



LEAD WITH WE EPISODE 20: CHRISTOPHER GAVIGAN

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Simon Mainwaring:

Welcome to Lead With We. I'm your host, Simon Mainwaring, the founder, and CEO of We First. Lead With We is a podcast where we get top business leaders and founders to reveal how they built their companies to be high impact and high growth by putting we first. Lead With We is produced by Goal 17 Media, storytellers for the common good.

Simon Mainwaring:

Welcome to this week's episode of Lead With We, and I'm very excited about our guest Christopher Gavigan. Now, Christopher and Jessica Alba, the actress, co-founded The Honest Company, one of the leading nontoxic all-natural home care brands in the country, and he's since gone on to start a new endeavor in the hyper-competitive CBD category called Prima. So, Christopher Gavigan, founder, and CEO of Prima, welcome to Lead With We.

Christopher Gavigan:

Simon, it's a pleasure. I've known you for a while, and it's always great to see your face, even in these chaotic and wild times. But it's always a pleasure seeing you and hanging with you.

Simon Mainwaring:

Well, thanks for spending some time with us. And I want to start at the beginning. Firstly, you're actually an environmental scientist by training. And before you became a CEO in the business world, you actually led a nonprofit called Healthy Child Healthy World, which educates parents on how to reduce their children's exposure to toxic chemicals. And then you went on to write a book on that same title to sort of try and codify that contribution. So, how did all of that lead you to found The Honest Company? Was there a light bulb moment where you suddenly said, "Wait a second, I've got to turn this into a business. I've got to start a company," because that's a completely different direction?

Christopher Gavigan:

Well, look, the world of NGO as you know it quite well is so equipped with data and information and ideals but it's bridging the gap between ideals and ideas is always so hard to do. And the idea was, can I create a product? Can we create a master brand that was a place of and outsource trust? So, consumers can come in and really feel at home and at peace and have the peace of mind to shop and to navigate a marketplace that is riddled with really harmful carcinogens at the end of the day in a lot of these incumbents that we're dealing with. It was a great run in the early days because I was like this purity pioneer, and I'm going to teach people about the medicine, bringing medicine and research into the world of chemicals and telling them what not to put on their bodies.

Christopher Gavigan:

But then, ultimately, at the end of the day, every person, every mom who I was teaching to or talking to because I wrote a book called Healthy Child Healthy World is specifically around parents and new babies, new homes, and parents ask one thing or they really request one thing, "Tell me what to buy." And for me, a brand is very much a collection of values. And I love the idea of really building those purpose-driven values from the NGO space that I harvested that...

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, so that's what you took away the need for a brand, because not everybody, most people want to get a product, an MVP out there, but to base a company on a core proposition of honesty, was that, again, naivete or was that a very conscious decision in the first place?

Christopher Gavigan:

No, that was a very conscious. To build in and surround the word honest by the company was incredibly conscious.

Simon Mainwaring:

You set a high bar for yourself. That's like a rod for your own back right there.

Christopher Gavigan:

Look, it's going to cut so hard both ways. I mean, that's just a field day for your competitive set to attack you. First, they watch you, and then they attack you, and then they copy you. Right? And so that paradigm shift and that marketplace shift, we saw it, certainly, over the course of the last eight years, to really entice and engage them to shift their practices around better, safer, more non-toxic ingredients in their products. And that's been the win.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. I think the influence on the industry when someone has established and kind of proven out that higher bar is enormous but, at the outset, taking on these products, you are an innovation company, in truth. You weren't a beauty company. I mean, you had to retool all of these products. So, we've got so many entrepreneurs listening to this who want to make a positive difference in the world. I mean, you literally said, "What am I going to do? Build a lab and pull apart every product that's out there?" How does someone go from idea to execution?

Christopher Gavigan:

So, Honest very much was we are what we are not, and we are not choosing, we are-

Simon Mainwaring:

What you exclude.

Christopher Gavigan:

Right, what are we keeping out? What are we formulating without? And I think that that was a big part of the endeavor there because it's okay, R&D guy, you can't use these 2,000 ingredients, even though you want to, and even though you've done it for the last 30 years, you can't use them. Now what? And so a lot of that was, can you get the aesthetics? Can you get the aesthetics, like foam-

Simon Mainwaring:

The efficacy.

