

Masters of Scale Episode Transcript: Ajaz Ahmed

“Drive full-speed at opportunity”

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AJAZ AHMED: Richard says to me, "What are you doing tomorrow?" And what goes through my mind is: "Anything you want, Richard."

The way I actually answer it is: "Oh, I can make myself available."

He writes down his phone number, and he says, "Call me in the morning. There's a meeting that you should be at. I think it'll be of great interest to you."

REID HOFFMAN: That's Ajaz Ahmed, the founder and CEO of the digital advertising agency, AKQA. And the Richard he's referring to? Sir Richard Branson. The pair met ... where else? But on a Virgin flight. To Ajaz, Sir Richard is an idol. That night, Ajaz could barely sleep, filled with excitement and intrigue over this mystery meeting.

In the morning, Ajaz dialed the number he was given. When Sir Richard answered, he told Ajaz where to meet but still not what he was being invited to. Ajaz was still in the dark when he walked through the doors and into that meeting. What he saw — or rather who he saw — astounded him.

AHMED: Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mary Robinson, Kofi Annan, Muhammad Yunus, Jimmy Carter.

HOFFMAN: This venerable group was brought together by Nelson Mandela, Sir Richard Branson, and the musician Peter Gabriel. They would be known as "The Elders." Their mission: to assemble experienced leaders from around the world to fight for peace and justice. And they were all there in the room with Ajaz.

AHMED: One of the interactions that I had was with Desmond Tutu. He said to me, "Listening is a healing."

I remember this in so many areas. One is paying more attention and being an active listener. Secondly, the way that he was listening to my conversation provided healing to me, and I feel so privileged and blessed and honored that I had this interaction and this gift from him, which has changed the course of my life just through four words: "Listening is a healing."

HOFFMAN: This profound advice — "listening is a healing" — is something Ajaz took to heart, and he's used it as a touchstone ever since. And the reason he was in the room to receive it was that when Sir Richard extended a vague invitation, Ajaz said:

AHMED: "Oh, I can make myself available."

HOFFMAN: Ajaz immediately accepted Sir Richard's invitation to what turned out to be a life-changing meeting, despite being unsure what would happen and with no way to prepare. He drove full-speed towards the opportunity, as soon as he got the green light.

But once Ajaz was in that meeting, he saw what a huge learning opportunity this was — and did more listening than talking.

That's why I believe that you should drive full-speed at opportunity, as long as you remember to read the road signs.

[THEME MUSIC]

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, partner at Greylock, and your host. And I believe that you should drive full-speed at opportunity, as long as you remember to read the road signs.

Have you ever been a part of a scavenger hunt? It's a race where clues are scattered around a vast location. Each clue gives you a hint to the locale of the next. Now the trick is finding the balance between speed and carefully reading the signs. If you focus too much on going fast, you're more likely to misread the clue and get sloppy. If you get the clue wrong, you could wind-up miles from the correct checkpoint. On the other hand, if you spend all of your time at the first clue, weighing each possible answer, you will lose valuable race time. You need to go as fast as possible, while still being able to absorb the signals.

This same balance is true in entrepreneurship. Time and again, a growing company will sacrifice speed over focus, or vice versa. But both are integral in winning the race to scale.

I wanted to talk to Ajaz Ahmed about this because throughout his entrepreneurial journey, he accelerated toward opportunities when the stakes and outcome were still up in the air. Ajaz founded the digital design and communications agency, AKQA in 1994 at the age of 21. AKQA cut its teeth making innovative web applications and solutions for brands throughout the '90s. It pivoted toward creative marketing content in the 2000s, producing commercials and online campaigns for BMW, McDonald's, and Microsoft among others. If you've used Nike's personal training app, you've already interacted with an AKQA product. This year, the digital ad agency expects to exceed \$1 billion in revenue.

Ajaz grew up in the UK's equivalent of Silicon Valley: the Thames Valley. In the 1980s, the area was booming, and Ajaz was surrounded by striving tech companies. In fact, a deft awareness of his surroundings and a radar for opportunity started for Ajaz as a pre-teen.

AHMED: My father got me a newspaper round. I arrived at the store, and I was given an incredibly heavy bag for a 12-year old. And I looked at the first address, and I almost leaped with joy when I saw that it was Number One Bath Road. And I knew that was the headquarters of what at the time was the third largest software company in the world called Ashton-Tate. So with incredible enthusiasm and gusto, I started the newspaper round.

HOFFMAN: Every morning on his paper route, Ajaz passed the Ashton-Tate office. And each time, he couldn't help imagining the excitement inside.

