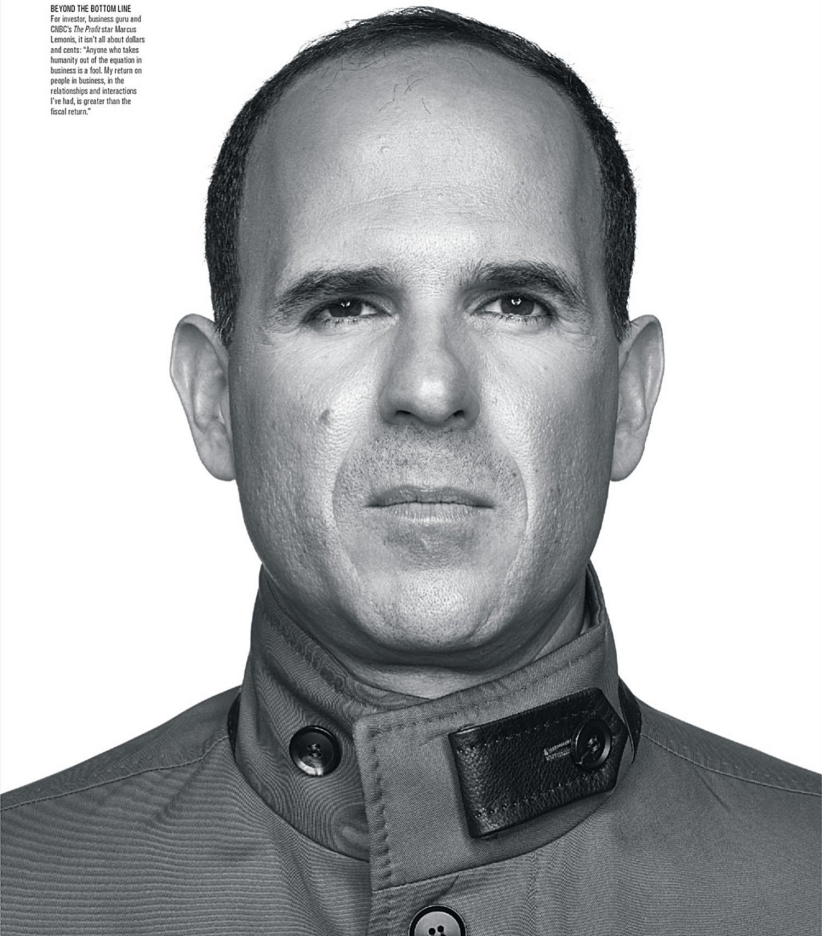


BEYOND THE BOTTOM LINE

For investor, business guru and *CHIEF's* *The Profit* star Marcus Lemonis, it isn't all about dollars and cents: "Anyone who takes humanity out of the equation in business is a fool. My return on people in business, in the relationships and interactions I've had, is greater than the fiscal return."



The Prophet

HOW
DOES
REALITY
TV STAR
MARCUS
LEMONIS
COUNT HIS
BLESSINGS?
BY THE
NUMBERS,
OF COURSE.

| By Andrew Myers |
| Photography by Sandro, sandrofilm.com |

Is Marcus Lemonis the prophet for whom small-business owners, reality TV junkies and CNBC executives have been waiting for? Lemonis, for those of you not belonging to any of these categories, is the charismatic star, self-made millionaire, bottom-line proselytizer and business turnaround guru behind *The Profit*, CNBC's breakout hit that debuted last year, went retool-high in the ratings last spring and returned for its third season—10 new episodes plus one for follow-ups on small businesses previously featured—this Oct. 14. And all at the unlikely time slot of 10p.m. “Money never sleeps,” avowed Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street 2*; not, apparently, does a capitalistic quorum fascinated with the ins and outs of small, often family-run, businesses have an early bedtime.

