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# Robbie Kowal of HUSHConcerts: 5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Became a CEO

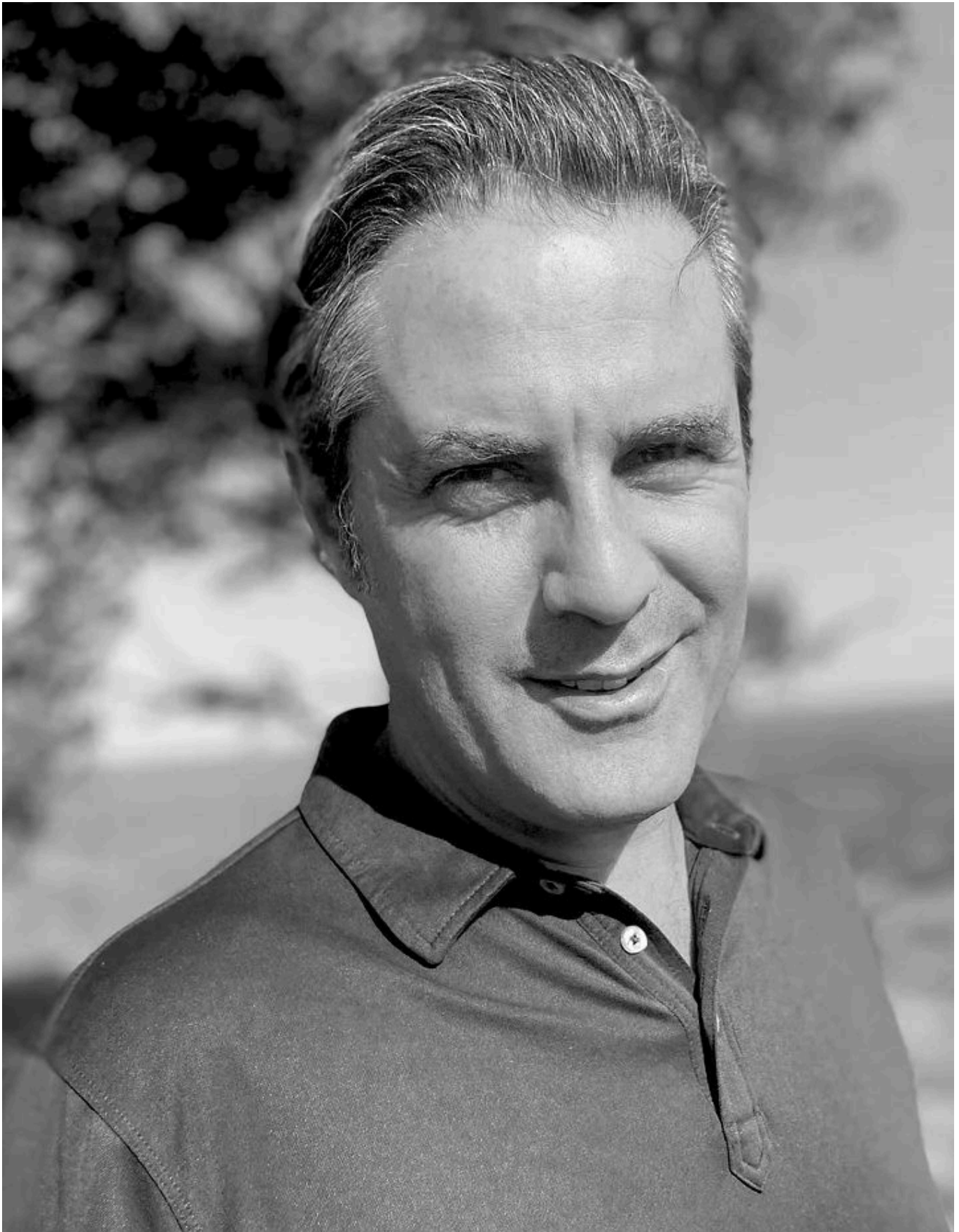
An Interview With Charlie Katz



Charlie Katz · Follow

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...Hire an expert rather than DIYing everything. I made our posters for many years and our walls are covered with my regrets.

**AS** *a part of our series called 'Five Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Became A CEO', we had the pleasure of interviewing Robbie Kowal.*

*HUSHconcerts CEO Robbie Kowal knows the event industry from every perspective. As co-founder and CEO of HUSHconcerts, Kowal leads his company to set the standard for Silent Disco and immersive events. HUSHconcerts uses elite technology, production expertise, and devotion to customers, clients, and community to create experiences like none other. HUSHconcerts has also produced over 1000 concerts with everyone from James Brown and Aretha Franklin to Diplo and Fatboy Slim, while developing seminal, oft-copied festivals like Ghost Ship Halloween, Sea of Dreams, and SF Funk Fest.*

*As a sought-after, popular DJ, Kowal learned how to create immersive experiences at events. He spent over 20 years moonlighting as a touring DJ, playing many of the US's major festivals. This diverse background gave him a unique perspective on the music industry and an understanding of the challenge of building a thriving business in such a creative industry.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit**

## about your “backstory”? What led you to this particular career path?

I started my career in writing and PR. All the while, I was working as a DJ because I love music and it was so much fun to be a part of the crowd, hyping them up and creating a fun energy at an event. This naturally led me to promote my own parties. Eventually, this led me to start promoting concerts, and then to creating and running festivals.