It's worth noting here that Ashton-Tate was known for their financial modeling and office productivity software. Not the kind of thing that motivates most 12-year-old boys. But for Ajaz it was tantalizing. One morning, he couldn't resist any longer, so he marched into the lobby and introduced himself.

Ajaz didn't have much idea of what would happen next. So it was a surprise when they not only let him in, but he was also treated to a VIP-level tour of the offices.

AHMED: They gave me a tour of the entire building and so took me through every single department. And I was like a kid in a candy store, just learning and absorbing.

HOFFMAN: What to most 12-year-olds would appear nothing more than a boring adult office producing spreadsheet software was a glorious wonderland to Ajaz.

SONG:

Come with me, and you'll be
In a world of pure imagination
Floppy disks, data risks
Have it all with software education

Please sit-in, what a win
Dial-up modem analog workstations
Our Mac screens, sick 2D
Animatioooooon.

HOFFMAN: Ajaz had driven directly to what fascinated him and saw beyond the office and into a world of pure imagination and opportunity.

AHMED: I fell in love with the company, and I was only 12 at the time, and you can't work when you're 12 legitimately. So I kept writing letters, I wrote letter after letter to the managing director.

HOFFMAN: Rather than starting a lemonade stand or another simpler venture for a kid, Ajaz set a course for this world-renowned company, and put the pedal to the floor. He sent more than a

dozen letters to Ashton-Tate, despite being too young to work there legally. After three years without a response, Ajaz took the lack of response as a sign he needed to change his approach.

AHMED: And instead of asking for a job, I listed what I could potentially do for the company. And I got a hand-delivered letter back the following week.

HOFFMAN: That letter came straight from the Managing Director offering Ajaz work at Ashton-Tate during breaks in the school year. To someone less hungry, this part-time job might have been limited to making cups of coffee and filing papers. But Ajaz instinctively recognized that being new in a new environment is when you're primed to listen and learn. So he drove as fast as he could to make the most of his time there.

AHMED: What started off as menial administrative tasks quickly developed to working in every single department in the organization and using their software to improve systems.

I would proactively see an area that was inefficient and could be better, or I would be given a challenge.

HOFFMAN: One challenge they tasked the young Ajaz with: analyze the warehouse and see where the company could be saving money. So Ajaz traveled the 400 miles up the British Isles to Scotland and did just that. His advice was taken onboard and successfully saved the company money.

As a leader, you will find yourself in situations where you have the opportunity to give less experienced team members real power. But you might hesitate. Is now really the right time? Are they really the right person for this task? Are they ready? This is when you need to take a moment to read the signs. You hired this person to your team. And it is in your interest and their interest to challenge them and help them grow. And their fresh perspective and enthusiasm could bring unexpected upsides.

For the next few years, Ajaz returned to Ashton-Tate and continued to thrive. Instead of going on to university like many of his graduating classmates, Ajaz sped into the business world, leveraging his Ashton-Tate experience to land jobs at other prominent tech companies, including Apple. However despite his quick rise, Ajaz started to feel like he was missing something. A voice told him that he may have skipped a valuable life experience. So he made the u-turn to drive back.

When you're driving fast, you're relying on your peripheral vision to decipher the signs around you. Because the middle of the highway is no place to pore over every left turn. If you miss something, it's actually OK to stop, study your map, and double back. It's not always efficient. But efficiency sometimes is actually not nearly as important as speed.

In Ajaz's case, it didn't take long to find his way back to university.

AHMED: I received an unconditional offer from Bath University, and it is considered the best school for management in the country. And so that kind of opportunity gave me this gut feeling that if I don't go to university, I will regret it my entire life. So I had an inner voice telling me that I must go to university.

HOFFMAN: However, it only took a handful of months for Ajaz to discover an unexpected opportunity — a different stretch of open road. It wasn't a professor who opened his eyes, but a classmate.

AHMED: We had these dorms. And one day I got a knock on my door from one of the mechanical engineers next door. And he said to me, "Come with me, I want to show you something." And he took me to the computer lab.

HOFFMAN: There before Ajaz, on a flickering CRT computer screen, was the World Wide Web, so new, it had been dubbed the information superhighway. He took the mouse, hovered it solemnly over a hyperlink, and clicked.

AHMED: He downloaded a picture of Cindy Crawford. And I said, "Well, it's a picture of Cindy Crawford." And he said, "I got it from America right now."

HOFFMAN: Fascinating as Cindy Crawford may be to two college students, it wasn't just her picture that was inspiring their awe. It was the future of information delivery that Ajaz saw signposted in the image.

AHMED: I immediately realized after he'd showed me that picture, that this was the beginning of multimedia convergence, which was going to be the next revolution in technology.

