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## LEAD WITH WE

### HIGHLIGHT 2020: JAY CURLEY, BEN & JERRYS

Simon Mainwaring:

Hi everyone! It's Simon Mainwaring, Founder and CEO of We First, and right now we are ramping up for Season Two of Lead With We. I can't wait to share new conversations with purposeful business leaders. But today, let's go back to one of my favorite conversations from 2020. It's with Jay Curley, Head of Integrated Marketing at Ben and Jerry's. At this point, it's hard to say whether Ben and Jerry's is better known for their delicious ice cream or their important and bold stance on social justice issues and Jay shared many insights on how they manage to do both. So, thanks for joining us and enjoy the episode.

Jay Curley:

I think for them, it really came down to, can we run a for-profit business that puts the force of progressive change at the center. That being our purpose, not a bottom line. And that is still to this day, what our purpose is. It's about using our business operations to be a force for positive social change.

Simon Mainwaring:

Welcome to Lead With We. I'm your host, Simon Mainwaring, founder and CEO of We First. And this is the podcast where we talk with top business leaders and founders about 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 where I'm talking with Jay Curley, the global head of integrated marketing at Ben and Jerry's. Ben and Jerry's has taken a truly strident stance on these huge cultural issues like the response to the Black Lives Matter protests and yet at the same time, they've maintained themselves as one of the most beloved brands in the country, which is quite a balancing act. So let's dive in. Jay, welcome to Lead With We.

Jay Curley:

Thank you so much. It's an honor to be here.

Simon Mainwaring:

Tell us a little bit about your journey. How did you end up at Ben and Jerry's because that is a big life choice. It's the company really defines the type of individuals that work there and the company's defined by those individuals. How'd you end up at Ben and Jerry's?

Jay Curley:

I think to a degree my journey here is like a lot of my coworkers' and part of what defines our culture is I really wanted to work at Ben and Jerry's because I wanted to work for a business that was really actively trying to progress the world for better. I was at an ad agency, design firm really called JDK Design. It's a fantastic place. I think my professional up bringing at JDK was all around using design to create disruption in industries. Using design to be provocative and get people to think differently. And I was working on the account side. I was working for brands like Burton Snowboards, and Merrell Footwear. And in that work, Merrell got the license for Patagonia footwear. So I started working on Patagonia. I read Yvonne's book, I went to a sales meeting and on that flight home, I decided I really wanted to work directly for a values driven business. I also wanted to stay in Vermont. So, luckily I landed at Ben and Jerry's.

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Simon Mainwaring:

It all triangulated and tell me this, what's that first few days experience like at a company like Ben and Jerry's? You walk in and go, "Oh my God, they're doing something completely different." Or do you go, "Okay, this makes sense in terms of what I expected."

Jay Curley:

You walk in and it's a brand immersion. The walls are bright. There's a slide in the lobby. There's dogs running around. There's ice cream, freezers here and there.

Simon Mainwaring:

How are you all not 300 pounds? That's the question I have.

Jay Curley:

There is a gym in the back also. And so that helps.

Simon Mainwaring:

A very dusty gym and everyone is like, "No, I'm going to go and get some whatever the flavor is."

Jay Curley:

And so I walked into a company of Ben and Jerry's that has this rich history. Part of it was just like, "Oh, don't fuck this up. Get this right." The other part was learning the nuances, understanding the people, so that I can have an authentic impact.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. There's always that moment where you've got to merge with the culture inside an organization and Ben and Jerry's is a very different type of company. We all know it to be very activist in nature. And on your website, you'll see that you're a social justice company that happens to make ice cream. How did that come about? Because every entrepreneur today wants to make a difference. Was it a function of Ben and Jerry themselves and that's what made the company unique from the get-go or was it something that grew out of time? How did it come about?

Jay Curley:

Yeah, I think the first is the nuance that honestly we're an aspiring social justice company. It's a journey. We have a long way to go also. But very directly it is rooted in our co-founder's values rooted in our co-founder's journey around entrepreneurship. Right? So they ended up making ice cream because they were failing at everything else and they wanted to hang out together and have fun and that felt like a good way to do it.