Christopher Gavigan:

And slip, and then can you get the consumer to like it? And its smell comparable and do its core job and function of cleansing and standardization and all those things. Those were hard days. And those were days where we were like, "Oh, we can't get that one done so we're going to scrap that one, and we're just going to focus on this." But that first launch of products was 17 products. So, we were in the diaper category, we're in the home category, and we're in the personal care category.

Simon Mainwaring:

So, how long did it take you to build a portfolio of 17 products? That's amazing.

Christopher Gavigan:

Two and a half years.

Simon Mainwaring:

Two and a half years, and you probably couldn't even find a supplier that would... They probably push back at you and go, "That's not the way things are done."

Christopher Gavigan:

Oh my gosh, the first days you should have seen these small vendors and co-manufacturers that we were with. It was truly kitchen chemistry in many respects but then rolling into first year one, two, three, you needed to find people that could scale with you. And that shift and that movement from small-time manufacturer to mid-tier and upper-tier and best in class, those were hard days because it just taxes the team. It taxes the operational sophistication and efficiencies but you eventually have to do it because the output of these small manufacturers just can't keep up.

Simon Mainwaring:

So, you co-founded The Honest Company with actress, Jessica Alba, and you two had a lot of success earlier on. There was a lot of growth. So, what drove that success? Was it the PR through Jessica? Was there a pent-up demand from moms? What drove that early success?

Christopher Gavigan:

There's certainly fear. Fear will drive change, generational change. And the fear was, "Oh my gosh, now I'm uncovering and discovering that certain toxicants can lead to harm or illness in my baby." No one wants a child with ADD or behavioral disorders or childhood cancer. I mean, this is the biggest, biggest fear. So, if I could make a small change now to prevent so this is prevention and this is preventative care, people will invest in that. And so if you tell that story and, again, not peddling fear but certainly causing enough of highlight to it to drive a shift, and I think that that-

Simon Mainwaring:

Education, awareness. You can't unsee that stuff.

Christopher Gavigan:

You can't unsee it. You can't unsee it, and then you wrap it in with the right amount of compassion and emotion. And, certainly a co-founder like Jessica Alba who can bring the attention and carry a story, it was a beautiful, beautiful mix of many things that some were luck and some were very consciously decided upon but it was a-

Simon Mainwaring:

Were you and Jessica partners out of the gate or is that something that emerged?

Christopher Gavigan:

Yes. Yes, yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

And wasn't it the case that she was just like any other mom, had the experience with her own child?

Christopher Gavigan:

Had the experience of where she had a horrible allergic reaction to a laundry detergent. And so she had just gotten my book. She actually came to my book launch party in 2008. So, it was a really kismet and a great moment. And she was just like, "We need to, I need to, someone needs to", and we were like, "Let's do this. And let's work nights and weekends to design and decide," and really decipher whether we were going to go for it or not.

Simon Mainwaring:

How long did that take? What did the team look like? It's just an idea. It's two people talking about it.

Christopher Gavigan:

Yeah. It was her and I. We had a couple consultants on the sourcing side and more on the FP&A and brand building side. I mean, and certainly, I've learned over the years but that was not my core competency. And then, eventually, we co-partnered with two other great entrepreneurs, Brian Lee and Sean Kane. Brian, specifically, had great and has tremendous acumen in all things subscription-based business. And so diapers plus subscription business plus e-commerce, and again, this is 2012, so this is early subscription days so it was a really nice fit.

Simon Mainwaring:

This is important what you're mentioning because neither your background nor Jessica's was really from that world, business models, and so on. So, there's a lot of great instinctive entrepreneurs out there that want to make a difference but they may not have had an MBA. They may not have gone to business school. So, how do you solve for that? Do you just sort of you just find those partners out there? You just bring in the skills you need?

Christopher Gavigan:

Look, you've got to know what you're good at and what you're not good at. And for me, my core is product, ingredients, the efficacy of these products. I mean, right? But for some of the larger operational and business stuff, you've got to outsource and you've got to find those key experts.

Simon Mainwaring:

So, after moving on from Honest and then to Prima, what was that next step? Did you just sit back and say, "What am I going to do now?" Or were you already thinking of the CBD category?

