Mobile Interactions Now
Episode 11

Podcast | Taking Personal Safety Technology into Campuses & Main Streets

In this episode, POM's co-founder & CTO Lucas Lampe talks to Jean about how to expand into new user markets and keep improving products through direct conversations with the users.

jean: Lucas, welcome to the show. I take special pleasure in having you on the show today. I had a rare opportunity to see an early prototype that you made of the POM device. Ever since then, I was so curious how this is going to get to everybody who needs it. So I'm thrilled to catch up with you today and perhaps I can get the latest and if you are willing, even something beyond that, what's to come next. So first we did a little intro in the beginning, but I am sure they'd love to hear from you directly. So can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do at POM?

Lucas: Sure. Well first of all, thank you very much for having me on the show. We know each other for quite awhile and you have been always a very good friend, so thank you very much for having me here. I'm Lucas Lampe, I co-founded POM. POM is a personal safety company in New York and I'm working on it for six years now.

jean: Awesome. Now I consider...I mean you're too close to the subject matter and the device itself…but I consider POM as a novelty thing. So you know, unlike when I'm using a mobile phone, I feel I need a little bit of a general introduction for our audience. Just explain what it is and who is it for. Can you just start from there?

Lucas: Sure. POM is basically a small discrete personal safety device. It fits on your key chain and you can do a couple of things with it. You can call emergency dispatch, you can also just connect with your friends. So there's a couple of different ways how to get out of uncomfortable situations and it's basically a small key chain sized dongle connected with your smartphone via Bluetooth. It has a speaker and a microphone on it, two buttons and yeah, and it has a fairly good battery life so people don't have to recharge it for a week or so.

jean: So who are using it actually?

Lucas: So it was designed initially for the student market. So basically the idea was to replace the commonly used blue light poles in America in American campuses, college campuses. And our vision was basically to replace that system with a modern technology and mobile technology. So that students, if there's anything they need help with, can call into their campus safety dispatch center. Now we are branching out a little bit. We were seeing the need in other industries. So nurses are using it now. Realtors are using it now. Older people are using it now. Basically everybody who has kind of uncomfortable situations in their lives or just know that there could be medical issues, et cetera.

jean: Now can you tell me a little bit more about what those typical uncomfortable situations are…because I do think there are a lot of emergency situations and I'm kind of wondering if it's just you know, nice to have or it's a real emergency communication kind of system.

Lucas: Yeah, so basically it is an emergency system, so it gets used for example, at burglaries, robberies, or even medical incidents where people couldn't really get to their phone and call 911. When they just need a button to quickly call for emergency help. And then what happens is basically as soon as they press the button, it starts a phone call with the dispatching center. They get the location and they can see on their screen some profile information, like medical information, but also emergency contacts, et cetera. So in the end they will have all of the information to be able to send help. And what's important as well is that they can actually talk to the victim or the person who called in so that they can actually gain a couple more information, assess the situation to really know what kind of help is needed here.

That's basically the main feature why a lot of people are buying it. But we've learned over time obviously that that feature doesn't get used a lot. It only gets used in a test sense a lot that people just want to make sure it works. But then we were thinking about what kind of other use cases are actually out there more in the day to day life, which are uncomfortable and where we could help. And that really came down to a couple of different things. For students it was more like when strangers started talking to them on campus or when they feel uncomfortable in certain conversations, et cetera. Or if they just want their friends to come and join them, for example, for a walk or on a party to get out of some uncomfortable situations. And with that in mind, we kind of like built other features around it so that you don't only have the emergency feature available all the time.

You also have, for example, what you can do is you can, when you hold down the button of the POM, you can basically text your friends your location and the predefined text. Or you can just call them or you can initiate a fake phone call, which is a feature which is widely used actually not only in emergency situations also more in everyday life. Let's say for example you have an uncomfortable conversation with somebody and that somebody doesn't stop talking. Wouldn't it be cool if you just pressed the POM and you receive a phone call from your mom or anybody and you obviously have to take that phone call so you get out of that situation. These features have been proven to be very practical in different situations so that you can get out of uncomfortable situation or sometimes even for jokes. That's okay with us. And, yeah. So in addition to that, our app has a couple of more features, like a virtual escort where you can say, "Hey, I want to be in my dorm in like 10 minutes and if I don't arrive, please send somebody." And we have that as well.

jean: So now, there’re so many fun things but also some very, very critical features I'm hearing here. So perhaps it will be helpful if you were to just take one example. Like okay, so this feature, you push this button and trigger this XYZ function. And can you just walk us through, because I have some, you know, geeky listeners as well. So was this triggered and then what happens from there? Tell us the whole thing that is happening in the back room.

