, you've been here 11 years now, do you have a favorite thing you like about Michigan? I know you like the manufacturing side of it, but anything else you find of interest now that you've been here a while?

F Frank Muller 20:36

Well, look, I keep meeting very interesting people here. I really enjoy the people of the state of Michigan. I have made so many friends here. There's a curiosity, there's an enthusiasm here. And there's this, look, I grew up in Geneva, Switzerland and come on, it's a beautiful city, you know, everything runs well, but people keep complaining about all, this doesn't work. Well, here in Detroit, people aren't complaining so much. I think they are proud of being in Detroit, even though there's many problems, even though we you know, it's getting much better from 10 years ago. But still, I like this attitude of just going forward. And so I like the people obviously, I also like the nature, I mean, Michigan has so much to offer every summer with my family. We go up north, like millions of Michiganders, and we just enjoy the nature here. There's always something new to see and, we're very blessed to be here in Michigan.

E Ed Clemente 21:30

Well, those were all good answers. And I want to thank again, Frank Muller, CEO Exlterra for being our guest today. You bring a lot of enthusiasm and I'm really hopefully, we'll be able to hear from you in the future about some of these great projects you're going to be putting in place.

F Frank Muller 21:47

Yes, Ed, thank you so much for having me. It was, it's always a great, you know, you know, for me the chance to share with people about what we're doing at Exlterra is fantastic. And I thank you for that opportunity.

you for that opportunity.

E Ed Clemente 21:59

Join us this Friday as we have a special episode guest Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Director Gary McDowell for agricultural month.

A Announcer 22:10

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