



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 144: PHILLIP SUN – CHANGING THE FACE OF HOLLYWOOD

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. If you like television and movies, you're familiar with Michael B. Jordan, Donald Glover, Taraji P. Henson, and Idris Elba. They're among the biggest actors in the business. They're also people of color who are represented by a new management firm called M88, an organization that represents actors, directors, writers, and producers of color and focuses on inclusive storytelling. One of the two men who created M88 is Phillip Sun, a William & Mary graduate, who, after earning his bachelor's degree in international relations, went to Los Angeles. He started as a gofer on a movie set, then got a job in the mailroom at the William Morris Agency, where he later became a talent agent and eventually the company's first Asian-American male partner. Now he's changing the face of Hollywood by approaching diversity, inclusion, culture, and storytelling in a new way. He joins us today to discuss his journey from William & Mary student to popular culture influencer. Here's our conversation with Phillip Sun of M88.

Ken White

Phillip, it's great to see you. Thanks for sharing your time with us today. How are you?

Phillip Sun

I'm doing well. Thanks for having me. This is a this full circle for me to come back to a William & Mary podcast. So I

Ken White

No doubt. That's great. Thank you. Yeah. We're recording in December. You and I were just talking about the weather in Los Angeles versus the weather in Williamsburg. So a little bit different. Of course.

Phillip Sun

About 40 degrees different.

Ken White

Yeah.

Phillip Sun

Yeah, a little bit.

Ken White

So what an interesting story. You're this international relations major from William & Mary. And so many I.R. majors go up to Washington, D.C., Capitol Hill and make their mark. You turned left and ended up on the West Coast in the entertainment industry. How did what was the first step? What was that first job you had that got you on that path?

Phillip Sun

It is a sharp left. The plan was to go to D.C. Senator Dick Lugar was a fraternity brother. So a lot of the Betas had opportunities to go up to D.C. just through our education, but also connections. So the trip to California was really just to scratch an itch that I had about L.A. It always been intrigued by celebrity and film and television content. So when I got the chance to work as a P.A., which is a production assistant on my brother's film that he was co-financing, I just jumped at the opportunity. And of course, it was for my brother, so I worked for free, but I learned the ins and outs of being on set, and as Hollywood works, it's just I met the star of the film, Parker Posey, who's a wonderful actress. The Christopher Guest movies were was her claim to fame. But I worked for her. I was a P.A., and then I got her coffee order, and then I got her the same coffee order the next day. I remembered her order, and she was like, Oh, my God, you remembered like, I can't believe I want you to be my assistant. Like, it's a coffee order. Like I went to William & Mary. I promise you; I'm educated. It's not that hard. But then I was I became I, I got promoted and became her assistant. And then as it kind of works in this world, it's just it's who you meet and then who they know. So before I was going to head home, she asked me to work for Kerry Barden, who was in casting then. So I worked for him. He asked me to work for Hans Canosa, who was a director and was a director's assistant. Then I went back to casting for Kerry Barden. And I got to meet Spielberg in that sense or in that in that job. And then before I left to head back, they all agreed that I should try the agencies because it's kind of like lobbying, right? It's like

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Phillip Sun

You gotta be good at salesmanship. And the skill set is very similar, actually. So why not? I'm here. Right. So I interviewed at all the mailroom positions, luckily I got offers from all of

them and then my Chinese immigrant family, my parents wouldn't let me stay unless they could read about the institution. So I ended up at William Morris Agency, which is the most historic agency of all of them because they could read about the mailroom and people who had become

Ken White

Sure.

Phillip Sun

successful from it and all the things that that Chinese parents need. And also, well, my brother and I sold it as the Harvard of agencies. So Harvard has a certain ring to it. And my brother went there, so I landed there and then I started to move my way up from the mailroom.

Ken White

So what was it early on in your career that made you say, this is where I'm supposed to be? This really lights my fire.

Phillip Sun

Not much. I think it was more of this is so interesting and different compared to Virginia. And I wasn't economically able to travel abroad and enjoy, you know, traveling after college. I had to get to work. So this was an experience for me. It was just like, oh, let's see how far I can take it. Oh, definitely a little bit of the Southern kind of competitiveness. Frat boy competitiveness came out, and it was like, look, I'm going to swing for the fences here and see what a southern Virginia kid can do here. And then also the William & Mary kind of background. It's just like we get to learn so many different things at a liberal arts school, like, you kind of just have to move and learn quickly, which you were taught to do at the college. So it kind of worked in my favor.