Simon Mainwaring:

So it wasn't all perfect from the start. It was, "Hey, here's what we love or we could vaguely do." And it just grew from there.

Jay Curley:

That's exactly it. And they did not want to be business people, worked hard not to be. And to a degree maybe because of that, maybe in spite of it, they were running a successful ice cream company that was growing and they were doing things differently. They were throwing chunks and swirls in. In 2020 that doesn't seem like a big deal. In the 80s putting raw cookie dough into ice cream was radical.

Simon Mainwaring:

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Right. It's the lack of self censorship that got them off the ground.

Jay Curley:

Yeah, exactly and the interesting thing is they actually got to that point where they did not like that success. They were managing people. They were meeting with bankers. They were doing all the things that business people do that they just did not want to do. And they were on the verge of selling the company back in I think '83 or '84, which was about five or six years in. And I mean, it was pretty much a done deal. And Ben was having a dinner with a friend who was this eccentric restaurateur. And he was telling him, "Yeah, I'm selling the company," blah, blah, blah. "We don't want to be business people." And his friend, his name was Maurice. He said, "Listen, if you don't like the way business is being done, do it differently." And this was a big, big, shift for Ben and then therefore for the company. Where, I mean, he literally stopped the sale and they found their purpose at that moment. We talk about purpose driven brands like it's a give me, you know?

Simon Mainwaring:

But how did they actually work through that process? Because it's one thing to have that light bulb moment of permission where it's like, "Oh wow, I could think my way through this differently," but how did they get to social justice and all the issues that you focus on?

Jay Curley:

I think for them, it really came down to, can we run. Again this is '84, '85. Can we run a for-profit business that is sustainable and continues to grow, but that puts the force of progressive change at the center? That being our purpose, not a bottom line. And that is still to this day what our purpose is. It's about using our business operations to be a force for positive social change.

Simon Mainwaring:

How do you prioritize, how do you make the decision as to what to respond to when? When does some issue become acute enough that you go, "Okay, whatever we were doing is now going to be reprioritized and we're going to lean into this issue."

Jay Curley:

I've been at the company now for 12 years. And in that time we've really had two primary campaigns. I'll say three. One focused on marriage equality. One focused on climate justice and one focused on racial justice. Right? And we continue to stay engaged in all of that work. But what leads us to say, "Okay, this is going to be our primary focus," is about where we think we can actually affect impact and be part of either helping to grow and support a social movement to a place where it can have real substantial success or be part of that moving it over the tipping point.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. Right. And so how does a brand think that through? Do you sit down consciously and go, "All right. These are the issues we're committed to as a function of our purpose and we're aware of how acute these issues are and therefore we're going to show up in this way," or is it a function of the founders or a function of the culture? Just how you go to market in your storytelling.

Jay Curley:

It's really a function of a dedicated team working hard on it and soliciting and engaging the right level of input with mainly the movements we're looking to support. So as it relates to racial justice in the U.S. after Michael Brown was murdered, our board of directors put together a group of really leading edge activists and great provocateurs that really helped Ben and Jerry's our leadership team, our activism team, our marketing team better understand the issues of racial justice in America. So this was back in I guess early 2015, I think. And that helped us to focus on "All right, how do we best engage in this issue?" And then it has been a matter for us of working with different

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groups, with different NGOs and building long-term relationships with them. Understanding what their goals and strategies are and then figuring out how we can use our business operations in service of those strategies.

Simon Mainwaring:

By definition, the people that work in Ben and Jerry's, they care about these issues or they wouldn't want to work there. But at the same time, you never want the company's purpose to be prescriptive of the personal purpose of the individual. So how do you bridge between what people care about who work there and what the company commits to at any one time?

