



LEAD WITH WE
SEASON 2: EPISODE 008
Wendy Hauteman – VSP Global

Simon Mainwaring:

Welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mainwaring, and each week I talk with top business leaders and founders who reveal their revolutionary mindsets and methods for building their bottom line and a better world by Leading With We. Today I'm joined by Wendy Hauteman, Chief Marketing Officer at VSP Global, a long standing leader in the optical industry. VSP has actually six entities that extend into every aspect of the industry from eyecare insurance, to the production of glasses and lenses, and to retail and new ventures. Under Wendy's leadership, they recently formalized their purpose. Wendy, I'm excited to talk to you, especially because we did some of this work together, and I look forward to hearing your insights. Welcome to Lead With We.

Wendy Hauteman:

Thank you so much, Simon. It is an absolute pleasure to be here and to talk about two of my favorite topics, purpose and VSP. So thank you so much for the invitation. I appreciate it very much.

Simon Mainwaring:

Absolutely. Firstly, Wendy, tell us about your journey with VSP. I think you joined in 2013, correct?

Wendy Hauteman:

Yeah, I've been here eight years with the company and it's just an amazing mission-led organization. I'm so proud to be a part of it.

Simon Mainwaring:

For those who probably have heard of VSP or one of your brands, give us some of the brands in your portfolio, just so it can trigger in their minds how VSP has touched their lives.

Wendy Hauteman:

I bet a number of your listeners probably hear VSP and think, "I think I know VSP is something to do with eyecare or eyewear and maybe that's my vision benefits." We are the largest vision benefits provider in the country. Then we're 65 years old, but over those 65 years, we've really grown. We have that vision benefits part of our organization, which is the largest part. We've also added a frame company which has a number of great frame brands. We have an optics lens company. And as recently as two years ago, we added 700 Visionworks locations. They definitely might recognize that name, Visionworks, retail optical locations into our family as well.

Simon Mainwaring:

65 years of industry leadership, why have you formalized your purpose now? Why did this work suddenly become so important? Because as I know VSP, you've been such a caring and kind of mission led organization all the way through. Why now?

Wendy Hauteman:

Well, first of all, 2020, what a year to be on a purpose journey. When you have to look at that corporate mirror and figure out what you do and why you exist and where you want to be in the future. We actually started our journey before the pandemic hit because we were just at a bit of an inflection point in our organization. We had just celebrated 65 years, our 65th anniversary, and we've really grown and changed so much over that time. We now cover 90 million Americans with vision benefits and we have 60,000 clients.

So we just took a pause and we said, "As we're going to look to the next 65 years, we really need to take a deep look at ourselves, our brand architecture." As you mentioned, Simon, we're a very mission-driven company. We had a mission, "We help people see," and everybody knew the mission statement, everyone from the board of directors down to anybody you could stop in the hallway. So we knew that was really strong, but when we asked ourselves, "Into the future, why do we exist?" That higher level purpose as you well know, we could not answer that question. So we really struggled and we knew we had work to do in that space to be clear about who we are, what we do, why we do it, and who we want to be in the future.

Simon Mainwaring:

And so, tell us about this process because it's really powerful for the listeners to hear what's it like for a well-established enterprise to start this purpose journey? Does it start with a new CEO in Mike or does it start with an expectation internally? Where did that journey begin?

Wendy Hauteman:

Well, for sure we had a lot of change in our organization. So as I mentioned, we doubled the size of our company two years ago when we added Visionworks into our fold. We had new leadership, a fairly new CEO, Mike had been there, Mike Guyette, our CEO had been there just for a couple of years. And so it was just time. It was time for us to look at ourselves and see how we were going to evolve to the future. It was an incredible process.

It was quite the journey in 2020, getting to that overall purpose. It was months long, and at the end of the day, we actually ended up in a place with a purpose statement for VSP of to empower human potential through sight. Simon, you know our company really well, that word empower was very important to us. We're a humble organization and we really, really want our stakeholders to have the spotlight. So we want to be the one to empower others, to empower our doctors, empower our clients and empower our members. And so this statement, it just became such a guiding light for us, and especially through the pandemic in 2020, where we really had to pivot in all areas of our organization.