Ken White

So you were an agent. What did that entail? What kind of work was that?

Phillip Sun

Yeah, I was an agent after I trained for like three years. So the work of an agent is purely to represent your client and build out their brand. Right. So reading scripts, putting together lists of directors, producers, people that they should be working with, strategizing alongside them and senior agents about how do you take someone from T.V. show or small movie and build them to the grand stage, if you will. So that is the job in a nutshell, like a very, very, like quick overview. You know, that job evolved also into what I like to say is like a CEO position. Right? You get to be the CEO of a lot of businesses. That resonated

with me more because I was still learning the arts very quickly. I didn't grow up watching movies and television. Like the kids in L.A. did. We were raised differently. And we at the college, you didn't really learn about fine arts and such unless you took classes on it. So kind of just I knew I could learn business because of the classes I had taken at the college. Right. So I was like, okay, this is economics. This is these are these things. That's how I'm divvying it up in my head. But the CEO position made more sense to me because it was like, okay, cool. So you get to partner with x movie star. How are you going to build the business? It's not just arts. It's obviously the fuel. But like, there's how do you brand them? How do you get into Silicon Valley? How do you get into investments? How do you get in like kind of bringing it back to my strength and skill set? But that's kind of how my job has evolved.

Ken White

And then the job to M88. How did it happen? How did you get there?

Phillip Sun

That was a lot. I mean, it was, you know, I loved the agency that I was working at. But I think with the birth of my son, which was last December, which is crazy, it's almost been a year and then COVID where everything just stopped. Like I was, I could take a second to breathe, and no business was happening. Right, like the world shut down.

Ken White

Yes.

Phillip Sun

And I think for the first time in 15 years, the perspective of being a new father, plus the perspective of given to me of through time to think right. And then the unfortunate tragedy of George Floyd, kind of what I had built my career on, which is fighting for people of color, voices of color, voices from underrepresented communities. It just kind of was a calling of I think I've done everything I can do at the Agency for Diversity and Inclusion, meaning that no matter what I did there, you know, diversity would be a program or an afterthought or a reaction. It was just a constant push. Right, because you're kind of going up against the grain of any corporation. It's like not built on diversity and inclusion. It's just not anything built. Less or more than five years ago, probably isn't built on it.

Ken White

Right.

Phillip Sun

So wanted to take my skillset and build a management firm, a representation firm. Partner up with my mentor, Charles King, who had started Macro, which is a production company studio that pushes out multicultural content as well, start the representation arm and like he had started a smaller version of it, but kind of supercharge it if you will and push out the mission of making sure that the world sees the content of the global majority told by the global majority and making sure that the representation reflects what they want out of the industry. And the opportunity just seemed to be perfect. And quite frankly, because of the Zoom world, a part of the reason I was staying at the agency is like I have so many good friends there, but like when you don't see them day to day, right, the emotional connection of people dissipates. And so you just start making decisions based on business.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Phillip Sun of M88 in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The post-COVID world will require new skills and new approaches. Those skills and approaches are taught in the William & Mary MBA program. We offer four different formats, including the full-time, the evening, the online, and the executive, all taught by our top-ranked MBA faculty. The William & Mary MBA will prepare you to succeed in our new world. Check out the MBA programs at William & Mary today. Now back to our conversation with Phillip Sun of M88.

Ken White

What was the reaction of folks in the industry, whether it's studios, production houses, actors, writers, what was the reaction?

Phillip Sun

I think we were received very well. I think there is a strong appetite for the systems that have been established to change. I think it's just a unique opportunity where minorities in representation aren't really a thing until recently. Right. Like our parents or our immigrant parents were like, go be a doctor, go be an attorney, go be something stable. That can give you a good, stable economic life and minimal risk. Arts is not that. Right. So but there is more minorities are like, okay, there is a business in the arts. Right. There is something that we can find there. And I think my generation is the first generation where you see more people coming through. And I was just oddly situated to be senior enough and blessed enough to have a client base that was strong enough to start this venture with Charles. And it was received so well because I think two-fold one. The minority community obviously is cheering for it, right? They want something fresh. They want a minority-owned business minority-led business to be successful because it represents them. Right. It gave them kind of like a new home if you will. I think the again, the industry, the studios, the production companies, which are predominantly led by older white men, some of them

want help and need help and need kind of like a go-to right. Like so, it's kind of simplifying it for people. Like you can come here like, you know the client, you know me, you know Charles, you know the people there. And then there are some people who I'm sure are cheering for it in publicly and not cheering for from behind because it's, you know, it's a tricky subject matter.