HOFFMAN: In the early days of the internet, multimedia convergence was a term that referred to the merging of previously separate media formats that could now mesh together on the web. Finally, a page that could deliver video, text, and music at the same time. Ajaz saw a gigantic, blinding sign that this convergence was about to become the new zeitgeist going forward: It would change everything we know about communication and consumption.

Moments like this one don't come along often. When they do, you need to trust that it's time to move. There's no room to wait and see if others agree with you. Because once something is trending into the zeitgeist and others have caught on, it may be too late to gain your advantage.

Just as Ajaz heeded the signs that sent him back to school, he now trusted the arrows pointing him to the untapped potential of the internet — potential so great that he knew he needed to take the next exit and steer toward it.

AHMED: There was a real urgency. I must start a company that helps organizations to embrace this new revolution.

HOFFMAN: Ajaz saw this tech, rightly, as a moment to put the pedal to the floor. Diving into the early internet was like merging onto the famed German Autobahn. The Autobahn has no mandated speed limit, so Ajaz was able to go as fast as he wanted.

By the way, any time you start a company, you'll have this "merging into high speed traffic" feeling. One entrepreneur who knows this well is restaurateur Lien Ta. She is the co-founder and managing partner of Here's Looking At You and All Day Baby, favorites on the LA food scene. Lien experienced a massive trial by fire when All Day Baby's opening coincided with the early days of the pandemic. In fact, the very day that the LA Times devoted one of its sought-after reviews to All Day Baby, COVID was declared a global pandemic. The restaurant had only been open for 10 days of full-service.

LIEN TA: It was sort of in the middle of our brunch service that we understood that we would need to close indefinitely. I mean, it was grave. We had to pack everything up. I needed to write a large email explaining what a closure was going to look like, even though I didn't know, send them links to sign up for unemployment, know that I had bank accounts unfortunately in the red. We were overspending, because we had just hired up, and we were in the process of training.

HOFFMAN: Besides keeping her staff safe, Lien's priority was finding \$50,000 to cover payroll. With employees desperately relying on her, she had to act fast and cook up an idea.

TA: We still had a bit of food left, and by Friday night I created a website in which people could pre-order what I thought was the marquee item of All Day Baby, which is our biscuit sandwich. So, I called it, The Biscuit Window. People could choose a time and feel safe, as far as picking that up from our takeout window.

HOFFMAN: The takeout Biscuit Window on the side of the building was an idea born of pure speed, which was crucial. Rapid decision-making is key not only to rapid growth, but in Lien's case, survival. When you're moving fast, you may make mistakes. But the biggest mistake is not making decisions in time. Lien was hyper-aware of the signs surrounding her.

Lien had some of the worst driving conditions you could imagine: It was the equivalent of driving during a snowstorm with ice on the roads while running out of gas. In Lien's case, that meant volunteering without pay to keep All Day Baby afloat. And it also meant doubling down on her pivot to the biscuit window.

TA: It was just creating and activating more Biscuit Windows and other kinds of windows: a Bagel Window, a Pie Window, and all of these windows. It was actually this really beautiful and glorious time that we could inspire a small neighborhood of 40,000 residents. I mean, they just bought everything we sold.

HOFFMAN: Lien could've spent months sourcing new financing or waiting for dining rules to change. Instead, she listened to the consumer reaction to her biscuit sandwich. This speed likely saved her business. Entrepreneurship is all about: What do you see as possible that other people don't see? You might not always find a biscuit window or a pie window, but you will find a window of opportunity.

Having found his own window of opportunity in the internet's capabilities for multimedia convergence, Ajaz dropped out of college along with multiple friends. He helped them imagine a world in which the internet was central to everything — from commerce to courtship. This, Ajaz thought, would be best applied to modernizing marketing with a focus on application building. The band of 21-year-old dropouts wasted no time building a new agency with an ambiguous name: AKQA.

You may think: What do building web applications have to do with advertising? The way Ajaz sees it: A brand wants to sell their product and get their messaging across. With applications that aren't streamlined or user intuitive, the messaging is weakened, and the consumer is less likely to digest what was intended. AKQA is all about less clutter to let the brand's product speak for itself: the Marie Kondo of digital advertising.

AHMED: When the agency started, we opened our doors without a single client. And that's usually a mistake for an agency. Because when you look at the great history of professional services companies or investment companies, you see the practitioners behind it have an opportunity or a relationship with an existing person or organization, and it makes sense for them to branch out on their own. We didn't have that.