Lucas: Yeah, sure. Well let's say for example, you trigger the emergency call. I think that's the biggest use case and the interesting one. It's basically ... and let's say for example, our system would be connected to the campus dispatcher. So we actually don't only have the front end kind of where you say, okay, you have the button and the mobile app working with each other. Now there's also actually a dispatching software at the campus safety level and they're running that dispatching software 24-7. So basically what would happen is if you press the button, it triggers a signal to the phone and then the phone basically looks up your location and tries to determine where you are and if you're in the vicinity of the campus. if you're within the campus borders, which we have defined beforehand, obviously, then what would happen is the phone tells the POM, hey, call campus safety. And in addition it says, okay and send all the location, send it all to the dispatcher so he can actually, or she can see you, knows where you are and also has access to your profile information. Let's say for example a picture, the name obviously, the phone number, the email address and medical information or even emergency contacts.

And then what happens is then the dispatcher sees that alert popping up. It makes a huge sound. It's always very loud. It's kind of funny when you actually go into the dispatch centers, it definitely gets your attention. And what will also happen is the phone call, their phone will start to ring after the dispatch is sent. And then what happens is the dispatcher would take the phone call, sees where the student in this case is and can talk to the student through the POM. So basically the POM acts as a headset with a speaker and a microphone so you don't even have to have your phone out of your pocket, which is for many campus safety directors, a very crucial thing because it makes it just more viable in the practical sense. And we achieved that basically with a Bluetooth connection, which is in dual mode. And that means it's basically using a couple of different protocols, which obviously the HFP and HSP protocol, but then also the low energy Bluetooth, which kind of like holds the steady connection and also enables us to have a relatively high battery life. So you have to recharge it only every week. And not every day or something like you have with the iWatch or something.

jean: Now I didn't realize how much of the actually built in connectivity and usability in that tiny little device here have there. Now in addition to what's happening on the device itself, what do you have to do if any for the campus itself? Are you setting up anything?

Lucas: Okay. Well it's actually all self-sustained, but if we install basically our system, it's not really an installation on their servers. Everything is cloud based, it just runs on our servers. It's more training. So we will have an initial call very quick asking about what are kind of the settings they want, what are the campus parameters in regards to the geo fence, what kind of phone number should we call where. And after that conversation we set their environment and then what we do is just we will go on sites and test and train every single dispatcher and yeah, that's usually also very easy. We kept everything ... the entire software is really built to not take up too much time and very self-explanatory. Back in the days when we met ... that was the time where I slept literally at 911 centers and campus safety departments to see how the night shift is actually reacting and what do they need so that this system is actually viable and usable for them.

I remember the early days it was really the question for us…not only about the user who wants to do the emergency call, it's also about the ones who receive it. But that has been proven now for a couple of years to be very successful. And for other companies, let's say for example health systems, we do it differently because they usually don't have there campus safety office integrated there. We actually now partner with a 24-7 emergency dispatch center. They call it rapid response and they take the calls. We're partnering with them now since a year and it's been very successful. We integrate within their systems and their processes, so it's very important not only to think technically what you do, it's also very important to think about, okay, how can you actually integrate your system within the processes the dispatchers are used to so that they don't have to be trained too much and in a stress situation they can easily get the information they needed? We only had to do that one time. Basically we're continuing to innovate and obviously update the system, but that has been also very effective so far.

jean: That sounds like an elaborate setup if you ask me, because there are many different parties involved and I think the whole workflow that has to happen…because there is no room for error. But I'm wondering from the buying process part of this, what are some of your typical champions within organizations who try to bring your solution into their campus and into their work environment?