Simon Mainwaring:

I want to speak to that language specifically because what we found in our work together was that many of the competitors in the industry, the vernacular, the language they used was pretty much consciously or not contained within the sort of, I don't know the vocabulary, the lexicon of sight. But the importance of this work was actually to transcend that and actually to reposition VSP Global in the human potential business, and the tool of your trade is sight. I think that's a very important distinction because as everyone listening thinks about their brand, sometimes we just kind of myopically look at it and go,

"Well, we begin and end at the limits of the industry, and we don't have a role to play above and beyond the industry." But you've now positioned yourself to be really in the human potential business.

VSP is very complicated. It's got these six different lines of business and all these brands within it. Help us understand a little bit about that process. How do you engage brands, your portfolio in and around this work and how do you make sure you sort of co-create the result?

Wendy Hauteman:

For us, Simon, internal engagement as we went through this process was absolutely critical. I just read a recent study from McKinsey who did a survey of employees because employees said that 82%, 82% of employees said it was really important for their employer to have a purpose. Only 42% said that, "Hey, my company's purpose is really impactful." So we knew as we went down this journey, we didn't want that gap. We knew we wanted to involve everyone at every level of the organization in order for this to be successful. We started with our board of directors, our CEO was incredibly supportive, our senior executive team, my peers, we involved them along the process. We trained our leadership.

Most importantly, we established purpose ambassadors across the company. And there were essentially organizational influencers who really we needed them to help bring purpose to life within the organization. And that was just a really critical part of our success so that it didn't become a mandate from leadership down like, "This is our purpose," but rather something that was born from within.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's so important. There's several things you called out there, one is you need the leadership buy-in. Secondly, it's got to be a co-creative process. And thirdly, you've got to empower those in your organizations to be ambassadors for it, so that it becomes a living and breathing experience inside the company rather than, Oh, that's a marketing exercise, or it's just something that leadership's going to do now and it's not living and breathing within the organization.

No matter who the company is, it's hard to get alignment around these issues because not everybody is equally bought in, shall we say. How did you align everyone at the leadership level and across the different departments and lines of business? Was there some upleveling of their understanding as to why purpose is important or the business case for being more purposeful or why they need to do more than what you've already done as a very caring company? What was that experience like?

Wendy Hauteman:

We needed to make sure, Simon, as we went through this process that this didn't become a marketing initiative, that even though it was led by the CMO and my team, this wasn't a campaign, this wasn't a flavor of the month, this wasn't something that was going to start and stop. Because many times when things came out of the marketing department, you get that initial support and pat on the back, "Good job, Wendy. We like that tagline. We like that campaign." This was something we needed to reiterate constantly as we went through this process that this is now our new decision-making tool. This is our new guiding light for what our purpose will help us decide, what are we going to be involved in as an organization? What are we not going to be involved in as an organization? And so we just reiterated that all the way through the process so it became much more ingrained into our employees to become very

engaged into the process instead of it being a passing campaign. It was really critical in our process and implementation.

Simon Mainwaring:

That approach, did you find it made a difference to employees? Did you find them go, "Oh wow, you're including us in this."? And do you find the more engaged because of that?

Wendy Hauteman:

Absolutely. In fact, I can share a story that the pandemic last year hit in the middle of our purpose journey. And so we had to in just a matter of days become instantly a remote organization. We went through this purpose process that we were starting this purpose journey already to unite us with the goal of uniting us and uniting our many friends, uniting our many companies. Now, all of a sudden we're remote. So it was even [crosstalk 00:10:04] challenge, we had to be even more critical that we absolutely that we are united.

What we found, Simon, is that I really think the purpose had so much to do, the purpose process so much to do with how we reacted and interacted with each other once we were remote. It was like there was this whole new level of kindness and empathy between workers that was just, I really believe it was born out of purpose because all of a sudden you have an employee that used to come into the office and was just an employee from 8:00 to 5:00. All of a sudden that employee is now on a Zoom call for work. He or she may have a toddler at their feet who can't go into daycare because the daycare is closed. They may also be teaching their six-year-old kindergarten math on the right.

So they had to be all of those things at once and I really believe that having this guiding light and place just gave us an extra level of kindness and empathy among each other and it showed up in our engagement scores. And one of the most craziest years in recent history, we had some of the highest engagement, employee engagement scores that we've had in over 10 years. So it was really impactful.