Jay Curley:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think our company's purpose is rooted in our co-founder's values, right? But even as late as the late 80s, the early 90s, the company and the leadership, including the co-founders, were trying to institutionalize what those were. So it wasn't just the whim of Ben or Jerry, more often Ben than Jerry. But, and they did that. They wrote a progressive value statement in the early 90s that articulated what those were. And really, at least since I've been here every five or so years, we look at how we evolve those. But then there are plenty of people who work at Ben and Jerry's who just love ice cream and are happy that we're doing the activism and advocacy work that we do. But don't feel the need to be engaging in it. That's not their sole purpose for being there.

Simon Mainwaring:

So what is that culture like in there? Because that's a really interesting balancing act you're talking about there where, Hey, if you just love ice cream and love the environment and love working here, then great. But if you also want to be very engaged in and around these issues, then great as well. How do you maintain culture?

Jay Curley:

Well, I think what we're focusing most of this on the company's social mission. We also have a culture that's just built on fun and joy. I mean, we literally have a committee at the company called the joy gang who-

Simon Mainwaring:

Okay, see that's not normal. The joy gang at a company. Come on, tell us about that. What's that about?

Jay Curley:

For decades the committees that would just throw random parties, giving every ... Like in the middle of the winter in Vermont, it's crazy snowy and whatnot. And the joy gang comes and gives everyone windshield wiper fluid. I know that sounds so silly and so trivial, but it's this touchpoint and connection. Right?

Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's really important. It's the intimacy of the relationships that you establish inside the company and outside. If you don't have empathy, if you don't have compassion for other human beings, you're not going to care about these issues and you're certainly not going to show up to change things for the better. And do you tangibly feel that the way that you're showing up and the advocacy efforts that you support are helping move that needle? How do you measure that success internally? How do you recognize it?

Jay Curley:

Here's a story for you and it's actually Ben told this to me. Pete Seeger told it to him at the Newport Folk Festival that Ben and Jerry sponsored back in the early 90s. So Pete Seeger talked about how change happens through social movements. I'm going to totally butcher it, but it's called the fable of spoon brigade. So picture a seesaw. All right? And at the bottom of one of the seesaw's is a massive rock. And at the top of the other is a bucket and a big

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tall ladder and a massive crowd of people standing there. And two or three people taking spoons and bringing sand up the ladder, dumping it in and bringing it down. It seems completely futile. Change is never going to happen. And one of the stander by folks sitting there watching says to one of the people with the spoons, "What are you doing? You're never going to change anything."

Jay Curley:

And the person says, "More and more people come with spoons every day and more and more people are picking up their spoons and going up that ladder. And one day things are going to change and they're going to flip and we're all going to say, how did that happen so fast." Ben and Jerry's did not cause marriage equality to be legalized in America. I do think we were part of the cultural movement that normalized and re-contextualized people to understand that love is love and that this is something that people should be able to, this is a right they should have. Right? So we were part of that movement.

Simon Mainwaring:

And what happens when you get that inevitable backlash? I mean, when you take a very strident point of view, either internally amongst your own team, where you go too far or a franchisee or somebody. What do you do? How do you manage through that process, because you have such strong points of view?

Jay Curley:

It's hard. I think that the team that is at the center of the work, we've been doing it for awhile. We've built up the courage. We built up the thick skin. What we've learned over the years is that we, and I think we do a much better job now, is really about engaging and arming our frontline employees, whether they're a scooper in a scoop shop or the community manager on social or the person taking the phone call at the corporate office. And so that's been a very active shift for us as to ensure we're bringing those folks along in the right way, so they can be prepared too. Yeah, what we do is controversial sometimes and often provokes backlash. I mean, I hate to say it, but it often proves the point that we need to be doing the work. When we say Black Lives Matter and people launch racist tropes at us and diatribes, it shows us that for everyone who thinks this isn't an issue, clearly it is, look at the comments.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think it's a challenge and I like what you're saying about getting everyone prepared, because one of the things I noticed about Ben and Jerry's time and again, is your agility, your speed through which you address an issue. And there's a huge benefit to that because when you're faster to market in response to an issue, you're not only seeming to be self-assured and showing up in a way that's authentic to what your stated claims are, but also you capture all the earned media and you get all the benefit of amplifying that issue through the lens of your brand. And so whether it's Patagonia saying "We're going to sue the presidents," or whether it's Ben and Jerry's taking on white supremacy, you move so quickly. What's that process? What happens internally when something flares up, a cultural flashpoint and you go?