My first silent disco experience was in 2005. While DJing at Bonnaroo, someone asked me to be the guinea pig DJ for their first ever US Silent Disco. Not long after, we started incorporating Silent Disco into our events, and by 2013, it was a major part of our business.

In 2015 we relaunched as HUSHconcerts. In 2018, I took over as CEO from my longtime partner. Since then, the company has grown in revenue and net and is well established as the US leader in wireless headphone entertainment.

**Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?**

The story of our HUSHconcerts growth and culture is so interesting. I took the leadership role from my longtime partner who wanted to step aside and move to a different business. I took the responsibility very seriously and read books, listened to podcasts, and tried to prepare myself in every way for this role. I anticipated changing so much of how we do business, perhaps even recruiting a new team to execute the vision. What’s interesting is how much has *not* changed since I took over. I learned quickly that our dedicated team amassed over the years was the exact group that would walk through fire to fulfill our vision. Throughout the pandemic, we managed to keep everyone

fed, clothed and paid. We are tighter than ever and see ourselves as more of a family than a business.

**Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?**

When we were promoting concerts and we had a show with an artist we had not yet worked with, I made a mistake that is funny now, but then- not so much! We did not have a press photo for this new artist, so I asked our designer to Google his name to get a photo for the poster. I was pretty busy and didn't review his work. We sent the poster to the artist's manager for approval. He came back at me furious because the person in the photo was *not* his artist. What I learned was 'ALWAYS doublecheck EVERYTHING.'

**None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?**

The main person I am grateful towards is my former partner and co-founder John Miles. When we met, he was so much more skilled in this business, but he took a chance on some of my ideas. 22 years later, we were still working together. We went through so much, ups, downs, both sad times and good times. When he left the company, we parted as we had always been, brothers.

**As you know, the United States is currently facing a very important self-reckoning about race, diversity, equality and inclusion. This may be obvious to you, but it will be helpful to spell this out. Can you articulate to our readers a few reasons why it is so important for a business or organization to have a diverse executive team?**

My mother was a leader in the field of child welfare and was the executive director of a major nonprofit organization. Her board fired her after she insisted that they bring on more racially diverse and LGBTQ+ members. Her position was that the organization could not effectively fulfill their mission and serve a diverse community without diverse perspectives in their leadership. I follow my mother's example whenever possible because it makes sense from both a moral and a business perspective.

**As a business leader, can you please share a few steps we must take to truly create an inclusive, representative, and equitable society? Kindly share a story or example for each.**

Empathy and transparency are crucial. Just tell people the truth. They're adults. They can handle it. We had a huge New Year's event in 2008 where we did an extremely poor job getting people in before midnight (which is the goal). I went out there personally to take charge but still failed. I made it my mission to answer every complaint personally and worked all the way through the next New Year to make sure that each of the aggrieved attendees not only got a ticket (on me) but came and enjoyed the show. Dealing directly and honestly with customers is how I wish our public officials would deal with us.

**Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. Most of our readers — in fact, most people — think they have a pretty good idea of what a CEO or executive does. But in just a few words can you explain what an executive does that is different from the responsibilities of the other leaders?**

Build the team. Set the direction and agenda for the company. Make the choices on who and how that agenda gets executed. Make final calls on

tough decisions that your subordinates cannot. Oversee the brand and creative direction to ensure that the company is well-represented in all things. And for us especially, lead the business development and sales process. Sometimes having the CEO involved in a bigger deal helps push it through.

**What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a CEO or executive? Can you explain what you mean?**

The CEO is not this ‘special’ infallible entity who gives commands and expects results to manifest. I can’t speak for others, because we are a small, horizontally aligned business. If anything, I take more crap from my team than I dish out. I frequently point out my own mistakes and shortcomings to inspire them to keep experimenting, grinding, and persevering through their own.

**What is the most striking difference between your actual job and how you thought the job would be?**

I was surprised by how lonely it has been as the CEO, especially during the pandemic. We’re in the event business, which is such a social enterprise. As creative director, I had a lot of fun putting on shows. As CEO, my job is essentially deskbound, phone hung, and since the pandemic hit, I rarely see my team in person. This sucks because I truly love each and every member of my team and the industry colleagues with whom we normally interact. Hopefully this will change as things open up more.

**Presumably, not everyone is cut out to be an executive. In your opinion, which specific traits increase the likelihood that a person will be a**

**successful executive, and what type of person should avoid aspiring to be an executive? Can you explain what you mean?**

To be a successful executive, you need drive, self-discipline, and the ability to subvert your ego. If you are in it for the mission, the vision, or the greater good, then you will have no problem crawling through the weeds to achieve your company's goals. If you are in it for your ego or to have CEO on your resume, then the reality, the gravity, weight, and responsibility of that position will grate on you. Too much ego may also make it difficult to nurture the same kind of commitment from your coworkers.

