

MAN ON FIRE PRESENTS  
**THE COMBUSTION  
CHRONICLES**

**EPISODE EIGHTEEN  
UPSTREAM INTERVENTION**

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**Shawn:** Welcome to "The Combustion Chronicles" podcast, where bold leaders combined with big ideas to create game-changing disruption. I'm Shawn Nason, founder of Man on Fire, and your host for "The Combustion Chronicles." Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future. We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us. I'm here with my co-host Michael Harper.

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**Shawn:** On this episode, we're speaking with Margaret Laws, President and Chief Executive Officer of HopeLab. Margaret leads a multidisciplinary team with expertise in healthcare, academic research, and design to create science-based technologies to improve the health and well-being of teens and young adults. When not traveling in the U.S., exploring healthcare innovation, Margaret enjoys international adventures, spending time in nature, and discovering great food, and arts, and culture. We are so excited and welcome you, Margaret, to the podcast today.

**Margaret:** Thanks for having me, Shawn. I'm excited to be here.

**Shawn:** Yeah. Margaret, I have to tell you, really, really, our whole team's really excited to have this conversation with you. And, you know, as you read through your bio, such incredible things and wonderful things. I met you several years ago in a meeting and just had such a connection for your passion, and love for people, and for changing, and disrupting healthcare in such a powerful way, and really an inspiration, as I watch what your work at HopeLab does to really transform healthcare. And we're gonna dig into some of that on this episode. But, you know, Margaret, HopeLab is described as a social innovation lab that creates behavior change technology to help teens and young adults live happier and healthier lives. Can you talk us through the creation of HopeLab and how you identify teens and young adults as your focus?

[00:02:10]

**Margaret:** Absolutely. So, HopeLab's creation story goes way back to around 2000. Pam Omidyar, wife of eBay founder, Pierre Omidyar, as one of the things, the many things that the Omidyar's, who are really incredible, mission-focused people and philanthropists, wanted to put out in the world. Pam had been working in a lab and one of the problems that was really vexing that she had come across was that young cancer patients, young people going through cancer treatment were not taking all their medications, their chemo or their antibiotic drugs. And as a result, were having poor outcomes. And so, she got really interested... She was also a gamer, in as a gamer. And she was really interested in how a video game, how that technology might be applied to helping young people adhere with this treatment regimen and as a result have better health outcomes.

And so HopeLab was actually started to build the video game "Re-Mission," to figure out a way to kind of tap into the psychology of young people going through cancer treatment, and to help navigate them, and steer them through a game experience to taking these drugs and having better health outcomes. So that was the founding story of HopeLab. After "Re-Mission," HopeLab worked on a product called Zamzee, which was focused on improving and increasing physical activity to get at diabetes and obesity among young people. And then I came on the scene in 2015. And since then, we've been working in a number of different areas. I'll pause and we can talk about the ones that you're most interested in.

But we decided that we really wanted to focus on teens and young adults. We had been focused a little bit more broadly on kids, on young people. Because the period of teen and young adulthood is such an interesting one, from a developmental perspective, from development of identity, from sort of making this transition from childhood into adulthood. And we just felt that for a couple reasons, one, from a science perspective, really understanding teens and young adults is a tall order in itself. And we felt like that was an important place for us to focus our research and science team. And then number two, you know, from a tech perspective, HopeLab has always been a digital tech organization. This is a period of time where there are such interesting applications of technology and every single person in the teen young adult world and teen young adult audience is using tech. So our focus now is on developing, co-creating with teens and young adults, digital technologies, apps, bots, games that can help young people be healthier and thrive, be healthier, happier, and to do that in a way that brings in science and really validate the solutions and the approaches that we're taking.

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**Shawn:** Wow. Again, just blown away. We have a team member who actually used "Re-Mission" and "Re-Mission 2" in some of their work, and had no idea until recently that that was HopeLab, and how excited they are to be having you on here, and the HopeLab team on here, and the focus that you guys have got too. So, you describe your work as a process of learning and co-creation. Can you talk the audience through what that process looks like to you?

**Margaret:** You know, a couple of things. One, we believe particularly working with a teen young adult audience, if anybody out there knows a teen or young adult, I imagine most of you do or you have some in your lives, that we really need to co-create with young people, if we're gonna build things or work on things that young people are gonna use. That as people who are not teens and young adults mostly, and we've got a couple in the office, but as most of us are not at that stage of our life anymore, our ability to understand and develop things is greatly enhanced by doing it side by side with young people.