Jay Curley:

So we've been doing work around racial justice for two plus years, specifically in criminal justice reform. We build campaigns in service of these movements, right? We launched a campaign 18 months ago with the focus around divesting from the broken system; the courts, the jails, the police. And investing in what is actually going to make communities healthier; economic development, housing education, etc. So when George Floyd was murdered, we'd been working in this space. We'd been engaging in this space and we were able to quickly respond in a way that hopefully was steeped in our experience trying to do this work and was a little bit more poignant and specific than you saw other businesses saying, right?

Simon Mainwaring:

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I think that's really powerful because I think sometimes brands today are waking up to the fact that they've got to have a point of view on these cultural flashpoints. But what you're saying is it's far more important to work out what your core purpose is and bring that to life, irrespective of what's going on. And when these cultural flashpoints come along, well, then you can play a more meaningful.

Jay Curley:

That's exactly it. For us we're not jumping on every cultural flashpoint. What we are doing is looking to use cultural flashpoints to continue the momentum and to grow the support of the movements we're already engaged in.

Simon Mainwaring:

You use the word movement in a very different way than I think other brands do. I think we hear companies talking about wanting to lead a movement, which is a way of saying they want to have an impact at scale. But as I understand at Ben and Jerry's, doesn't try to be the movement in its own right. But you partner with those grassroots movements that already exist. Talk to us about that.

Jay Curley:

Yeah. I think if you're at a big company trying to do this work, if you're an entrepreneur trying to do this work, humbly this is the most important thing I think I'll say over this course of this podcast. Stop developing your own campaigns. Stop trying to think that you are going to come up with the solution to solve these big issues. You're not and that's good. That's okay. That's not what you're in business to do. We make great ice cream. That's what we're in business to do. What we aspire to do is take the lead of the people who this is their job. This is their expertise, right? And then we figure out what do we have to bring to the table that's unique that can help them to reach their goals? Versus an ad agency saying, "Here's what your campaign is going to be."

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, that outside in optics approach, as opposed to this authentic collaborative approach. It's night and day in terms of the impact you have, but also how it's experienced out there and consumers, millennials, gen Z, they're so sensitive to brand BS these days. They just don't want, they have no patience for the optics management that you see so many companies doing. That said, how do you get it right? Because if you're dealing with criminal justice issues, there's so much academic thinking. There's a lot of grassroots movements around this. It's not like no one else got it right and then a brand Ben and Jerry's, or otherwise can come in there and get it right. You made those big four policy proposals around white Suprematism when you took that stance. How did you, in such a short space of time, have a point of view that you felt confident enough to go public with?

Jay Curley:

Yeah. I mean, a lot of those things that we had brought up are things we had brought up before, right? So, I mean, from a marketing perspective, one of them was, one of the solutions that we have put forth and we still are pushing for is HR40 House Resolution 40, which is a commission to study reparations for descendants of African slaves in America. We support, we put out a statement in support of that in October, last October. And a few months before that we outlined in a basic blog, the link between slavery and mass incarceration. We put it out. It did fine as a piece of content. We re-posted that a week after our statement around dismantling white supremacy and it got more engagement than the statement itself, right? It was a time that people were really interested in wanting to learn and wanting to engage in it.

Simon Mainwaring:

The other side of the coin when you're taking a strong stance is also holding yourself accountable. And I know you'll see Matthew McCarthy came out at one point and said, "We're a white company in a white state." What do you do to walk your own talk and what changes do you make?

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Jay Curley:

The only thing I'd quickly caveat and it's an important caveat is we're a mostly white company in a mostly white state. Right?

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Jay Curley:

Because there are black employees of Ben and Jerry's, people of color and there are in our community. But I mean, it's interesting because those are words I used to say too. And I realized in saying that, yes, we're a vast majority white company, but by saying we're a white company, we've actually erased the few people of color that we do work.