Christopher Gavigan:

Yeah, for me, it was understanding the vision of, certainly, the customer but my responsibility to help architect a new story and a new paradigm on how we care for our bodies. Again, I love the beautiful. I believe that nature is intelligent, and how to be choiceful and protective and reactive to, okay, there are certain threats and we're going to prevent those. We're going to keep those out. But then what is actually infusing and optimizing and causing us to heal and thrive from within?

Simon Mainwaring:

So, a lot less bad, more good now.

Christopher Gavigan:

More good. What is nature telling us and what have we discovered in the last 25 years that nature is telling us, specific to all things plant-based botanicals, and where's the innovation lie? And so I recalled, early days in 2009, so I sit on the board of Mount Sinai, and this is in 2009.

Christopher Gavigan:

So, prior to Honest launching, I heard about cannabinoid science. I was like, "What are cannabinoids? What are these molecules, these phytonutrients, and where are they coming from? They're coming from cannabis?" And like, "Is this about high or healing? Where are we?" And so the world of this newly discovered body system, this endocannabinoid system that we all have in our bodies, and how gas in high concentration, they're found in the cannabis plant but we actually make these molecules. And these molecules are specifically functioned to bring the body back to balance, to reduce inflammation, to reduce pain. There are two ways to manage pain inside the body, opioid receptors, and cannabinoid receptors. And so cannabinoid receptors, again, it's a young burgeoning science but neurobiologists, and neuroscience, and the world of endocrine disruption and discovery, everyone is so excited about this new science.

Christopher Gavigan:

And so I went back to science fires me up. There's an industry that's now unfolding around cannabinoid research, and there are 120 cannabinoids. One's THC. That gets you high. And there are 120 others. What are some of the possibilities of these compounds? And again, you had Big CPG discovering it. You have pharma looking at it. You've got the world of medicine and academics and research looking at it. And there wasn't one brand, one coalesced place of trust that I was excited about or a place that I could say on the consumer side, "I understand you. I understand what you're doing. I know the sourcing. I can trust your accountability and transparency initiatives. I know that you're building something of a high integrity." I mean, the world of cannabis, as we know, has some shadow economy folks over the years.

Simon Mainwaring:

It does. But you're looking at it through a very unique lens. You're looking at it through the eyes of an environmental scientist who has a passion for science and the energy to understand it. When you launched Honest Company, you had to educate people as to the harm that's being done that they were unaware of. Here you've got a different challenge. You

had to educate people that this wasn't some weird voodoo sort of getting high sort of alternative. And, at the same time, you did have those who were stepping into the cannabis industry, which was just a gold rush at the same time. So, you had to educate people but you're fighting on two different fronts. How did you navigate that?

Christopher Gavigan:

For me, it's this understanding of bridging the gap between healthcare and wellness, and understanding that... Wellness for me has hit this limiting factor and place. Right? What does wellness mean? It's this bastardized word right now. It's been watered down. And for me, it's about this frontier of wellbeing and wellbeing is the physical, the mental, and the social. So, this paradigm of these three ideals of an optimized state of health. Yes, we can live the cleanest, purest life but if we have no social relationships and our thoughts and mindset are completely out of whack, and if you're allowing stress, which is the epidemic of today, if we're allowing stress to impact our bodies, I don't care how many kale salads and organic juices you drink, you're going to be ill, and sick, and out of balance.

Simon Mainwaring:

Absolutely. I think we're all, especially during COVID, working so hard to manage our mental health, our physical wellbeing. But what did you do differently when you were starting from scratch again this company versus Honest? Again, back to a small team. Again, back to a standing start in a very competitive industry. What looked different the second time you did it?

Christopher Gavigan:

For me, it was leaning more heavily in the science because they're in this, again, in this space, in this young space or evolving nascent space around cannabinoid research and health, no one's defining the standards around purity and accountability to the sourcing side. No one's really has defined a level of commitment around potency and, really, label claims and certifications. And so what we've decided to do is, really, either partner with third-party credible outside experts, like Environmental Working Group, and B Corp, and MADE SAFE, and the glyphosate project, Detox Project to drive the halo of trust around the brand, and then also just to really, just everything you want to know about the brand, we'll tell it for you. If you want to double, triple, quadruple click in, it's there for your discovery.