Lucas: Well that's a very, very interesting question and that's the hard part I would say. As a technology guy…it was always I don't want to say straightforward, but it was always doable to build a system. And you've mentioned the redundancy you need to make actually, yeah, like a security system and that hasn't been easy. But on the other side, obviously the sales part, the question really is, who do you target? We started targeting colleges at the very beginning and there are…the director of safety, the VP of student affairs, everybody who basically thinks about student affairs. And those are the people we are targeting. But in the end, it's a very interesting buying process because, well, in the end you need the approval from the board and the president. So it's sometimes hard for people like the director of safety to actually go to the president and then want to have funds for that. And so some colleges were able to do that. Some colleges were still stuck in the buying process. We have yet to hear a lot of colleges who say, this is a bad idea. It's just it takes time. Colleges are like big ships. They're not moving fast. They want to make sure this is working, et cetera. But yeah, it's been very good.

On the healthcare side though, we're seeing now a lot of interest specifically in the mobile workers. So home health for example is a huge part where we're growing very quickly. We implemented it on a couple of different health systems and currently are also in a lot of pilots. And there it's usually the COO, the chief nursing officer. Sometimes health systems also have a director of safety and security. And what we've seen here is, I mean they have very good answers for their in-hospital safety on campus, like they have cameras, access systems, all that stuff. And these are sophisticated markets with few players. But we were at a conference in Florida and we asked the simple question. What do you do for your mobile workforce? Do you have anything here, any safety solutions, any security solutions? And we haven't heard anything…like there isn't anything. Many people just say, well we trained them. We, you know, we have a nice

process and stuff and we asked, okay, what happens if you really need help? Or what happens if it's just an uncomfortable situation?

I give an example that is fairly interesting. We heard a nurse who got literally stuck in the room of a patient and the patient said that you get out of this room if you listen to my piano music. So she was stuck in a room for an hour. She didn't get assaulted, there was nothing happened like on a physical sense at least but it was a very uncomfortable situation. Wouldn't it be nice if you get a phone call in that moment? Or if you just discretely text somebody, please come here and then that somebody could be another nurse, et cetera. But someone comes and just that there's somebody else in the room and helps you out of it. And it's not even that you need the police necessarily. You know what I mean? You just need to get out of there. And that is ... we hear that a lot. Like these kind of little things where people feel uncomfortable seeing it as part of their job, which I think honestly it's ... my sister's a nurse, you know. For me it's incredible what kind of work they do. But I kind of think it gets a little out of hand in that sense that nurses have to actually deal with all that stuff.

So with that in mind, in the health systems we talk to the director of security, we're talking to CNOs, chief nursing offices, we are talking to nurse managers and we work with them to make that system even better for them. So that's also something we're trying to do…continuously improving the system. We released this year alone like three big features specifically for healthcare and they have already been proven to be very effective.

jean: That is really interesting because although this is an enterprise use case, the minute I hear healthcare, I'm thinking about the patient end of it…the whole nursing situation…I didn't think about the people, the actual professionals who have to actually go to sometimes for the first time like stranger's house to take care of them…and that is totally a different way to look at it.

Lucas: You mentioned that at the beginning you think it's a novelty and I think it's still a novelty. Personal safety in that sense is still a new market. There's a lot of players now who try to go in there with a new technology which happens over the last couple years and they also get more and more sophisticated like Bluetooth for example, low energy Bluetooth gets more and more sophisticated over the years. It's still a new market. And although everybody knows life alert for elderly, so you've mentioned that in one of our conversations before, but really what happens to people in their everyday lives are everything. They should also be able to use the current technology. And we're still learning in that market. So we're seeing a lot of players with same kind of features. But I still think that there's a lot to be learned and a lot of education to be done. So the other part is that because it's a novelty, if you create a new market and you have the vision as a co-founder, hey everybody should have access to emergency help anytime. There's a lot more to it than just building the product and throwing it at nurses or students to say, okay, use it. You have now emergency access nowadays. It's way more. And to actually make it successful and that's for us, it's really data, data, data and conversations with our users.

jean: Let me pick that up a little bit because you talked about learning from the users and really talking with them and watching them. And you bring it over and you try to build that into the product when you're doing it. But I also know there are many people who are developing products, they have this moment of being pleasantly surprised because oftentimes the users just find their own way to use things…in ways when you are designing the product you never thought of. Is there anything that really surprised you in terms of how your users are using it?