HOFFMAN: Ajaz is right, most people wouldn't have the chutzpah to start an agency without clients. Especially a new kind of agency that was envisioning a whole new world. But AKQA was driving full-speed toward opportunity. That allowed Ajaz to read signs in the distance that other slower competitors were missing. All he needed was a way to share that vision with others. And he was about to find it.

[AD BREAK]

HOFFMAN: We're back with our episode on driving full-speed towards opportunity, with Ajaz Ahmed. If you're enjoying this episode, share it with friends — just hit the 'Share' button in your podcast app!

And to listen to my full conversation with Ajaz, become a Masters of Scale member at Mastersofscale.com/membership. There are more stories we couldn't get to, including Ashton-Tate's unusual cross-country challenge to Ajaz. And how AKQA built an app that users surprisingly found "too fast." You won't want to miss it.

When we left off, Ajaz had just founded AKQA with no clients, a brave feat for a new agency — especially one composed of 21-year-old dropouts. So, how could they attract clients when

competing with established advertising agencies? Their inspiration came from a phenomenon known as vaporware.

Vaporware is when a product is being advertised but isn't available yet, and in fact may be very far from completion. So AKQA decided to do a 180 instead: whenever they'd pitch a campaign to a potential client, they would put in the work to build a prototype ahead of time. They drove quickly to design and build before the client even approved the pitch. This way, the client could see exactly what they would be buying into.

AHMED: We had to create a vision. We were demonstrating applications of the internet to inspire organizations to embrace it. And because it was such an abstract and difficult technology for people to understand until the applications existed, we would create prototypes of ideas and share those prototypes with potential organizations. And most of the time, the organizations would fall in love with the idea and want to build it.

HOFFMAN: This aligns with a belief you've heard me say on the show before: show your work early, and show it often. Building the prototypes was mission critical for AKQA as they were creating technology that the lay-person couldn't comprehend yet.

One of the first major brands that AKQA had the opportunity to woo was Nike. Despite respected agencies also aiming to secure the account, the presentation went so well that Ajaz and the team left the pitch with confidence and swagger.

AHMED: A couple of weeks went by, the client from Nike got in touch with us and said, "We absolutely love the recommendations. We love the creativity. But this project is a pan-European project. We can't take the risk of working with an organization that only has one studio."

I remember putting the phone down and being absolutely gutted as you would be, and having this inner voice saying, "Get big or die trying." So, I never wanted to lose a pitch again for being too small. That mission of not being too small started the journey of becoming an international firm.

HOFFMAN: AKQA saw a clear sign from Nike: Road Block Ahead. The pitch had proven that AKQA could compete, but before they could land a dream brand like Nike, they'd have to race on to "get big or die trying."

But Ajaz and his team also took encouragement from the experience. AKQA spent the next few years building not just their volume of clients, but specifically targeting those with high name value who also wanted to expand online. Eventually they got traction with high-profile brands like Coca-Cola and BMW.

A brand that became synonymous with AKQA was Virgin. As you heard at the top of the episode with Ajaz's nerve-wracking meeting with Sir Richard Branson on a plane, AKQA and Virgin formed a thriving working relationship.

AHMED: Growing up in the UK when I did, Richard Branson is the ultimate entrepreneur, visionary, and pioneer.

HOFFMAN: Perhaps no entrepreneur better embodies the "drive full-speed" ethos than Sir Richard. Having started a record label as a teenager, Branson saw a kindred spirit in Ajaz.

AHMED: Virgin got in touch with us because Virgin wanted to launch a new product called Virgin Net. They wanted an organization to facilitate the interface and the onboarding and all of those components. Because of the success of that, we then received a number of other commissions from other parts of Virgin. An example is Virgin Radio, where Virgin Radio became the first radio station on the planet to broadcast live radio on the internet.

HOFFMAN: This strengthened Ajaz and Richard's already fruitful relationship and cemented a long road ahead together. Bolstered by successful contracts, Ajaz felt like he could continue to book it in the fast lane. He saw no reason to believe otherwise.

But Ajaz wasn't content. He'd never forgotten that early lost Nike account. Despite considerable success and growth, he was still haunted by that "get big or die trying" lesson, and he kept his eyes peeled for the next scale-leap off-ramp. It materialized, ironically, from a moment of deep trouble.

It was the early 2000s, and after years of boom times, the internet bubble burst. Valuations plummeted, companies disappeared. AKQA was hardly immune from the carnage.

AHMED: By this time, no one needed convincing about the importance that the internet was going to play in business. However, there wasn't the consumer base of audience required to give the internet the critical scale it needed to ensure these businesses could generate the returns that they needed. That inevitably led to the dotcom crash. So, it became the perfect storm for us.