Simon Mainwaring:

You cannot underestimate that intangible impact of purpose, not only during a crisis, but outright. It really does serve as that connective tissue, that emotional connective tissue between people. I love what's happened with Zoom during COVID because you got the chotskies in the shelf on the back, you've got the cat tail wafting in front of your nose. Cats always know where you're on a Zoom. You've got the kid in the background and it's just humanized everyone. It's allowed us to step away from, shall we say the professional hats we used to wear that we'd put on when we'd walk in the door of the office and to really just humanize the whole culture of the company.

We were there with you, but it was incredibly difficult during COVID last year to navigate it outright yet you didn't step away from this purpose work and I'm sure there was a lot of pressure to do that. Why did you prioritize it and how did you navigate it?

Wendy Hauteman:

Well, gosh, as you well know, not only do you have to take care of your employees during a pandemic, we had to take care of all of our stakeholders, and their expectations are amplified in a time of crisis. We had to be sure that we showed up for them because they're looking at you and saying, "Okay, VSP, it's a crisis now, how are you going to show up? How are you going to help me? How are you going to perform in this time of need?" And that purpose, it was just critical that we kept that going, and we had the support of our CEO who was saying, "There's probably nothing else more important that we need to be doing this year than continuing on this purpose journey so that we can find continue to support our clients, our members, and our doctors."

We had to pivot just like every other company had to pivot last year, and what you thought your 2020 was going to look like, looked entirely different. So we did the pandemic pivot in all of our areas so we could continue to empower our doctors to be able to serve our 90 million members, to empower our clients, to be able to ensure that their employees could still get the care that they needed even in a time of crisis, because even in a pandemic, the need for eyecare does not go away. So we did a lot of things in that space.

Simon Mainwaring:

Just even the language you use there, I mean, your purpose is to empower human potential through sight, and it was so directly applicable to all those different stakeholders that you just mentioned. For those who probably don't know about all the work that VSP does to bring your purpose to life in the normal world pre-COVID, can you share some examples about how it comes to life like Eyes of Hope, and other ways that you're contributing to communities?

Wendy Hauteman:

Yeah, absolutely. Eyes of Hope is absolutely the heart of our organization and it's probably one of my favorite things to talk about. VSP really does try to do well as an organization so that we can do good in our communities and Eyes of Hope is how we're able to do that. If you can just think for a moment, Simon, or your listeners, think about how much your life would be changed or compromised if you didn't have access to good vision. So if you're a child in school and you need to see the blackboard or the smart board, if you're an adult trying to fill a job application and you can't see the computer screen or the paperwork very well, or just all of the daily experiences with your friends and family, they will be so compromised if you can't see well.

So Eyes of Hope is all about removing barriers. There's barriers that could be caused from income, from distance or location or disaster. We know that there's a billion people that live with a vision impairment worldwide because they don't have that access. We feel it's our duty and our mission to help people see, to have programs to help those populations. One of our greatest programs is really our mobile clinic program, and it's really an eye doctor's office on wheels and it actually grew out of disaster. Following 2005, there were two major hurricanes, Katrina, and Rita. We knew at VSP, we needed to get to those locations, help our doctors get back on their feet, and then help them help the members in their community as well. So today we have three fully equipped mobile units with exam rooms just like your doctor's office and we can make eyewear on the unit as well.

We also create a partnership with our doctors. They can volunteer on those mobile clinics, do an exam, we make the glasses and we can help people who've been in those situations. If you can imagine, we have wildfires here in California all the time. So you can imagine you hear these stories all the time, "I have two minutes, I have three minutes to get out. I had to get out of my house." What do you do? You get your family, you get your patch, you grab your car keys and you're out the door. You're probably not thinking to get that pair of glasses that's sitting on your nightstand. So that's what the mobile clinics is about, providing that access to disaster or disaster relief to people who need it who've been in disasters.

Last year we had to pivot because of COVID. We couldn't send those mobile clinics out. So then we had to pivot and we relied on our gift certificate program. In that case, we partnered with the American Red Cross and they were able to give gift certificates to those people who still needed it. Disaster still happened in the pandemic, they could then go get a no-cost eye exam and eyewear at a VSP doctor location, and VSP would pay for that. That's part of Eyes of Hope, and there's a number of other pieces and parts to it. But it's just the heart of our organization. We've helped millions of people through this program just by removing those barriers to getting quality eyecare.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's not surprising that with a large organization like yours, you have to share the load in keeping the purpose alive and you've mentioned purpose ambassadors. Help those listening understand who they are and what they do, what their role is inside a large organization.