So, the way I would describe the process at a high level is that we have a team of behavioral scientists, our research team, we have a team of designers, human-centered designers, our design team, and we have a team of what we call strategy, but it's sort of tech product management folks. And our process is of those three teams, learning and iterating together. So the designers are out in the field working and often with other members of the team are out in

the field, side by side with young people, understanding unmet needs, understanding what excites them, understanding what their challenges are. The researchers are in the background, really looking deeply into where are their evidence-based practices that have been used successfully for challenges like this before?

And the strategy team, the tech product team is really thinking from the very beginning, "Gosh, let's assume this is incredibly successful, how do we get it out to as many young people as possible? How are we thinking about distribution and business models and that whole piece of it?" And our teams work in an iterative process, both those three teams with one another with each other at HopeLab, and then all of those teams with young people. And so, the learning along the way happens in a series of cycles, wherein some ways, we're kind of mashing up research with design, design with distribution, and thinking about the market. And in each of those cycles, we have a discovery phase, a build and test phase, and then a distribute phase. We're taking the learnings from teams being out in the field and working with young people back into development of prototypes, testing of prototypes. And ultimately, for all the projects that we do or products that we create, doing a very rigorous, often randomized controlled trial test to make sure that we're actually hitting the impact targets that we set out on the health and well-being metric side.

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**Michael:** That's what gets me most excited, Margaret, about just paying attention to the work that y'all do is that, you know, you're very clear, that you're using science-based technologies. And I think when a normal person hears that, they think, tech world, they think scientific method, they think data, data, data, data, data, right? And yet, y'all infuse this mindset of qualitative research and listening in ways that aren't normal, I would think for people who claim to be science-based. Do you find that to be true? How do you navigate all that?

**Margaret:** It's a great question. And it's a great point. Since we're in the time of COVID now as we're recording this, I'm gonna use a little analogy of something we talked about last week, which is, you know, if you think about all the projections we're doing about how COVID is gonna play out, and what the epidemiology is, and how the disease presents itself, that's all one piece of it. And we're trying to figure that out now. But there's a whole other piece of it that's really, really important, which is human behavior. How are we...? We don't know how people are going to adapt and adjust their lives because of the things they feel about this, not necessarily because of what we see in the kind of empirical data.

And so, when I think about what we're doing and all the things we're doing in HopeLab, we've got the facts, right? We've got the facts about this particular intervention has been shown in the past to be helpful in reducing anxiety. But we also really need to understand how do people, young people in our case, feel about this issue in their lives, whether it's loneliness and depression or whether it's going through cancer treatment? I will give a little example because I think it's a great one from "Re-Mission," which was that we thought about why young people

weren't taking their medications. And it wasn't that there weren't doctors telling them they needed to do it and that their parents weren't telling them they needed to do it.

But if you think about that experience of being a young person with cancer, if your drugs or your medication are the thing that reminds you about this thing you don't want to be happening in your life, you might have an aversion to them. And so, the experience that we needed to create had to take that into account and had to think about how to help young people enlist the drug as their agent, and their ally, and their superpower, rather than just clinically understanding, "If I take this, my body will have a better chance of winning this fight." And I think that that emotional piece of it, that cognitive piece of it, and the way those things fit together can be a really important part of it. And so that's where a lot of, you know, what we call the design work in the field brings to the experience is you hit somebody with a factor or with a piece of data, but then you also have to understand how do they feel? And how is how they feel going to result in different ways that they might behave?

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**Michael:** Absolutely. The next step for me is knowing that you have to put together a multi-disciplinary team, right, to make this happen. And is it always, like, rosy and sunshine or is it...?

**Margaret:** As soon as you asked that question, I started thinking about what an adjustment that is for folks. And so, one of the things we've talked about a lot and we've had this team setup since, you know, probably 2016. We constructed it when I came in 2015. And one of the things that people have had to learn how to do is adjust to and respect the background, and training, and process of the different disciplines. And Chris can talk much more about this when you talk to him. But, you know, it's wonderful. This is the combustion chronicle. So, we're combusting. You know, we're putting researchers in with designers and they often work on different timelines, they use different approaches.

And so, the first experience people from those very different disciplines have with each other can be a little rocky and can be frustrating for everybody. You're going too slow, you're going too fast. You're not looking at this thing that's important. You're not looking at this thing that's important. But what's beautiful about the process and the way that the teams have evolved is to see what the different disciplines can learn from each other and how the sum is definitely greater than the sum of the parts because people are bringing nuances in from different disciplines that can really help deepen the understanding of everybody on the team.