What separates *The Profit* from other business-turnaround shows like *Restaurant: Impossible* and *Bar Rescue*, or CNBC's popular *Shark Tank*? First of all,

“I DON'T GAMBLE; I'M NOT INTO ART; I DON'T CARE ABOUT COLLECTING HOUSES AND CARS. BUT I DO BUY DESIGNER [CLOTHING]. IT'S ALL PART OF YOUR PACKAGE, HOW YOU PRESENT YOURSELF!”

Lemonis isn't a consultant, hired hand or once-removed observer-actor in the dollars drama unfolding before viewers' eyes. Nor is he picking pitches from protean entrepreneurs with business plans promising “potential” with the process ending in smiles with a big, inevitable, divorced-from-reality reveal.

Rather, the Chicago-based Lemonis focuses on small businesses, failing businesses, businesses in which he then invests his own money and tries to “fix.” Most often he's successful; sometimes he's not. And therein lies the tension that translates to rating's catnip. “The show is a real inside look into small business; it's not just changing paint and putting in new carpeting,” says Lemonis. “We break business down in a nonpatronizing way, without talking down to a teenager or a retiree.”

So far he has intervened in a catalog of companies ranging from ice cream and toy manufacturers to retail clothing stores and wholesale meat distributors. “The common through line is the business has to be relatable to people, so no widgets or high-tech,” says the 41-year-old singleton who thus far has received applications from over 40,000 companies asking for his help on *The Profit*, and whose returns from investments made on the show more than merit that five-figure deluge.

Those on-air investments totaled \$14 million shortly after the start of the current season, and Lemonis

estimates the profit from his on-air portfolio at north of \$9 million. That makes an eye-popping return of approximately 65 percent in well under two years (the first episode of *The Profit* premiered on July 30, 2013, with filming, ergo Lemonis' investments, having begun several months earlier). But although Lemonis admits to having “big anxiety over appreciation or depreciation of *The Profit* businesses,” it's not the return that keeps him awake at night. “The health of the business and the employees is always at the forefront of my mind; not the owners or my return,” he says.

On the show, Lemonis can be by turns feisty and fierce with his potential business partners, ready to administer hard medicine and harder truths. But he can also be touchy-feely and empathetic to an extreme. It's a beguiling combo audiences have keyed into. It also intimates Lemonis' own vulnerabilities, which he speaks

about openly and often, and which help to better answer the question: What makes Marcus run?

As far as *The Profit* is concerned, money is not the motivator. Lemonis' day jobs include chairman and CEO of Camping World, the country's largest chain of RV dealerships with revenue in excess of \$3 billion, and Good Sam, the world's largest RV owners association. Nor does Lemonis stand to make any money directly from the show. He enjoys no syndication rights, enormous salary or royalties of any kind. In fact, his per-episode fee isn't even sufficient to cover his travel expenses, and each episode takes nine or 10 days to complete—“work days,” he specifies, meaning each of the 24 episodes really takes two weeks or half a month. Or half his life since filming began.

Which leads us back to... why does he do it?

In one respect, Lemonis views his participation and investments on the show as prospecting new business categories for possible development, a sort of televised R&D that he finds exciting and invigorating, both physically (in terms of the adrenaline rush) and intellectually. “Thanks to the series, I now have a ‘sweet’ platform and a ‘food’ platform,” he says, referring to companies such as Key Lime Pie Co. and Sweet Pea's.

Presently, he's focused on his latest partnership with Courage Is, a family-run “clothing and fashion platform”



THE 'P' PRINCIPLE
Lemonis, whose own business journey took the once orphan from teen care to club promotions to politics to car dealerships and beyond, employs a stringent yardstick for evaluating business investments, but his business advice is based on simplicity: "I'm adamant about educating people how business really is, about keeping it real and raw, about making it clear that business in this country cannot be commodified. It's about people, process and product, with an emphasis on people."



that was featured on the premiere episode of the third season, and which happens to be opening a store in Atlanta in February 2015 and planning to work on the Chicago market in the next year. "It has incredible growth potential. In five years it could grow to 100 stores," says Lemonis, who estimates he's invested in and turned around over 100 companies during the last decade, and emphasizes that he built Camping World—comprised of formerly independent, usually mom-and-pop operations—via a similar one-bite-after-another sequential strategy. "I started with just \$9 million business, and grew it from there."