Wendy Hauteman:

They are in every level of the organization, they're in every different kind of job in the organization. We may have directors, we may have some of those frontline associates. We didn't care what level you were in the organization, we just wanted you to raise your can, be engaged and say, "You know what? This is something I care about. This is something that I want to help bring to life in my area."

Simon Mainwaring:

What has been the greatest obstacle? I mean, COVID has presented so many challenges and the Black Lives Matter protest last year also put greater scrutiny and expectation on companies. Those aside, just in terms of the purpose process itself, when you've got tens of thousands of employees, as you look back as a leader, what would you say was a surprising obstacle in the way or something that you didn't foresee, and then how did you work around it?

Wendy Hauteman:

Well, your listeners can learn from me.

Simon Mainwaring:

The same problem for them.

Wendy Hauteman:

No, I think my advice, my counsel would be if you're going down a journey like this, go into it without having a sacred cow or any sacred cows. Because as we started this journey, our mission statement was, "We help people see." As you know, we've had that mission statement for decades. And as we began this

journey, the question was, "Okay, we knew we have to create a purpose statement. We knew we needed to create a vision statement. What about the mission statement? Should we revisit that?"

As the CMO, I certainly didn't want my legacy to be the CMO that killed the beloved mission statement. [crosstalk 00:19:02]. I was like, "I don't think we should touch the mission statement." But I got some great encouraging feedback from others that said, "Wendy, let the process play out. If we help people see is the mission that's meant to be, it will come through the process, and if it can end up being something bigger and stronger, that might be okay too." So it changed my thinking. I opened up my own thinking and we let the process play out, and where did we land? In a better place. Now our mission statement, which was, "We help people see," is now, "We help people see every possibility." It's stronger, it's broader, it's more impactful that only occurred because people challenged me when we started this process. So don't go into it having a secret cow.

The other piece is we wanted to avoid that risk of this becoming a marketing campaign. Again, when these types of initiatives are born out of marketing, it can be perceived as a tagline, a short-term initiative. We knew that we needed to just continue to reiterate all through the process that this is a strategy driver for our business. It's a decision-making filter for our business. It's going to be ingrained into everything that we do. It is not a marketing campaign.

Simon Mainwaring:

We've talked about some of the benefits of purpose in terms of your trajectory or decision-making filter moving forward. It rallies your employees, it inspires the impact you have out in the world. But talk to us about innovation, because purpose is not just giving you relevance to a challenged world. It's actually an innovation on lock inside a company. What role is your purpose statement playing to that end?

Wendy Hauteman:

A huge role. VSP is at its heart, a very health-focused vision care company and we're always striving to find, first of all, ways just to connect your eye health to your overall health first of all. And then in the innovation space, really taking a focus role in connecting eye health, to the diabetes epidemic. Simon, we have a diabetes epidemic in the country. There's 34 million Americans that live with diabetes. There's 88 million that live in that pre-diabetic state where they have a risk-

Simon Mainwaring:

I think it's 30% of Americans are either diabetic or pre-diabetic.

Wendy Hauteman:

Exactly. Most of them don't know it in that pre-diabetic space. So we actually have been innovating alongside our network doctors to help detect diabetes earlier. What many of your listeners may not realize is often the eye doctor is the first to detect signs of diabetes. They can see it through the eye. And also we, as a society, we're just a little bit more loyal to our eye doctor than we are about going to our health care provider. And so we see patients more frequently.

In the innovation space, we recently partnered with some doctors in Ohio, where these doctors were actually able to execute our offer A1C screening in their offices. That's just a fancy name for the finger

prick test that you take and give a little drop of blood and it tells you where you are on the scale. What we found is that a third of the patients who took that A1C test scored in that pre-diabetic range, and it was previously known to them. So by doing that, obviously those patients can learn, accept their condition, make the lifestyle adjustments that they need to do, work with their healthcare provider and avoid the devastating effects that it can have in their life.