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**Shawn:** Yeah, Margaret. Had a conversation with one of our team members yesterday, and we've been talking within, you know, our organizations around mindsets. And we've been identifying this as radical collaboration. But one of the team members challenged me yesterday, and this really is hitting into that space that what you've actually created in your environment with these three teams is this whole new concept we're calling radical relationships, right? Like, there has to be relationships within those teams, within those people,

that can probably get uncomfortable at times. Right? And as a leader of the organization, you hear about it, right? And you have to go, "Do we manage that? Do we keep that going or do we switch it right?" And what I'm hearing from you, as the leader of HopeLab, is that you have to manage it and you have to just work through that process with each team. Which leads into this whole question. And then we'll dive into your newest project, which honestly, just excites me to no end. But a question around where do you see creative disruption fitting in to the new norm, you know, after this epidemic? You know, what does creative disruption look like for you at HopeLab?

**Margaret:** That's a really great question. And I kind of feel like we're all at the moment right now, I suspect you guys are as well, where we can actually start thinking about this. We're sort of thinking about the next normal. We did a sprint, which I'm about to talk about with Nod. We've done some rapid kind of relearning of how we work together. And I think even, you know, the seeds of all of this are starting to come. I was looking at a couple of messages today where, you know, we're having to think about new ways to collaborate. And I think about the creative disruption that comes in through that, just through thinking about how are people learning? What are they yearning for? How are we connecting with young people? How are we doing our work? And how do we actually...? What's beautiful about what's going on is that it's creating an experiment. And we're a very experimental organization that would have been extremely hard to engineer. Like, so many of the experiments that are going on in the world right now are things that we used to say, "Gosh, you know, if you could suspend reality and try this, it would be so interesting to see what we'd learn." But you couldn't.

And I think now we're in a place where that's happened and where we're having to think about...you know, I think about creative disruption in terms of how are young people recreating creativity and what are they making? And what are they thinking about? And how are they adapting? How are the sort of organisms adapting? And then how do we think about our own... You know, we just got this great process that I just described to you and it's all humming along well, and now we've got to disrupted it. I actually love the disruption process, and creativity, and sort of being forced to rethink things, but I think that's gonna be a really big theme to use this as an opportunity to both learn from young people about how they're being creative and creating disruption in all of the tools, and the tools they use, the things they watch, the things they create, and how do we filter that into the work that we do? And learn really fast, and really rapidly, and really iteratively.

[00:16:29]

**Shawn:** Well, that leads us into this amazing, your new product, your new launch that the team did. And really when I saw it and it really tapped a lot of emotion within me because it's taken kind of three worlds of ours, in particular, that we have kind of leaned into around mission and purpose. That in this last October, we started a work around truth-tellers for men that deal with loneliness. We work with, I've talked to you about Cure 4 The Kids in Las Vegas, and these worlds just colliding in such a powerful way. And then in the middle of this epidemic, how do you make all this pandemic? How do you make all this happen, right? So, I really wanna dig into

why HopeLab launched this next thing and how you're looking at loneliness now with college students, but even with young adults. And I see this tool going in so many different ways. So, I'm gonna actually turn it over to you to let you kind of introduce it to the group, and talk about it, and how this was birthed.

[00:17:38]

**Margaret:** Sure. So, we started working on this... The projects we do at HopeLab, the large ones, we do small experimental quick turnaround things, but the bigger ones we do are generally two to three-year-long projects. And so, this one started a few years ago and it started out of a really big question, which is... And we did, you know, kind of a landscape analysis and a systems analysis of what accounts for the current state of mental well-being of young people in the U.S.? Which as you know, has had some pretty precipitous drops. We've seen increases in depression, increases in anxiety that are really significant over the past decade or two. And what we're seeing now, depending on which survey you look at, is young people reporting loneliness levels between 64% and 79%. And so, they're high numbers. And loneliness kept emerging. It emerged in this system but in a number of different places.

And what we decided to do at HopeLab was because loneliness really is upstream of depression, anxiety, suicide, things that are the outcomes that we'd like to see change. We decided we would try to work on an upstream intervention and see if we could develop an intervention for loneliness that if it was successful, could result in decreased levels of anxiety, depression, and ultimately, hopefully, even suicide. And so, we got to work on that. And we developed what we had hoped I'd call an impact pathway, where we looked at the relationship between loneliness and these other mental health factors, depression, anxiety, suicide. And we began to look at what evidence-based practices had been used to mitigate those. And we put together an intervention, and it takes the form of an app, and it's called Nod.