Simon Mainwaring:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Jay Curley:

Right? And so, anyway, what we're doing I think we've been really intentional around really trying to understand what the root causes of the issues around racial diversity, equity and inclusion are at Ben and Jerry's. And certainly for a marketer, the process is slower than I would like, because it really is a process of discovery and digging down to root causes. So we spent most of last year gathering the information to do the root cause analysis. We spent about the first six months of this year doing that root cause analysis. And now the next six months, we're now I guess two months into it, working on the solutions to it. For business people and for marketers in particular, it's really uncomfortable because I'm impatient and I want results now.

Simon Mainwaring:

But it's interesting that it's so complicated the issue too, because I think some companies almost fudge the math because a lot of the people of color are further upstream in their supply chain and yet in their corporate offices and executive leadership, it's absent. So, how are you taking it up a level? Because if you're taking these issues on publicly at a high level, how do you take your own internal behaviors to the high level?

Jay Curley:

Yeah. I think what we're attempting to do ... I mean, at the highest level on our board, they've been real leaders on this and we have a fairly racially and gender diverse board and that was their own initiative. They've pushed that and done a fantastic job with it. With Ben and Jerry's to your point, this isn't just about how do we change the demographics of the employees in headquarters? Yes, that is a KPI we intend to change, but it's got to be much deeper than that. So we've actually been looking at four different areas of the company.

Jay Curley:

One is our full supply chain. One is our franchise network where there's a big opportunity for us. The other is the internal employee culture. And then the last, and this is a very interesting one is, how do we actually change how we measure success and what KPIs are, right? So some are quite practical. How do we use our supply chain to address the racial wealth gap, right? That's a pretty tangible thing that we can go after. We're marketers. We can build a plan, we are building a plan, we'll go at it. Something like, how do we actually measure success differently? That's where I hope, and we're in the midst of doing it now, I hope that leads to some breakthrough thinking.

Simon Mainwaring:

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And if you were to ... the biggest light bulb opportunity for you, where you would make the greatest difference, where's that access point? What does that pivot point where you think could make all the difference?

Jay Curley:

As it relates to internal culture or extra internal?

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, internal yeah.

Jay Curley:

Internal, I mean, I think this is specific to Ben and Jerry's in our business model. But I see the most opportunity as it relates to our franchise network and retail shops. Because we have more of an opportunity to engage with more people. Right? There's 100 folks at our corporate office at Ben and Jerry's, whereas we have hundreds of scoop shops all around the country and that's just the U.S. We have about double that globally, you know?

Simon Mainwaring:

And how do you protect those various stakeholders? Because in a sense, I think a lot of business leaders out there, they want to play into these issues. But they're scared like, how will the street respond if they're a publicly traded company, or how will culture respond? Especially at a time when the United States is so polarized. If you put your hand up in a certain way around a certain issue, it can feel unsafe. So how do you manage that?

Jay Curley:

For us, we get courage honestly in being rooted in our values. And it sounds like a cliché, but to know that, or at least to have some confidence that we're on the right side of history. At least in my career at Ben and Jerry's the biggest backlash we have faced as a company was when we supported marriage equality in 2009, and when we supported Black Lives Matter in 2016. But again, whatever 10 years on, four years on, I think we can look back and we know those were the right things.

Simon Mainwaring:

And let me ask you a sensitive question. I mean, these issues have not only been polarized, but amplified all around the country and overtly or covertly different voices or groups are playing into those two polarized points of view. So through a political lens, when you put your hand up and really call people out in terms of white supremacy on a public stage, what do you hear back? What are those dark forces that you hear emanating back towards you that maybe surprising?

