

The Human Side of the Company

An Interview with Alan S. Elkin,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Active International

EDITORS' NOTE Alan Elkin co-founded Active International in 1984. Elkin began his career at Kaiser Broadcasting which, under his direction as Senior Vice President of Sales, later became Field Communications and then a subsidiary of Katz Media Group. He has received the Entrepreneur Of The Year™ Award by Ernst & Young and the British American Business Inc. Award in recognition of Active's global accomplishments. Additionally, he received the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award at the Broadcasting and Cable Hall of Fame annual gala. Elkin believes that community involvement is as important as business leadership and through the company's Active Cares program, contributions have been made to over 600 charities since 1997.



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capabilities of a global corporation, Active continues to redefine what's possible and turn possibilities into positive business outcomes. Active drives performance through industry expertise, its Corporate Trade Model and portfolio of companies with a core competency in media, to create and deliver value for leading brands throughout their business lifecycles. With a global team comprised of business innovators, industry leaders, media mavens and finance experts, Active is dedicated to delivering new levels of financial flexibility and custom solutions. An employee-owned company, Active's client success comes first, as well as the betterment of its people and the communities in which they live.

How important is it for leading companies today to be purpose-driven?

It is very important to have a purpose. I've been speaking about purpose for more than 15 years, and that leading corporations such as Active have to be about more than just the bottom line. We need to be able to look at the communities that we serve and have a purpose of driving good and that is what we do.

Will you discuss Active's purpose?

We wish to be a good corporate citizen. It is interesting because we didn't know way back when we created Active Cares that we were

talking about a purpose, but then we started to see the good that it does, and then we saw how engaged our people were, and we realized that this wasn't just a corporate effort, it was a company effort, and by company I mean people, not brick and mortar. We learned through Active Cares that we did have a purpose, and that purpose has always been to try and save lives. This is what happened with our involvement with the Active International Cardiovascular Institute. It was an opportunity to save a number of lives that could not get to a hospital in time. We built the Institute with the best and newest equipment and it has saved lives which is our purpose – saving lives and making life better for people who are less fortunate.

How critical is it to have metrics to track the impact of Active's philanthropic work?

Metrics are important, but you need to also look at the human side. No matter how many metrics we look at, there's a human side to this work as well. The human side is that we want to be able to take care of our people, we want our people to work in an environment that is conducive for them to come back every day, and we want to provide our people with a culture that values purpose. What is the purpose of Active beyond the metrics? That's the question I ask and my people answer that by their contribution of their time. While not everybody sees it the way I see it, the majority of our people do.

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An example is a sad story that happened to one of our employees. I got a phone call from an employee advising me that her son was missing. He was hiking in the mountains in Rockland County and never came home. She asked me if I would put together an e-mail and have our people meet at a particular place to search for him. I said, "Of course I will" and we all agreed that we would put a search together with the police as well as with Active's people. I put an e-mail out and I figured I would get 25 people or so. When I got to the site at 8 o'clock in the morning, I couldn't find a parking space. There were over 150 Active employees there. As the morning went on, there were another 50 and then another 50. Our people went to the office and then they came for the search. Others went straight to the search and then they went to the office later on. That is the nature of the human side of the company. I was so proud of our people. The sad part of the story is that four Active people found him. He had fallen off the cliff and died.

We all went to the church and there was not enough room in the church. There were people outside the church that couldn't get in and they were Active's people. Now, what did the company do? The company engaged the people, told them that they don't need to go to the office, that this is more important than today's work. That's the human side of the company.

Active is a company that continues to evolve. How do you describe the Active of today?

Active keeps on reinventing itself because the market is changing dramatically because of technology. I restructured the company in 2019 to be able to evolve with technology focusing on media and eliminating the other businesses that were non-media related businesses. We needed to better understand the marketplace to be able to pivot to the new marketplace. We are doing that with streaming media, which is part digital and part legacy media which you get through a Wi-Fi connection, an IP address, and you bypass your cable box. That technology is growing tremendously and you're going to have two models out there, a model that has advertising and a model that doesn't have advertising. It is a changing marketplace. I keep telling the company that the only predictable thing that we can count on is change and that we need to embrace that change. Active has to be agile and to be able to pivot.

Do you feel that entrepreneurship can be taught?

People have risk tolerance. I have a greater risk tolerance than other people which is critical to being an entrepreneur. That risk tolerance is the basis of a question that I ask people. Are you prepared to bet the ranch on that idea? Most people say no.

When you're in pain and you're walking through the desert, you have blisters on your feet and you have no more water left, can you go the extra mile? Some people can, and their risk and pain tolerance is greater than others, and some can't. That doesn't make them bad people. What that could make them is entrepreneurs in a corporate environment, but they're never going to build a business from scratch. It's about how much sacrifice are you prepared to take.

Do you take moments to reflect and appreciate what Active has become or are you always looking ahead?

I am always looking to the future, but great leaders need to be able to live in three dimensions. The first is the past. That past is your history. That past has all the mistakes you've made and all you've learned, and all the things you did well, and all the things that you did not do well. This is how you gain experience.

Second is the present. The present is where you apply all that failure that you experienced, and all the good things you learned, and merge them together in order to execute.

Then you need to live in the future, because the future is there the very next day. You have to apply all those things to get to the very next day and if you do that, life is simple.

Tomorrow, no matter what, I want to be better than yesterday, because yesterday was the past and today is the future. That's how I see it and I have fun with it. ●

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