Simon Mainwaring:

When you look at Prima and the way it shows up on your website and marketing materials and so on, it's quite an elevated brand. It's clearly upscale. It's clearly targeting a youth demographic and a well-informed demographic. How do you work out, when you're starting a company, where you're going to pitch yourself in terms of your brand and, by extension, your products?

Christopher Gavigan:

The way we've positioned the brand has been, yes, we're cannabinoid science and research for the whole you. We want this collective wellbeing mindset. What we're learning is and what we intuitively know but we've got to just continually be grounded. You know this very well. Simple, direct, easy, and somewhat irreverent sometimes but we need to boil down the science even more. I mean, sometimes I get too excited and too seduced by the science, and someone needs to be like, "Yo, I don't understand what you're saying."

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, right, right.

Christopher Gavigan:

And so I think what we're trying to do right now is understand, okay, we've built some phenomenal products that people love. We've built a halo of responsibility and accountability in the higher standard in this category. So, we know where we're going, and now it's to build that relationship with that consumer that makes them feel like, "Okay, again, I outsource my trust to you, and you've got the baton, and you're leading but at least I'm familiar with you." It's that accessibility conversation.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. What are you doing differently in terms of growing a purposeful business like this to what you did before with Honest? Are you still throttling in the same way between building the brand and focusing on product efficacy? Are you doing something different in terms of how you're building the team? Are you taking it more slowly having learned the lesson that you did with Honest Company? What's different now?

Christopher Gavigan:

What we've seen is if we're going to be these pioneers around trust and relationship but also standards and building a world-class brand that you need some anchor partners. You can't have a beautiful website and just be fulfilling direct. You need some anchor relationships on the distribution side. So, we work with Sephora and underneath their Clean at Sephora banner, we've created these CBD standards. And to get a global retailer to step towards... Again, Sephora LVMH, to get them to say, "Yes, we are going to help define some consistency around the product, and around sourcing, and around how we test, and around what's inside, and what's not." So, that has shifted now because the retailers are regulators because the regulators in DC aren't doing the work. So, brands and now retailers have a responsibility there.

Simon Mainwaring:

They have to protect themselves.

Christopher Gavigan:

They have to.

Simon Mainwaring:

How did you broker that? Because the partnership with Sephora is a big deal for any young company. And, yes, you had the credibility of The Honest Company behind you, which obviously helps. But how did you go to the... David and Goliath, you're nobody in their world, in a sense.

Christopher Gavigan:

Again, it all comes back to this book, 2008, Healthy Child Healthy World.

Simon Mainwaring:

Write a book, throw a party.

Christopher Gavigan:

Write a book and throw a party.

Simon Mainwaring:

The rest takes care of itself.

Christopher Gavigan:

Cindy Deily, excuse me, Deily who worked at Sephora at the time, she read my book. She'd just had a baby, and Cindy was, remarkably, an internal champion for the standards around Clean at Sephora. She saw the natural, botanical, plant-based trend. She saw the reason to start getting some of these bad actives ingredients out of the cosmetics industry, and so she had a vision. And so when we launched Prima in the fall of, excuse me, in the spring of 2019 as a educational platform because we launched with a hundred pieces of original content, adding context, demystifying, what is CBD, how do you use it, what to look for, we didn't have product at the time. She saw us, and she said, "Oh my god, you're back at the education and awareness game. I want to partner with you. I've got this category of CBD I have no idea what to do with it. And it's growing tremendously but I don't know who to trust, and all these people, and..."

Simon Mainwaring:

This is so interesting. I mean, people feel like they're at a disadvantage if they're starting a new company and they don't have a product but you turn that around and built education that was necessary to kind of demystify the area, and then that unlocked a relationship that otherwise wouldn't have happened.

Christopher Gavigan:

It would have never happened. Like, if I had to knock on the door of Sephora and said, "I've got some products," that would've never happened.

Simon Mainwaring:

As you look forward now, what do you look like in three years time? To your point about a brand being bigger than one product alone, what does that portfolio look like because you're in the wellbeing business?