**What advice would you give to other business leaders to help create a fantastic work culture? Can you share a story or an example?**

Gather a list of company values from the whole team for each year. Put them on the wall for all to see. Amend and adjust for each new year. It will enable everyone to be a part of the company as mission and not just a firm. For us, we started in 2018 with these company values: SERVICE, FAMILY, ACCOUNTABILITY, ABUNDANCE, PERSISTENCE. We add to them each year.

**How have you used your success to make the world a better place?**

Evangelizing Silent Disco is a truly wonderful way to merge the event industry with public service. I see the validity of the perspectives around music, noise, nuisance, and nimbyism. As an artist and promoter, I believe that there must be a place for live public entertainment. As a father and community member, I can also see where outside noise encroaching on your peaceful family life can be aggravating. Doing events with wireless headphones solves this conundrum for millions of people. We live to have



someone call us and say, “They told us we couldn’t.” We can then respond with, “We’ll show you how.” Now, if we can just find a solution for weed whackers and leaf blowers!

**Fantastic. Here is the primary question of our interview. What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)**

Here are the top things I wish someone told me before I started:

First, there’s a guy for that. Don’t be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

Hire an expert rather than DIYing everything. I made our posters for many years and our walls are covered with my regrets.

Next, definitely have a good lawyer. More than a few things have gone sideways when we have tried to shortcut this step and expense.

If you can’t afford to lose it, don’t do the show. Two of my favorite artists of all time are my biggest losses.

And finally, promoting is extremely risky.

**You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.**

I think helping to solve the NIMBY issue has been a good start on a small scale. But for me, as an avid Scuba Diver, I am personally concerned about the health of our oceans, which impacts all people and things. If I could help

to keep people from putting plastic in oceans, destroying reefs, poisoning marine life, and destroying our most important food source, that would be my personal goal.

**Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

“Push the people above you and lift up the ones below you.” My mom, Loretta Kowal, who worked in the nonprofit social work sphere used to live by this and teach it in her courses. It’s a concept that is dear to me. Although it occasionally caused a little consternation in my managers and partners over the years, it has also inspired some amazing loyalty in my coworkers.

**We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them**

I would enjoy lunch with Michael Rapino of Live Nation. It’s easy for smaller companies and *competitors* in the event industry to hate on the big dogs. But I have positive experiences whenever I collaborate with Rapino’s various teams. It says something about his leadership that they maintained a positive culture despite the pressure of being a public company and industry leader. The work they did throughout the pandemic in producing essentially break-even or losing events simply to keep their communities engaged and employees working was also extremely inspiring. I know next to nothing about him as a person, but the organization and its quality speaks volumes.

**Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.**

Business



## Written by Charlie Katz

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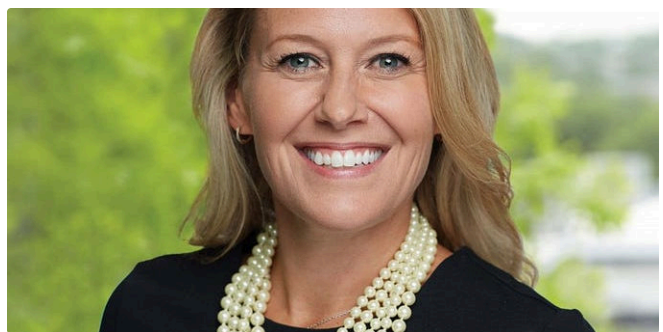
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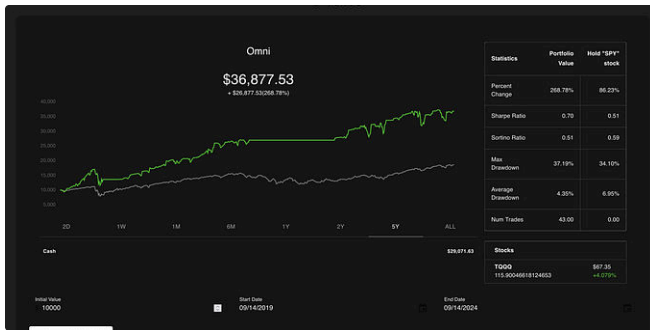
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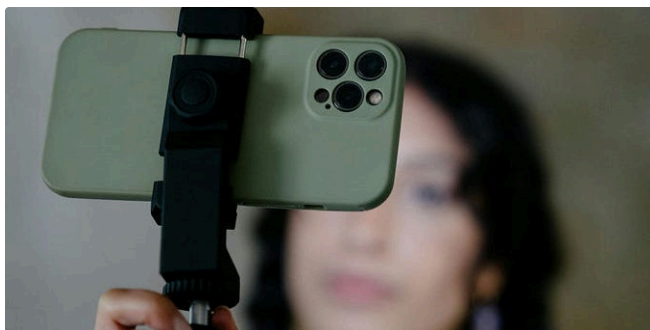
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