Lucas: There're a couple of things. One of the biggest thing I like was actually the fake phone call as I personally was not a big fan of it at the beginning when that idea came up but it was relatively easy to implement so I was like, all right, let's just do it and try it. And then it became one of the most used features. It was just funny, specifically on a student campus it was funny. On the other side, what we've seen is, for example, on the text message side ... so if you press a button, you can text a friend. We've seen it developing in a couple of campuses we saw…people say, "Oh, we have POM buddies now." Then as I was on campus giving out the POMs and then two girls came to me. "Yeah, we are POM buddies, we put each other as emergency contact, we are fine." And then the other one came and the other one ... and I'm like, "Oh wow, that's cool." And now we're actually taking that concept and we will integrate it into a more sophisticated feature which will come out in the next couple of months.

And the other way was the emergency feature was actually used as an escort feature. So people called in and they just said, "Can you be with me five minutes on the phone? Just be with me on the phone. I'm walking you through ... I don't care about the walking. I want you on the phone. And do you see me? Do you see my location? I'm here and it's dark and cold and it's uncomfortable. I want you to be on the phone." And obviously then our call center or in that case it was actually the campus safety officer stayed on the phone and made sure that she arrived safely.

jean: I don't know how I got to this question from what you just said, but what you just said, it got me curious about your pricing model. How is this? Is it usage based and how are you pricing this?

Lucas: So because we have to man an emergency dispatch center, it's a subscription model. So we usually charge for the device and then we charge on the subscription side. If somebody chooses to use their own dispatch center, which obviously most of the colleges have, then it's still a subscription because we want to make sure that we develop the product, we add features and all that stuff. So for us it's not a one time thing and just want to sell the product and that's it. We really want to have that subscription just because we want to make sure that you always use the latest and greatest technology and that we can make sure that we improve the product to be more valuable for you. And .... we really want to make sure that in this early market we can improve the product.

jean: Sounds fun. And I heard a little bit about your customizable command center and I'm curious what that feels like, because I'm immediately imagining something like an emergency system, a little bunker, a virtual bunker-like situation. So tell me what that is and how customizable it can be.

Lucas: Well, it has a lot of stuff. I mean, so basically it's all about setting it up how you want it to work. So who should it call? What kind of emergency protocol do you want to happen? So you know, you can really say, okay I, as a company, any call who comes in from our nurses for example, should notify these people, should notify even like not only email and text message, also a call actually. It should actually trigger these actions. It should either always send an ambulance or always send police or always send firefighters. Here are the things which happen if you can't get in touch or if the person can't talk. So that's the one customized. And you can also customize and preset the auto text, the auto call or the fake phone calls to really like go really deep in there. And then you can add features.

So we have a couple of features for the mobile workforce for example, in the health system. And there was the scheduling feature where you can put in your schedule. And basically with that we enable a more sophisticated location because we know you have an appointment in apartment 3C on the seventh floor, so we can send that additional information over to the dispatcher, which is specifically as you know in New York could be an issue, because the question is where are you actually in a building. And if you have like 30 floors that could take awhile to find that person.

Then there's other things like mass broadcasting. Who should be able to mass broadcast, who shouldn't be able to mass broadcast? And we're working actually now on the other features, availability dashboard we call it. It's basically a dashboard where you can see your workforce mobile and kind of see what kind of schedule they have and even contact them fairly easily and manage them on the fly. Those are still features we're working on…that will all be customizable for a customer.

jean: And this is what I love about software based products. It is just limitless and it is like you are only limited by your own imagination. So I think it will be remiss if we don't address the topic of user privacy, data protection, all these things because you do have sensitive location data and all those things. Take us into some of the issues that you have to deal with.

Lucas: Well yeah, on the business side, on the enterprise side, we definitely have to go through rigorous IT ... like questions and kind of like that…they are looking at our system and we basically have all the standards you need on the technology side to be safe. We're using all the standards, protocols, the secure protocols, we're encrypting everything. So in that sense it's usually a quick conversation honestly because we designed the system to be secure and we are very sensitive about it. We also don't track somebody the entire time specifically not in the consumer space. That is something I'm very ... personally, I have a very big opinion about it because I really want that people are autonomous or really know if they get tracked, but they're also safe. You know, like I don't want to build a big brother everywhere. That's not what I've ever intended. But I want to give people access to emergency help … if it's needed they have to be tracked in the enterprise world, then it will be very obvious to the user that the location actually went through.

And that's very important for us. We do nothing in the back door there. Everything is very transparent and that's very important to me. And on the data privacy side, all the

standards, I mean we can go through them, but I don't think they are very exciting for people, but that's basically it. Yeah. We have also outside companies who look at that.

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