Interview

An Interview With Mike Singer, CEO, Careismatic Brands, Inc

Batcheller: Describe your overall role as the CEO of Careismatic Brands.

Singer: My first priority is to ensure that we have the highest quality, best-fitting, most comfortable, fashionable and professional products, in stock and available to purchase in every channel that consumers want to shop. That is not an easy task, as the scrubs business serves males and females in all shapes and sizes, from petites to talls and from XXS - 5X in a wide variety of fabrics, colors, and styles. Careismatic Brands keeps tens of thousands of choices in stock to serve the needs of the consumer. To do this, I make sure we have the right people, the right systems, and the right culture that is dedicated to championing health care professionals. I have to do a good job listening and collaborating to support great ideas. I value the perspectives of our extraordinary people who make this possible, due to their experience, intelligence, creativity, and wisdom. Our experienced and talented people are our most important asset.

Batcheller: Can you share some highlights of what your role includes?

Singer: My role as CEO includes formulating corporate strategy and helping to allocate the resources to support it; optimizing organizational alignment by matching high-value roles with people who are the best fit; creating a compelling culture through managing organizational effectiveness; and helping to position our board to better understand the business and contribute to its success.

Batcheller: How did you hear about the 10,000 nurses on boards initiative?

Singer: We learned about the initiative several years ago when we were creating an advisory committee of nurse executives. In the process of researching prospective candidates, we serendipitously ran across and reached out to the Nurses on Boards Coalition, which helped provide us with some terrific candidates. The Coalition has been an incredible resource and partner.

Batcheller: Careismatic Brands is a Founding Strategic Partner of the Nurses on Boards Coalition. Why did you support having a nurse on your corporate board?

Singer: Our private equity partner recognized there was a need to be better informed by a nurse who leads other nurses. A large system chief nurse joined our board, and it was one of the best governance decisions we’ve made. It was the perfect match. She brings experience managing multi-million-dollar budgets, directing thousands of nurses, and working to solve complex challenges in a highly regulated environment that is evidence-based and data-driven. Her significant professional successes are also the result of leading teams to effectively address critical issues—a valuable attribute for board members.

As Careismatic Brands sells its products to retailers and online distributors, we are 1 step away from our consumers. We are 1 step from a better health care experience for the consumer. That is a mission that we take very seriously.
removed from health care leaders and do not call directly on them to sell product. While this business model has worked well for us and health care professionals, it historically did not create direct engagement with hospital and health system executives. For example, if a nurse executive is charged with developing and implementing a standardized uniform program for a hospital or health system, they would want to know that Careismatic Brands designs, manufactures, and distributes medical apparel under the Cherokee, Dickies, Heartsoul, Infinity, and Disney Scrubs brands—and that we can match colors across all of those brands that are accessible to purchasers of all budgets small and large, that we have deep stock in colors, sizes, styles, and offer a range of fabric technologies that include antimicrobial and fluid-resistant technologies. Further, I believe CNEs would want to know that those products are of the highest quality, are in stock and available for purchase online and in their local community, which helps provide jobs and tax revenue. Our nurse board member helps us in transformative ways, including how to better understand and meet the diverse work-apparel needs of nurse leaders and those in their charge.

**Batcheller:** What have been the benefits of having a nurse on your board?

**Singer:** She is a supernurse and an experienced, savvy, nurse executive who brings world-class knowledge and skills to the boardroom. She brings a perspective shaped through a unique lens that we didn’t have previously. She is a business leader, a nurse, and a leader among nurses. We seek diverse and valuable input from exceptional professionals on our board, and her contributions have been extremely valuable.

**Batcheller:** Why did you decide to form a nursing advisory committee for the company?

**Singer:** When we saw the benefits that the nurse leader brought to the board, we realized there was so much more that our executive team could learn from direct interactions with nurse leaders. In addition, we felt we could provide a compelling and intellectually challenging environment that the nurse leaders would not only enjoy but also benefit from by participating.

**Batcheller:** Can you share an example of how the input of these nurses has influenced key decisions?

**Singer:** After 25 years, we desired to change the company name from Strategic Partners to something more representative. I presented the name, Medical Grade Brands, and they thought it stunk. They said that our company symbolizes compassion and caring for nurses and other caregivers and champions those who wear scrubs. Their input inspired us to develop the new name: Careismatic Brands.

**Batcheller:** How has the knowledge you have gained helped you personally and professionally from having nurses in such key roles?

**Singer:** Previously, I didn’t know how nurse executives thought. I thought I did. One of the biggest things I learned was that even though nurse leaders may help guide standardized uniform programs, they are not always aware of all the ways they can still allow nurses to express their individuality through styles, fashion, fabrications, colors, and fit of uniforms. When one nurse executive saw some of our styles that mirror a more fashionable ready-to-wear look, she said she was tempted to return to bedside nursing just to be able to wear the uniforms.

Nurse leaders with whom we have partnered have also illustrated and underscored the importance and value of timely innovation and pivoting to meet unanticipated needs. These are 2 qualities that not only have allowed the health care industry to change in dramatic ways since the pandemic, they have allowed us to help provide products like scrubs and masks containing our Certainty antimicrobial and fluid-resistant fabric technologies. And we created SmartBoost, a laundry additive that allows health care workers to prolong the life of their clothes and resist stains, in addition to preventing the build-up of mold, mildew, fabric degradation, and odor-causing bacteria on the fabric.

Personally, these nurse leaders have enriched my life by just being present. They have
challenged my assumptions and challenged me to always view our world through a nursing lens, and it has been extremely valuable. I have made wonderful, treasured friendships as well.