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And by the way, this is a very important part of the story. We teamed up with a partner called Grit Digital Health, a Denver-based company that has a platform for college students that helps them access resources and one category is in health and mental health. And so, we got together with Grit Digital Health and began to build and test this intervention, which is now an app we call Nod. And we put it through, developed it, very fun. Hopefully, everyone will get to take a look at it. You can download it in the Apple iOS Store and Google Play Store just under Nod, N-O-D. But what it does is it combines a series of challenges, social connection challenges. The root of helping people combat loneliness is helping them create supportive social connections in their lives. So it's a series of challenges to get people together to practice skills of social connection and then a series of reflections which brings in positive psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and a bunch of those tools in a really engaging, fun, visually interesting way.

We worked with more than 100 young people, college students in the design and testing. And then we ran a randomized control trial on the University of Oregon campus last fall with 200

first-year students. We decided to target it initially at students entering college, recognizing that this is a really important point of inflection. It's a place where there's both a lot of high expectations about your social life and a challenge because you've moved away from home, you need to make new friends. So, we built it and our plan was to launch it on a number of college campuses this coming fall, and then COVID hit. And we quickly made a decision as a team, HopeLab and Grit got together and decided that we needed to release it, given the challenge that all of these young people, college students, but high school students as well were facing being home and feeling disconnected from their friends and their social lives, and feeling very lonely.

And, you know, I look at every week at the Crisis Text Line data, and it really is striking to see the levels of loneliness and isolation that people in the kind of high school, college-age student populations are facing, even relative to the rest of us. It's been a big disruption in their lives. So, we launched Nod. We did a really sprinty sprint in about 2 weeks, 10 days, 14 days. We had to make some changes to it so that it would be completely contextually-relevant for a virtual life at home, and then get it ready to go direct to consumer through the App Store and the Google Play Store, and got it launched. And have been really working with organizations, companies, college campuses around the country, to high school student support organizations as well to get the word out there and to get young people downloading it and using it.

[00:22:31]

**Michael:** How do you know when an initiative like this and an opportunity like this is ready to launch? And I think, for me, it goes back to the whole science data versus move quick, more tension there. Right? Who decides that? How does that work?

**Margaret:** Yeah. Well, actually, I'm glad you asked that question because that was one of the things that we had to ask ourselves. We had done this... As we talked about earlier, we always do rigorous clinical scientific trials. And so, we had done this randomized control trial and we were analyzing the data, and analyzing it as fast as we could when this came out. And we had to think about a couple of things. One, did we know enough to know that this tool could be really helpful? And then did we know enough to know that it was not gonna likely harm anybody, right? And so, you have to make a decision about that, which we had to do. And then what we had learned, which was really exciting news for us, is that the tool in the first trial that we did, had shown real promise in buffering college students, first-year college students who came in more highly-susceptible to loneliness, and depressive symptoms, from loneliness and depressive symptoms.

So, we had some good directional indication that it could be helpful, particularly to the target audience we were most concerned about, which was young people who are more predisposed to loneliness and depressive symptoms. So, we had to make a judgment call. And so, we got together and talked to a number of experts. You know, we have a really fantastic advisory group at HopeLab that includes a lot of academics and researchers who work in these fields, who work in adolescent young adult health, who work in these areas of mental and emotional

well-being. So, we tapped into that group. We tapped into our own internal expertise. And we made a decision that we thought the potential benefit of it, even though, you know, it's a little sooner than we had been ready to release it, could be really strong during this time. And we were just really, you know, excited and proud as a team to be able to get it out there.

**Michael:** And probably a little nervous too, right? Like, once you got into the world?

**Margaret:** It is. Yeah. And I think, you know, in some ways, it was good in the spirit of flexibility and experimentation, and all the things we talked about earlier. It was a good test for us as a team and as a partnership with Grit to see if we could really pull together and get this done. And the team did an incredible job. And it was a real testament to the things we were talking about earlier, which is different disciplines working together effectively.

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**Michael:** So, all these big ideas, if you can just step back because Nod is a perfect example of the big ideas that you have. And I'm sure you've lived through a lot of learnings with your time at HopeLab. If you could dial back to when you first started there at HopeLab, what advice would you give yourself? This Journey is so fascinating to me working through all of this.

**Margaret:** Yeah. I think the advice I would give myself and probably, you know, some things that we might have accelerated were hire really fantastic people to lead these teams and people who can absolutely bring a collaboration mindset, and a growth mindset, and a problem-solving mindset. So, to make sure that those things are in place, I think to have really wonderful advisors in these different disciplines to kind of build a community around us that can both bolster our work and bring in new perspectives. And those were things that I did but, you know, again, if I could have looked back and given myself the advice and thought about how do you just start? I think the other piece, which was really interesting from an innovation perspective is we had an idea. And HopeLab's prior work had given lots of interesting kind of windows into how we might put all these things together. And what I've learned in my career and the advice I'd give my younger self is, sometimes you just have to start.