HOFFMAN: In short, the dotcom crash caused a pileup. But while other businesses were focusing on their engines up in flames, Ajaz used the moment of smoke and carnage to remake AKQA for the future bigger and better. With everyone else afraid of dotcom winter, he used the pit stop to resupply for the next leap. AKQA raised capital and went shopping for agencies that were momentarily struggling but could amplify AKQA's aspirations.

AHMED: Everything that we did was about surviving and then thriving for the future. Fortunately, we managed to do that.

HOFFMAN: In 2001, AKQA received a \$71 million investment from Accenture and merged with 3 other firms around the world to become an international agency. Ajaz's inner voice had told him "get big or die trying." Well, now they got big. Five years after that disappointing blow from Nike, Ajaz got a call from them. Nike wanted AKQA to work on their next campaign. In the years that followed, the agency became closely tied to Nike, working on a soccer campaign in the UK and later an Air Max sneaker release.

AHMED: From your greatest defeat, you can often have a profound triumph. And in fact, it's those defeats along the journey that can often spur you on and make for a much better organization.

HOFFMAN: As always, the perceived failures at a business can make you stronger in the long run.

AHMED: I would say that we are able to take more risks with the work now and push the work even further because when you are small, if you make mistakes, or if you take risks, sometimes those risks can have a catastrophic effect on the organization. But when you benefit from the scale or the size, you can carry out more experiments. And if some of those experiments fail, then fine. We learn from that experiment. We take onboard the learnings, and we make sure we don't do it again.

HOFFMAN: This is exactly right. Scaled organizations have the capacity to stomach risks without them becoming existential threats. If they take a risk and it misfires, they can absorb the loss and move on. But counterintuitively, that doesn't mean a small start-up shouldn't take risks. Small, scrappy organizations actually must take risks, because at that size, your main advantage is speed. If you bet wrong, you've failed — but at least you've failed fast. And if you're right, you can gain first-mover-to-scale advantage.

You should still be reading your road signs, but you have to read them faster than the competition. At this phase, the most important sign of all is: MINIMUM SPEED 100 MILES PER HOUR. You can't slow down to the speed of competitors if you want to beat them to scale.

Keeping the minimum speed in mind, Ajaz shifted once again to seek inspiration in a new avenue of content creation. The agency drove full-speed at the chance to use revolutionary technology in music videos. In 2015, AKQA collaborated with the artist Usher on his song "Chains." The music tackled the ongoing plight and oppression of African-Americans in the United States.

AHMED: It's easy to turn away and not pay attention while this social injustice keeps taking lives. So what we did is to ensure the audiences paid attention, we launched the song using facial recognition technology, and so it would hold the gaze, and if the viewer looked away, then the music would stop.

HOFFMAN: Rather than use this new technology as a gimmick in pursuit of virality, Ajaz saw signs to use it to send a significant message. This release was a year after the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson and five years before that of George Floyd. So retrospectively, AKQA's collaboration can be seen as miles ahead of most major content corporations' social consciousness.

The road signs imploring responsible and moral leadership were becoming obvious on every block for Ajaz. He couldn't ignore them. He saw this moment in his career as a time to pivot into nonprofit work and opened his car to those that need a ride. Ajaz formed two AKQA off-shoots: Ajaz.org and AKQA Bloom.

As AKQA Bloom focuses on environmental causes, the agency partnered with NGOs worldwide to launch an open-source software called Code of Conscience that fights illegal deforestation. Fleets in both Australia and Brazil began to implement the code. And in response to the catastrophe created by COVID, Ajaz.org began to offer emergency grants to families and children on the poverty line.

AHMED: The idea with these grants is that they focus on what we call small-scale philanthropy. Even though I'm a big believer in systems change. It doesn't put food on the table. So there's a lot of families and children that are missing out while they're waiting for the system to change. So these grants that we've made are helping in the meantime.

HOFFMAN: Ajaz knew that this was an example of where speed means everything. They read the signs that pointed to a bureaucratic grind if they were to navigate towards wider change. So instead, they drove full-speed to achieve some tangible good quickly.

Ajaz's long tenure at AKQA armed him with the skillset and faith in speed to best lead the charity initiatives. AKQA is still redefining what it means to be a digital agency, as it continues to scale.

AHMED: Now we are about 25 years on; we're around 6,500 people. And if our projections go well, then we should exceed 1 billion in revenue this year. That all began because of the paper round that my dad organized for me.

HOFFMAN: You're likely too old for a paper route. But think about what that next paper route-sized opportunity might be for you. An opportunity can appear small in the distance, but if you drive full-speed and remember to read the road signs along the way, the opportunity may lead you to vistas you never thought possible.

I'm Reid Hoffman. Thank you for listening.