**Batcheller:** It seems that nurses and nursing are in your DNA. What’s the source of that?

**Singer:** I developed a deep respect and admiration for health care professionals early in life. I was a teenager when my younger cousin had leukemia. She was in and out of hospitals. It was an extremely difficult time and the care and compassion of so many nurses meant so much to her and to her family. It’s a big reason why I have worked to put the full weight of Careismatic Brands’ resources and influence to champion the people behind the scrubs. When my own life was on the line after I took an intense line drive with a 16-inch ball to the face at the pitching mound, was losing blood rapidly and had to be medevacked to the hospital, I will never forget the professionalism, expertise, and kindness of the nurses, which continued through my extensive facial-reconstruction surgery. What would we ever do without nurses?

**Batcheller:** Congratulations on being chosen to receive the American Nurses Association’s Champion of Nursing Award in 2020. You were the only person who was not a nurse who received an award from the ANA in 2020. What does it mean to you and the company for you to receive this award?

**Singer:** I was absolutely floored when I received the award letter from the American Nurses Association! We try to do things for all the right reasons, but we certainly don’t expect awards. We’ve invested resources to celebrate nurses and to increase awareness of their immense value to their patients, to other nurses and to the communities where they live and serve. I have to say that receiving this award is one of the most meaningful things that has ever happened to me, and I still feel deeply humbled to have received it. I am most thankful to the ANA for the incredible honor.

**Batcheller:**: In 2020, Careismatic Brands gave away $1 million in scrubs and produced a high-profile video tribute to nurses. What was behind that?

**Singer:** When it became clear that some hospitals did not have enough PPE for nurses and other health care workers during the early days of the pandemic, we immediately put plans into action to donate $1 million worth of scrubs to hospitals whose nurses were in the hotspots treating patients with COVID-19. We heard stories of nurses changing into fresh scrubs between patients, and then throwing out their dirty scrubs. It was a very difficult time for those working on the front lines, and we were relieved we could help.

In addition, we were so inspired by nurses across the world who were giving their patients their all, that we created “In the Year of the Nurse—A Tribute to Courage,” spotlighting the heroism of nurses as they continue to battle COVID-19 on the front lines. It was our tribute to nurses’ courage and included a music video of children singing George Harrison’s song “Give Me Love, Give Me Peace on Earth” and 19 stories showcasing frontline nurses from around the world over 19 consecutive days. Our goal was to raise $100,000 to help support the DAISY Foundation’s Health Equity Grant Program—funding nurse research that addresses patients and families whose health is adversely affected by social determinants—and we succeeded. We are honored to support this important cause and to know that our nurse tribute videos have received more than 5 million views on YouTube.

**Batcheller:** I read in Mark and Bonnie Barnes’ book “Shining the Light on All the Right” that Cherokee Medical Uniforms has been an industry partner of the DAISY Foundation since 2010. I believe you also fund a scholarship for DAISY Award Honorees. And most recently, you have helped fund the DAISY Foundation’s Health Equity Grant Program. What does it feel like to have a role in helping to honor the extraordinary work and compassion of nurses, as well as to help fund nursing research?

**Singer:** Partnering with Mark and Bonnie and the DAISY Foundation to support nurses...
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has been an honor and—I’m sure that everyone who has met them feels the same way. From the time we first sat down with them, we knew they were special, and their cause to thank nurses for the care they give resonated with us. Mark and Bonnie are testimonies to how grief and sorrow can be leveraged for good. I think their book—“Shining the Light on All the Right”—is perfectly titled. I would encourage all nurse leaders to purchase the book on Amazon and read it.

At the risk of being too forward, I warmly encourage Chief Nursing Executives to purchase the book for every one of their DAISY Award Honorees. Imagine having a difficult day at work, then coming home and reading something so positive and uplifting . . . It’s the perfect antidote for a hard day.

To get behind something so meaningful as DAISY’s Health Equity Grant Program is exciting because we know these grants will result in real impact on patients and families. It is a real joy to be able to give back to nurses by supporting DAISY and this impactful cause.

Batcheller: Do you have advice on how we continue to gain support of more CEOs to have nurses on boards?

Singer: Nurses literally are the lifeblood of our nation. Nothing has illustrated that more than this pandemic, when nurses have sacrificed their lives to provide care. They have led on the front lines and behind the scenes, in their communities and in their homes.

To be successful, we must increase awareness within each of our spheres of influence about the mission and vision of the Nurses on Boards Coalition. The Coalition advocates for nurse involvement in leadership roles wherever ideas are considered that could shape strategies and policies that impact the health of our communities and nation. That includes the White House. The more that nurses are in leadership positions throughout their communities and the nation, the greater positive impact they can have.

I believe many CEOs have not even considered having a nurse on their board. We must all keep sharing and amplifying the stories of how nurses have helped change minds, attitudes, strategies, and tactics due to their involvement on boards. And I would love to see health care employers create programs that will mentor and equip future nurse leaders.

COVID-19 has catapulted nurses from the shadows into the public spotlight perhaps like never before. I believe the time is now for nurses to imagine the difference they can make in community, sports and religious organizations, in nonprofits, in local, regional and national elected positions of power, in their own organizations and those entities that seek to impact public health. Nurses offer a truly unique perspective that could help improve the health of Americans wherever they choose to become involved.

Batcheller: From a CEO perspective, what makes you really listen to what nurses say when they do speak up?

Singer: Nurses engage with diverse people and people groups from all walks of life and are some of the most real, practical, connected, and educated problem-solvers you could ever meet. They are well-grounded, full of insight, wisdom, life-experience and empathy, and they cut right to the chase and stay on point. They can both hyperfocus and zoom out on issues and challenges. If a nurse speaks, I want to listen because I know they have something important to say.

—Joyce A. Batcheller, DNP, RN, NEA-BC, FAONL, FAAN