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SURFACE

ISSUE 103
NOVEMBER 2013

AMERICAN INFLUENCE

\$15 USD



Summit Series

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In the U.S., “business conference” has become synonymous with past-their-prime hotels, complimentary drawstring bags, and buffet tables. But attendees of this year’s Summit Series, the annual symposium founded by Elliott Bisnow in 2008 and located in Eden, Utah, experienced a new take on a tired practice: Instead of clichéd ice breakers, they bonded over falconry and field drawing classes; instead of PowerPoints and panels, they talked about sex with psychologist Esther Perel; instead of a tablecloth dinner in a hotel convention center, they had an outdoor picnic at a quarter-mile-long table that a marching band led them to.

In truth, Summit isn’t really a business conference. The goal, according to Jeremy Schwartz, a co-founder of Summit along with Brett Leve and Jeff Rosenthal, is to bring together a group of people from a range of industries, urge them to turn off their cell phones, and see what happens. “We’re trying to make people drop their ego at the door and really connect with one another,” Schwartz says. “From that, doing business and inspiring each other is the next logical step.”

Maybe there’s something in the air at Powder Mountain, which the Summit founders

purchased in 2012. Entrepreneur Greg Mauro, now a Summit partner, initiated and facilitated the reported \$40 million sale. But whatever the group is doing, it seems to be doing right: The series started out with only 19 attendees at its first conference, and this year it had 900. (To house the guests, Summit built a temporary city on the mountain, complete with more than 500 tents for sleeping, a duck pond, a bar, a gym, and a teepee for gathering.) After attending, those who make the trek out to Summit find themselves nostalgic for the summer camp-like world they leave behind, and many come back to recreate the experience the next year.

Summit is about unplugging and connecting—which happens over meditation sessions, impromptu dance parties, and wilderness survival lessons—but according to its founders, its long-term impact is in the entrepreneurial support that stems from it. “When you put ideas out to the Summit community, you tend to get enhanced versions of your ideas back in return,” Schwartz says. “I tend to find that if you’re only surrounded by the people in your industry, you get tunnel vision.”

Leaders in art, design, music, tech, and nonprofits—including Ace Hotel Group

co-founder Alex Calderwood (see page 152), street artist JR, and NAACP president Benjamin Todd Jealous—were among Summit’s guests this summer. (Full disclosure: Surface Media CEO Marc Lotenberg has attended three of the conferences.) That range, according to two-time attendee Ivy Ross, who is Art.com’s chief marketing officer, reflects the founders’ ability to gauge the group’s multifaceted interests. “Sometimes you go to a hotel for a conference, and it’s a very different experience from the real world,” she says. “But here they try to take what’s important to the group—art, music, science—and create an experience out of that. It’s a mini fractal of society.”

Three of this year’s Summit Series attendees share their current projects—and talk about how Summit fits into their life and work.

Ivy Ross

“My entire life, I’ve been a bit of a rebel in big companies,” says Ivy Ross, whose background includes stints at a number of retail giants, including Calvin Klein, Coach, and Swatch. After starting her career as a metalsmith and jewelry designer—her work has been shown at 10 museums, including London’s Victoria and Albert Museum and New York’s Cooper-Hewitt—Ross switched to the corporate track. She rose through the ranks, taking on a number of prestigious roles, including one as the head of design and product development for toy giant Mattel’s girls division, followed by another as the executive vice president of marketing at Gap. She has since returned to her artistic roots as the chief marketing officer of Art.com. “We sell not the original art, but the art image, for maybe \$150 instead of \$5,000,” says Ross, 58. “We’re trying to democratize art to allow anyone to have an image that resonates with them.” Through programs like Art Sparks Learning, Art.com’s year-old philanthropic venture, the company brings art to public schools by letting students and teachers choose prints for their classrooms and providing art supplies for children to make their own works. At Summit this year, Ross held “office hours” in the woods to discuss fellow guests’ ideas in 10-minute meetings. The natural setting, to Ross, is one of Summit’s best selling points: “I think nature is the most creative place, because the universe is the best designer.”



Neil Blumenthal

Warby Parker, the eyewear company founded by Neil Blumenthal, David Gilboa, Andrew Hunt, and Jeffrey Raider in 2010 has helped make thick-rimmed frames cool again (and affordable, at an average price of \$95). The brand started out as what felt like a wild idea dreamed up by four Wharton students, but in the three years since its launch, it has grown to be, as Blumenthal puts it, “part of the cultural zeitgeist.” For every pair of glasses sold, a monetary donation goes to one of Warby’s partnering nonprofits, which then distributes glasses. “We thought that it was a powerful idea, and a transformative idea,” he says. “But never in a million years would we have imagined that in three years we would have 300 employees and have provided more than 500,000 pairs of glasses to people in need.” In short, Blumenthal says: “It’s been a crazy ride.” Since April, Warby has opened up four new brick-and-mortar shops—two in New York, one in L.A., and one in Boston—and is planning to launch more. In September, Mickey Drexler, the retail maven who heads J.Crew, joined the board of directors—a sign that Warby is here to stay. The 33-year-old Blumenthal, who worked for the nonprofit Vision Spring before co-founding Warby, has used his Summit connections to create new outlets for the brand: He collaborated with fellow attendee Adam Braun, the founder of Pencils for Promise, on a special line of glasses—the proceeds of which went to fund a school in Ghana.



Rameet Chawla

By analyzing metrics to anticipate mobile trends, Rameet Chawla and Fueled, the New York-based company he founded in 2011, build apps for companies that will stay relevant in the ever-changing technological landscape. But Chawla, 30, hopes Fueled will do more than just make good apps for its clients, which have included HBO, Uniqlo, and Procter & Gamble. “Ideally, our products will in some way change the way people use technology for the better,” Chawla says, “and as a result might change the way they use dated pieces of technology—anything you could define as traditional.” The company started out as a development-based shop under a different name, but added mobile design when it became Fueled. “Our design team now is coming close to being considered one of the top in the world,” Chawla says. “It’s awesome to get that kind of traction.” Part of the company’s success is due to Summit (of which Chawla is a founding member): Fueled has secured more than a million dollars in design-and-development consulting for fellow Summit attendees. Summit’s influence on Chawla’s endeavors has extended to social-good projects. After leaving his first conference, he decided to help develop a nonprofit called Charity Swear Box that checks users’ Twitter feeds for swear words and encourages them to donate a dollar per curse to charity. In June, Fueled officially opened a collective workspace in Manhattan’s SoHo neighborhood that it shares with 25 other startups.