Simon Mainwaring:

It makes so much sense because if you're in the business of human potential, you've got that kind of remedial capacity where you're helping people that are pre-diabetic and so on. You've also got that preventative capacity where you recommend lifestyle changes and so on to protect their eyes and their eyesight. I think a lot of people don't realize what a window to your health that the eyes are. I think we go to the doctor every time we get sick, but we go to an eye doctor only periodically. There's a huge opportunity there, right?

Wendy Hauteman:

There is and I think many people go to the eye doctor because they just want to make sure that they can see well, and what they don't realize is that eye care professional can detect signs of diabetes, they can detect signs of glaucoma, they can detect signs of hypertension. It really is a window to your overall health and I just encourage everybody to get that annual eye exam. It's just really, really important and not to confuse an eye screen with a true comprehensive eye exam that you can get from your local optometrist.

Simon Mainwaring:

Help us understand what that's like at a leadership level. There's huge consequences to the decisions you make, the leadership team makes. You're in a very competitive industry. You've been a leader for 65 years, and now you've got to compete on multiple fronts in the future. How do you think your purpose and your business model sets you up for future leadership? How is it working to ensure that you're relevant to the future, that you can compete, that you can expand into new markets? How is it serving you?

Wendy Hauteman:

I think a couple of things. In the 65 years that we've been around, we have never wavered from the original vision of a small group of optometrists that wanted to provide access to high quality, affordable eyecare and eyewear for people. So while we have grown and we have added companies, we've never wavered far from that. I think that's really critical and it will continue. I don't think we will ever waiver far from that. It's going to continue to be important for us long into the future.

The second thing I would say is we're structured for good. So we're structured as a not-for-profit organization and what that means for us is we don't have shareholders. So because of that, we can reinvest our earnings back into our industry, back into our communities to support and empower our stakeholders in the communities that we serve.

And for me personally, Simon, I just feel like I'm so fortunate to work for a company that I feel puts purpose over profits most of the time. They do the right thing. A great example of this is during the

pandemic last year, we knew we had to pivot to serve our stakeholders in a different way, and we needed to be there for them. One of the things that we did was offer a grant program to our network doctors. Some of our doctors were suffering hugely financially. They had to shut down and to reconfigure their offices to be able to support their patients. So we offered a grant program of up to \$10,000 in cash to give to these doctors to help them with those expenses. That's something that it wasn't a loan, it wasn't a short-term loan, it wasn't a long-term loan. It was a grant to them to be able to empower them to be able to serve our patients. It's just a great example of putting purpose over profits and I think that will continue to carry us into the future by making the right decision, just doing the right thing.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's really important. It's not about showing up in the good times when you're going to be lauded for being purposeful. It's being there for the lifeblood of your business, the doctors and their communities in times of trouble. You mentioned on a personal note, what purpose has meant to you. Everyone in a leadership position, whether you're a small company, a social enterprise, or whether you're this very complex global conglomerate, every decision we make has a lot of consequence on others' lives. But what has this purpose work meant for you in terms of how you feel about your role, the fulfillment you find for that role? What has it meant on a private, personal level?

Wendy Hauteman:

I think it's meant a lot to me. It has just resolidified and really just sort of packaged up, but articulated all the things that I knew about our company and I felt about our company and I was really proud of our company for, but we had just never taken that step to really package it up and create a structure. It continues to just reinforce what I have in my heart, which is just a complete love for this company, a company that gives back, a company that supports its employees. It just makes me even more proud to be part of VSP.

Simon Mainwaring:

Wendy, I can't thank you enough for sharing the insights into what is such a complex but critical process. It's been a privilege to work with VSP on this journey, so thank you so much for your time today.

Wendy Hauteman:

It's been an absolute pleasure. I thank you so much for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We, where I spoke with Wendy Hauteman, Chief Marketing Officer at VSP Global, who shared with us how a large and complex organization defined an integrated their purpose to build their business and how you activate that purpose in times of crisis to strengthen your culture and community.

Our show is produced by Goal 17 Media, and you can find more information about Wendy, and VSP Global in the show notes for this episode. Make sure you subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and do share it with your friends and colleagues so they too can build purposeful and profitable businesses. You can also watch our episodes on YouTube at We First TV. If you'd like to learn more about purposeful branding, check out wefirstbranding.com where we have lots of free resources and case studies. I'll see you on the next episode, and until then, let's all Lead With We.