And we started and you have to learn by innovating and learn by trying. And so, we started with a project in the beginning of 2016 with the nurse family partnership, a project working with high-risk young moms. And we actually didn't have all the pieces in place, but we built it as we went along. And I think it really helped us be creative and iterative, and not wait until we had everything perfect before we got started. And I think that's, again, one of the most important lessons for anybody in an innovation function is to recognize that you've gotta put some stakes in the ground and you've gotta start learning. And if you wait till things are perfect, the moment will often have passed you by. And that means you'll get some things wrong. And hopefully, those things you get wrong, you can learn from and build something.

**Shawn:** And I'm sure it's been really easy too, right, Margaret?

**Margaret:** Simple. Yeah, the easy part. So, the one other piece I would add, which is really the hardest part is, and you guys know this from your work, you can't underestimate the challenge of distribution and adoption. And I think that often we get caught up in the, you know, innovation world and sort of the creation, and we're gonna be really creative, and we're gonna make this amazing thing. And you have to be thinking from the very beginning about distribution. And that's often a conversation about partners and about finding the partners. And we're always looking for them. So I'll put the word out now, finding the partners that have broad reach to young people and are really passionate about and interested in getting innovative solutions out to them to help with things like mental well-being, that for us to be successful as an innovation lab, we also have to be successful in cultivating those partnerships, and really bringing something we hope is special and unique to those partners, so that we can benefit from the reach that they have to young people. And they can benefit hopefully, from the innovation and the perspective, and the solutions that we bring.

**Shawn:** Wow. What excites me more is when we have you back on to talk about your next project even too, right? The things that you guys are tackling, just blow my mind. And this particular one, you know, when you talked about 64% to 79% of young adults dealing with loneliness. And, you know, I did some studying and that 70% - 75% of men deal with loneliness. There seems to be this theme around how do we deal with loneliness as a culture? And how do we connect and be real again? And so appreciate what you guys have done with young adults. And so how we kind of closeout these episodes, Margaret, is we have three questions that we randomly pick called the combustion questions that Michael is gonna jump into with you here. And just when he finishes, I'll close up here and we'll let you go. So, Michael, the combustion questions for Margaret.

**Michael:** There you go.

**Margaret:** I'm ready, Michael.

**Michael:** Margaret, here are your combustion questions. Number one, if you could turn any activity into an Olympic sport, I love the Olympics, what would you have a good chance of winning a gold medal for?

**Margaret:** Oh, wow. That is fascinating. I think I would have a chance in winning a gold medal in making great connections between people, connecting people who might not otherwise find each other who can do amazing work together.

**Michael:** I would love to be on the podium there.

**Shawn:** With her.

**Michael:** Yeah, right. That can be an aspiration. All right, number two. This is an important one, especially in your line of work, Sharpies or Crayola markers?

**Margaret:** I'm just gonna be honest, I wish I could say it was Crayola markers because that feels more colorful and creative, but I'm a Sharpie. I spent some years in my life as a consultant, and now we do a lot of design work on sticky notes, so I'm a Sharpie user.

**Michael:** It's okay. You can admit that.

**Margaret:** I don't have to be embarrassed?

**Michael:** No, no, own it. Own it. All right, final question. What do you think about button-fly jeans?

**Margaret:** Oh, wow, I love that question. So what I think about is that when I was a young person, I remember exactly...I'm trying to remember my first pair of Levi's, but that first pair of Levi's 501s, like, was a seminal moment in my childhood life. It was an incredibly cool thing that you could have. And one of the things about them was that they were button fly. So, for me, when I hear that, it takes me back to sort of the age group that we work with young people and sort of what you're aspiring to, and what you think is cool. And for me, Levi's 501s were cool, and they were the iconic button-front jean. So...

**Shawn:** That's right. Sixth grade, for me, Margaret, I know it to this day, first pair of button-fly jeans.

**Margaret:** Yep, special rite of passage.

**Shawn:** Yeah. Well, awesome. Margaret, again, so excited to have you on here and the work you're doing at HopeLab. I'm excited to have some of your team on in a few episodes. But thank you for today. Thank you for sharing your honesty, your transparency with us, and we look forward to talking to you again, Margaret. Thanks.

**Margaret:** Thanks, really appreciate it. Have a great day

**Shawn:** Yeah

**Margaret:** Bye-bye.

**Shawn:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "The Combustion Chronicles." None of this is possible without you the listener. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, look up Man on Fire on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and at manonfire.co. Give us a shout. Let us know what you think. And please, subscribe, rate, and review if you like what we're doing and if you don't do it anyways. And remember, always stay safe and be well.