Lemonis would also like to be that relative in the business you wish you'd had. "I'm adamant about educating people on how business really is, about keeping it real and raw, about making it clear that business in this country cannot be commodified. It's about people, process and product, with an emphasis on people," he says, evoking his Three P criteria by which he famously evaluates businesses, and which can be succinctly summarized with three questions: Are the right people in the right positions? Is the company firing on all cylinders, with a handle on margins and costs, and optimally organized to create, deliver and sell? Is what's being sold both excellent and relevant?

And, yes, Lemonis likes the limelight. He made his TV debut a few years ago as a challenge sponsor on *The Celebrity Apprentice* and subsequently appeared on *Secret Millionaire*. And he likes to look like a million bucks. "I don't gamble, I'm not into art, I don't care about collecting houses and cars. But I do buy designer [clothing]," he says, counting Tom Ford and Biondi white shirts as his staples. "It's all part of your package, how you present yourself," he says. "If you really want to set yourself apart, dress well."

But for Lemonis, business has long been a self-esteem buttress as well as a bridge by which he connects to others. Adopted from an orphanage in Beirut before his first birthday, he grew up the only, cherished child of a well-heeled couple in Miami. Acculturated to chatting with adults from an early age, Lemonis played less well with

CHICAGO'S OWN

Lemonis has made the Windy City his home base since 2000. How does it tally in his ledger, and where does he prefer to lurk?

Why did you pick Chicago as your primary base?

It is a centrally located major city.

What most distinguishes it from other American cities?

I feel that it is the heart of the country; I enjoy the Midwest values and culture and especially the great food.

What area of Chicago do you live in?

Lake Forest

Work in?

Lincolnshire

What made you pick those areas?

Lake Forest has an amazing landscape, and the community is welcoming. Lincolnshire is far away enough from the city of Chicago to be quiet but close enough for you to reach major attractions.

What is your favorite restaurant?

Le Colonial—French-Vietnamese restaurant

Favorite men's store?

Tom Ford and Barney's

Favorite place to chill out?

My couch

Favorite place to recharge?

Yoga at Forever OM

kids, tweens and teens. "I didn't have friends, didn't get invited to parties, didn't date," he says. "I was bullied." For consolation, he turned to food, and developed an eating disorder resulting in huge weight fluctuations.

Lemonis also turned to business, first as a candy dealer as a tween, then as a lawn-care organizer as a teen and, finally, as a club promoter while still in high school. "I got very good at making money; it was the only thing I knew how to do," he says. At Marquette University, where Lemonis studied political science, economics and criminology, his quest for self-discovery and definition led him from bartending to a position on the alumni board to three-failed attempts to become student body president. "I was really searching to find myself, to fit in."

That search continued post-graduation back in Miami, where Lemonis joined the family's auto dealership, didn't like it and, at age 21, ran for political office. While he lost the election and didn't become a state representative, he did find his path. Through the campaign, he met billionaire entrepreneur Wayne Huiuzenga and went to work for Huiuzenga's AutoNation. The following four years served as a de facto business school and taught Lemonis principles he would later refine into his Three P principle and apply to the universe of RVs, thereby creating Camping World. "I experienced a lot of failure early on, and that's great for an entrepreneur," he says.

While the clichéd profile of the business mogul includes a cold love of numbers that must be matched by indifference, even disdain, for Bob and blood, Lemonis feels exactly the opposite. "Anyone who takes humanity out of the equation in business is a fool," he says, adding that traits all good businesses share are depth of character, a moral compass and respect for their people. "My return on people in business, in the relationships and interactions I've had, is greater than the fiscal return."

Like all prophets, Lemonis is on a mission. Like all prophets, he has a message. Like all prophets, he's had time in the desert (literal and/or figurative). Still, perhaps prophet is the wrong appellation. "Prophets" fits much better. ■