Ken White

Yeah.

Phillip Sun

But overall received very well.

Ken White

I mean, you're influencing popular culture. I mean, that's how a lot of people learn about diversity.

Phillip Sun

My clients are influencing popular culture. I am just trying to help.

Ken White

You're assisting them. That's really that's really something. I mean, that's an influence on people that can really touch everyone. Have you thought much about that?

Phillip Sun

I did. I did. When I was coming up about what the opportunity of a representative with a cause could be. Right. Because it's very much like politics, right. When you're lobbying or when you're in D.C., you're pushing for policy. We all know through government and watching television and just knowing how government works, it takes forever to get something through because of the politics. You're actually much more able to send a message in Hollywood. Right, because a lot of the a lot of my clients, everything that they do has some sort of social relevance or message. And they use their strength of their brand to push things forward. Policy forward right. But you're in a very liberal town here. Right. So they're not as much politics to get in the way of it. Right. It's just about can you are you lucky enough to work with the people that have like minded mission aligned with you, and can we influence the world that way? So, again, I thought about it in the way that, like, should I be in D.C. should be here, like, what should I be doing? It's the same skill set, but there's power in both coasts if you will. And that's I just chose my coast.

Ken White

To outsiders, to fans, you know, people who love movies and television and the arts. This sounds extremely innovative. Is it in your field what you're doing? I mean, it's different for sure.

Phillip Sun

I think it's it's different. Well, look, we're the first, I believe we're the first minority black-owned minority-led representation firm. There's certainly no other representation firm led by people that look like us. And our though we're small, we're mighty so far, and we're growing intentionally. But our manager and assistant base is one hundred percent women, people of color. Our client base is majority women, people of color. It will remain so. I think that's the uniqueness in the innovativeness. Right. You're giving a traditional system of representation a new look. And the look is kind of the look of the new global majority. And look, it's we all know about institutions, right. It's like William & Mary. When the culture is set early on, you know what it's going to grow with the business, the college, wherever. We're trying to set the culture early on in the mission early on so that it grows and thrives but will always be the center point. And that's the innovative, I guess, avenue.

Ken White

Yeah. There was something I read in the L.A. Times; one of the actors said that M88 produces great work that has cultural integrity.

Phillip Sun

We try to.

Ken White

What does that mean to you? Yeah.

Phillip Sun

Well, our sister company Macro is actually the one who produces. Right. So they are exactly that. Whether it's fences, whether it's sorry to bother you, whether they are, they're tapped into the culture, and they are very hyper-vigilant about making sure that the stories told are excellent and told by the storytellers that are meant to tell the stories. M88s clients, they certainly are of the same ilk. M88 is a representation firm. Like this is just the industry we watch, right. We we're representatives our clients can produce in our sister company macro produces. But we always everyone knows the rule is like as a person of color. In any industry, you feel like you have to be that much more excellent, right? You have to be that much more perfect. I think we take that challenge on the clients, the representation firm, and also macro. We embrace it, and we rise to the level of it. Knock on wood. We'll continue to do so. But yeah, I take that as a compliment and an

expectation. I just want to make sure that the alumni and also the students at William & Mary know that this is an opportunity and like people built like us and from a background, like the students, we need you out here, all right? Like if you ever think that this is not available to you, that's wrong. Cord Jefferson and I are of the same class. Cord just won an Emmy. I just started a management firm. We're both from William & Mary. So it's like it's there's something about the school and how we're taught that works. So certainly, if we can send the message to the students that we're open for the college's business on this side, just reach out to me.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Phillip Sun of M88, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. Businesses and organizations are seeking professionals to lead in the post-COVID world professionals who think strategically, communicate effectively, and manage ambiguity. You'll learn those skills and much more in the William & Mary MBA program offered in four formats the full-time, the evening, the online, and the executive MBA. Check us out online to learn more. Finally, we'd like to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Phillip Sun, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.