Christopher Gavigan:

Yeah. I truly believe that there are, outside of hemp and cannabinoids, there are many other functional and innovative therapeutics in the botanical space that need to be driven into the forefront. I believe that we're going to continually iterate and we're going to push the science on how to... Again, how do we bring the world of botanical therapeutics in the forefront? And how do we get away from the petrochemicals, and industrial solvents, and industrial chemicals of yesteryear, and push conscious innovation in the world of plant-based? The hundreds of thousands of years of ancient traditions have leveraged some of these technologies and then we've just forgotten about them.

Simon Mainwaring:

You're such a powerful study in somebody who's just pursued their passion, a pretty geeky passion, which is a love of science, environmental scientist by training, and then you've really explored doing less bad and adding more good in the beauty category, and now you're doing it in the CBD category. Tell me your advice to young or sort of mid-career entrepreneurs out there, on the strength of all that you've experienced, a few pointers as to how they navigate

capturing the opportunity that's out there in the marketplace right in front of them but also playing for the long game and making sure that they get the success that they want, and also enjoy it on the way. Anything you'd share?

Christopher Gavigan:

I think we're in a time where it's forcing us to slow down and, hopefully, the slow down is not to hurry up again but to slow down and recalibrate our priorities and the impact of what we're doing to the globe, and the planet, and to each other. My advice would really be do the thing that you're going to do but hopefully, do it with a level of responsibility and care for future generations beyond. And make sure that you are serving not yourself, but serving something bigger and something far beyond your reaches of understanding that is not within the next 5 to 10 years but, hopefully, 50 to 100 years.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's such a powerful thing that you just shared because I think we all think of pace as a noun. The pace at which you live is predetermined by external forces, and you've got to deal with the pace of life. But what you're saying is it's a verb. You can actually choose to pace your life consciously, intentionally. And if you do that, you can be much more considered in the choices you make. You can enjoy it more on the way. You can make sure you keep your eye on the right prize, which is, as you say, success in this lifetime but living a legacy in some way that's going to have a positive impact. My last question would be after all of these miles that you've run and the companies that you built, what does success mean to you? How do you define or understand success privately, professionally?

Christopher Gavigan:

It does go back to legacy for me. And success for me, I had a moment of true perspective when my son, who's now 13, he was in his kindergarten class and he was telling his friends what his dad did. And the teacher said, "What does your dad do?" And he said, "He makes trusted products for a healthier world." And I felt like, oh my god, if he can able to articulate that as a six-year-old, then I'm so living my truth. And for me, success is about living your truth. Again, in your heart of hearts and your deepest core, what is your truth? What do you want to live? And how does that express itself?

Christopher Gavigan:

And mine is, my truth is to be in service of others. It is to really help others. And yes, it is through science and, yes, it is through the world of nature but it really, I mean, my father sometimes beat it into me, not literally, but he was like, "Help other, serve others, do something for someone else, do something but it has to be for someone else," because I think, ultimately, I believe that we all have that service orientation inside of us. It just needs to be unlocked or shifted because when you serve others, you're really going to serve yourself at the end of the day.

Simon Mainwaring:

So true. Christopher, thank you for sharing the insights and the journey that you've been on, and nothing but best wishes for the success of the next expression of Christopher Gavigan, which is Prima, and congrats to the whole team on the success so far.

Christopher Gavigan:

Thank you so much, Simon. It's always a pleasure to see you and hear you and your greatest capability of listening and then rearticulating. I've been involved in some of your sessions and

I mean, I've seen magic happen a few times but in one particular session, I saw magic unfold right before my eyes and it was because of you.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for the kind words. Thanks for joining us on this week's episode of Lead With We where I spoke with Christopher Gavigan, the co-founder of The Honest Company, and now founder and CEO of Prima who shared with us how to start a purposeful business from scratch and take it to scale, and how to capture that marketplace opportunity by building trust around your entire category. If you'd like to subscribe to Lead With We, you can find us on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and please do recommend it to your friends so they too can learn how to build a purposeful and profitable business. If you'd like to learn more about how you can build a purposeful brand, check out wefirstbranding.com where we have lots of free resources and case studies. See you on the next episode of Lead With We.

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