

Meet Alexandre Mars, the Man Bringing Silicon Valley-Style Disruption to Philanthropy

The French-born entrepreneur uses data to track how effective charities are—and he wants to make widespread giving the norm.

BY ELIZABETH HOLMES

JAN 23, 2018



SARAH LEE/EYEVINE/REDUX

Here's a question: How much money did you give away last year? Here's a better question: Why didn't you give more? The answer to the second question, according to Alexandre Mars, the French entrepreneur turned philanthropist, is threefold: a lack of knowledge (about where to give), a lack of trust (that the money would be put to good use), and a lack of time (to figure it all out).

Mars is on a mission to remove those barriers and make it systematic and painless—joyful, even—to hand over your hard-earned cash.

We live in the world of solutions. How can I ask you to give money if I'm not able to show you where the money goes?

Having amassed his own considerable fortune, first in technology and then in venture capital, the 43-year-old Mars is employing those tools and that business mindset in his philanthropic pursuits. Enter Epic Foundation. Since its launch in 2014, Epic has grown to represent three dozen youth-focused organizations in seven parts of the world, from the U.S. to Hong Kong, from Brazil to India.

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With a vigorous vetting process and monthly reporting, Epic feels more like a venture capital fund than a group of like-minded charities. Each year Mars and his team spend several months narrowing the applicant pool of thousands of charitable organizations, looking at 15 factors in each of three stages, which yields 45 data points. They then do intensive research on, and site visits to, the finalists. In 2017, out of 3,500 applications analyzed, only eight made the cut.



Mars speaking at an event called "Fast-Track Cities: Ending the AIDS Epidemic" at the

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Donors can sign up on [Epic's website](#) and track their ROI, as it were, via detailed status reports. One six-page "Mid-Year Monitoring" report on a French organization that offered web development training to low-income youths included charts comparing the projected and actual numbers of students enrolled each month, along with the cumulative number of training hours provided.

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The group’s “overall performance in Q1 and Q2 was slightly above the average of the Epic portfolio,” the report reads. Epic’s app offers similar insights, as well as a newsfeed, à la social networks.

For a generation raised on data and precision tracking, being able to see what’s trending in real time on Twitter or how many minutes until an Uber arrives, this kind of accountability is not a nice-to-have, it’s a #musthave. “We live in the world of solutions,” Mars says. “How can I ask you to give money if I’m not able to show you where the money goes?”

Mars is covering Epic’s overhead himself, including salaries for 30 employees in six offices worldwide. He estimates that he will spend roughly \$50 million of his own money in the foundation’s first decade, making it possible for all donated funds to go to Epic’s affiliated organizations.

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is far less quantifiable: to make giving the norm.

Born and raised in Paris, Mars adopted a Robin Hood–esque mantra early on: first to make money, then to use that money, along with his time and expertise, to do good. He started his first enterprise, organizing concerts, at age 17.

An early believer in the power of the internet and the importance of mobile electronics, he spent the next two decades launching and selling companies. The Publicis Groupe bought his mobile marketing agency, Phonevalley, in 2007. BlackBerry picked up Scroon, his social media management company, in 2013. Now he spends about a tenth of his time working for Blisce, his family’s New York–based VC firm, which has made investments in buzzy tech and tech-marketed names including Spotify, Pinterest, Harry’s razors, and Casper mattresses.

With close-cropped curls, an angular face, and a relentlessly positive attitude (he often ends conversations with “Have a beautiful day!”), Mars is charming in a very French way. (He schooled this reporter in the proper order in which to eat the selections on a cheese plate.)

A 2015 article in *Le Monde* carried the headline “le petit Bill Gate français.” He maintains a frenetic travel schedule, visiting Epic organizations around the world, reaching out to potential donors to get them to join the thousands already involved, and giving talks on the importance of philanthropy—70 appearances in the last year alone.

Yet he is home in Brooklyn often enough, with his wife and three children, to coach his daughter’s soccer team. “He is an adult who retains the energy of a young boy,” says Arnaud de Puyfontaine, chief executive of the French media conglomerate Vivendi. Mars typically sleeps just three or four hours a night.

In 2016, Mars was named the chair of the Sport and Society Committee for the Paris 2024 Olympics, charged with turning the games into a force for social change. He sees athletics as an exercise in humility. “Sometimes in the business world you believe you’re at the very top, and the truth is you never really know,”

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Mars practices krav maga, the self-defense system taught to the Israeli Army. He recently invited Alex Chung, founder and chief executive of Giphy who is also a black belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, over for a bout in the dojo in his home. Chung was greeted by an array of gloves and a selection of protective cups. Mars urged him to put on one of the latter, then promptly took a swipe at him. “You gotta learn,” Chung recalls Mars saying. “He hits really hard,” he adds with the nervous laugh of a man telling a story about getting hit in the testicles.

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Philanthropy has had a bad user experience since the beginning of time.

Perhaps in the name of fighting the good fight, Chung pledged a quarter of his salary to Epic the year it launched. “Philanthropy has had a bad user experience since the beginning of time,” Chung says, using techspeak to describe the need for a “rebrand.” Charity often conjures an image of a guy in a Santa suit ringing a bell, or someone with a plastic jug collecting change. Mars runs Epic like a startup, Chung says, trying to grow his user base and create content that goes viral.

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especially to younger donors who aren't used to parting with their winnings.

Take Cole Zucker, 33, who co-founded the commercial LED lighting business Green Creative in 2010. He once lived out of his car, but now he reports \$70 million in sales, up from \$300,000 as recently as 2011. He says he wants to give back but has been turned off by the reported inefficiencies of many organizations. “Not to say I would like somebody else to do it for me,” Zucker says, “but the time that would be required to decipher what's a good charity and what's a bad one is not really realistic.” He sees Epic's approach as a “fund-to-fund, putting the money into a basket of charities that [Mars] believes will yield the greatest return.”

Zucker is participating in Mars's Sharing Pledge, which comes in two versions: one for investors that asks financiers to pledge a percentage of their carry earnings, and another for entrepreneurs in which they pledge a percentage of the shares they hold in their companies. Zucker pledged 1 percent of his equity in addition to giving a lump sum to Epic this year.

When asked how it felt, he said, “Really painful.” He then quickly added, “No, it felt amazing. It really did.”

Donating 50 percent is super-painful! The giving should be joyful. When it's painless, it's joyful.

That feeling is a critical point for Mars. He asks donors to define their level of pain and go up to that point—but never beyond it. It's a personal limit, he says, one that only the person in question can define. He has a deep admiration for the Giving Pledge, started by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. But he finds the requirement of giving at least half of one's wealth to be prohibitive. "Donating 50 percent is super-painful!" Mars says. "The giving should be joyful. When it's painless, it's joyful."

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philanthropic philosophy: the less hassle involved, the less thought required, the less pain inflicted.

If you don't have equity to give, don't fret. Mars has a pair of solutions for you, too, which he is actively pitching in his talks around the globe. He is a proponent of payroll giving, in which employees donate a portion of their paychecks—even just the cents tacked onto the dollar amount. He encourages employers to match that amount.

Mars also pushes businesses to offer transactional giving, with the option to round up the amount of purchases for, say, a glass of wine or a suite at the Ritz. "It could be just 50 cents," Mars says. "It's nothing. But the nothing added to the nothing will become big."

This story appears in the February 2018 issue of Town & Country.

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