Jay Curley:

I think that one thing we realized in retrospect is that yeah, we're playing in a much bigger ball game here. This isn't just about us standing up for our values. I mean, we're literally talking about international espionage and information warfare. Over the last two years we've realized that whether we like it or not, we're part of that ecosystem. And we saw that in retrospect when everything came out about what was happening in the fall of 2016, as it relates to Russian hackers and troll farms and whatnot. They were amplifying the division within our Black Lives Matter statements. We were able to actually go back and find the bots, although we had no idea at the time that that was what was happening.

Simon Mainwaring:

I mean, it's crazy, right? I mean, as you say, we're all pawns in a much bigger game. It's easy to get, especially if you're younger and you're a social entrepreneur, to be really swept up in this rare moment in time with business has given license to really play into these larger issues. But at the same time, how do you make sure you never lose



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sight of the fact that you got to stay in business? I mean, it's like, "Oh wait, did anyone make any ice cream this week?" How do you balance that?

Jay Curley:

The co-founders and the leadership back in the late 80s, balanced that by making a three-part mission. We have a three-part mission. Product mission to make the best ice cream in the world, I'm simplifying. Economic mission, give a fair return to our stakeholders. And a social mission, which was to use the business in service of social progressive change. Now, again, in the late 80s that was absolutely radical. These days it's like, "Oh yeah, I learned about that in business school," or whatever it might be. But we operate the business balancing those three missions, as it relates to resources, investment, and whatnot. And if we don't continue to make and sell the best ice cream in the world, we're not going to be able to do the important activism and advocacy work.

Simon Mainwaring:

And how does those, the day-to-day, how does that break out in the sense that you're going to polarize some of your audience. Some people won't agree on that particular issue, or they just don't want to be involved in any issue. They don't want their ice cream to be politicized in some way. Do you find it's the deeper loyalty of the loyalists that actually maintains the financial strength of the company, or is it you widen the net and you bring more people into the tent in a sense?

Jay Curley:

It's 100% both. And again, this is a basic marketing brand building. It's about building penetration and loyalty. We can do both of those things, or I'd rather say both of those things are a consequence of our activism and advocacy work, right? They're not why we do it, but we do grow penetration and we do grow loyalty because of that work.

Simon Mainwaring:

You know, Jay, it's so hard to look around us right now and not feel a little disheartened by the direction the country's going in or how quickly we're solving for some of these issues. But as you said with the right to marry someone you love, it can turn very quickly. How do you stay optimistic? What keeps you positive in these very challenging times?

Jay Curley:

One of the things that I get excited about and I do stay optimistic around is taking heart in the small victories that often take a long time. We worked in support of an amazing coalition in St. Louis called Close The Workhouse for about two years. They have been working for well over a decade to close what is a wasteful and racist jail in St. Louis. And we started to support their existing campaign, showed up with our ice cream, showed up with our content, worked really hard in partnership with them, not knowing when that was going to be better. And in June, the board of aldermen and the mayor finally voted unanimously to defund that prison or excuse me, that jail. And it's going to be closed this year. And the impact that that's going to have on the poor and the marginalized folks of St. Louis who are often locked up because they couldn't afford bail, that's where I get my energy from. I look and I say, "All right, let's get to work. Let's roll up our sleeves. What are we going to be doing?" And it gives me the energy and the optimism that it is going to continue to get better.

Simon Mainwaring:

Jay thanks for the work and thanks to Ben and Jerry's for giving all businesses an example to follow. And here's to making a greater impact together that much more quickly.

Jay Curley:

Yeah. Thank you. I appreciate the time to dive in a little further and really encourage other businesses to engage in the work. You're never going to be ready, but just take a step.

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Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Lead With We, where I spoke with Jay Curley, the global head of integrated marketing at Ben and Jerry's who shared with us how a brand can take on an important and complex issue like racial justice. And how you can build a brand movement that truly makes a measurable and meaningful difference and how a company can navigate that delicate balancing act between doing good and doing well, not just today, but over the longterm. If you'd like to subscribe to Lead With We, you can find us on Apple, Google, or Spotify. And please recommend it to your friends and colleagues so they too can become a purposeful and profitable business. And if you'd like to learn more about how you can build a purposeful brand checkout [wefirstbranding.com](http://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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