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**LEAD WITH WE**  
**SEASON 2: EPISODE 020**  
**Paul Coletta, CEO of Urban Remedy**

Simon Mainwaring:

From We First and Goal 17 media, welcome to Lead with We, I'm Simon Mainwaring, and each week I talk with purposeful business and thought leaders about the revolutionary mindsets and methods you can use to build your bottom line and a better future for all of us. Today, I'm joined by Paul Coletta, CEO of the plant-based meal delivery company, Urban Remedy. Paul, welcome to Lead with We

Paul Coletta:

Thanks, Simon. Really appreciate the opportunity.

Simon Mainwaring:

So good to see you, Paul, and I'm always mindful of the journey that entrepreneurs take before they have these successful companies. And I know that you're were at Walt Disney and Hewlett-Packard. How on earth did you end up, or why did you end up in the food business?

Paul Coletta:

Well, I guess I'd start with the fact that food has always been sort of in my family's DNA. My grandfather and my great-grandfather immigrated to the US in 1921, and they started a chain of restaurants in the south, which is still in business today, and next year we'll celebrate its 100th year. And my brothers and sisters are also in the food business, so I like to say, "It skipped a generation." Our father is a physicist and wanted us to pursue academics, but I think spending the time we did as kids around the food business, it really sort of it kind of seeped into who we are. But I also, I think I also just I've always loved the rich diverse culture of food. It celebrates the diversity of cultures, and it connects people. Everybody eats, it's common ground. So I guess, I love it. It's something I'm passionate about.

Simon Mainwaring:

You know what I love about that is that a family gets together, and you're all in the food business, and you're like, "For once let's not talk about work," and then you look down at the table at your food, and it's on again.

Paul Coletta:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

You're damned if you do, damned if you don't. I think that's funny. And then you sort of cut your teeth in a lot of companies that everybody knows, Jamba Juice, Pinkberry, POM wonderful. Give us a sense of some of the things you took away from that that kind of inspired you to say, "Hey, I want to launch something on my own."

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Paul Coletta:

Well, I think every one of those experiences in the food industry that I've had in some way, shape, or form has kind of shaped how I think I've led this company. To be clear, I'm not the founder of Urban Remedy, that was Neka Pasquale. She started the company about nine years ago, and I came in and have been running the company for about seven years. So I'm not a founder, I am the CEO, but those experiences really taught me a lot about nutrition, which is something I'm very passionate about.

Paul Coletta:

They taught me a lot about storytelling, how to connect with consumers around stories. And it taught me a lot about Omnichannel, the business model that Urban Remedy is operating under today. So all of those companies you mentioned were either in the physical brick and mortar retail space, or in the e-commerce space, or in the CPG space, Urban Remedy is in all three. And so I think it really prepared me to help us engineer an Omnichannel model, which is in some ways kind of more than the sum of its parts. There's a lot of synergy between those three channels in what we do.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, and I want to come back to that, because I could not agree more. The sum being greater than the parts is fundamental to not only launching a brand, but ensuring the brand becomes a movement, but also unlocking greater sort of consumer engagement and ROI for the business. So I want to dig into that a little bit more, but I want to sort of step back one second and say as CEO, you've really kind of leveraged Urban Remedy to take on Big Food. And I think a lot of people understand intuitively what Big Food means, and the negative connotations. And it's typically industrial farming, or what are those chemicals in the products that aren't good for our health, and so on, but there's also a huge, larger consequence for our future, and just the planet on which we depend. And for those who aren't aware, give us a sense of why this is so important to retool the food system?

Paul Coletta:

Yeah. I mean, when I talk about Big Food, and I've said, I think Big Food is a big problem. I'm not talking about any one food company in particular. I'm talking about our over industrialized food system, which we believe is unsustainable for human health and the planet. And it might be more accurate to say that Big Food has a big problem than is a big problem. And I think Urban Remedy and companies like ours that are trying to re-imagine the food system are part of the solution, or at least I hope we are. It's early for us. I wouldn't tell you that I think we've arrived, or we've figured it out, but it is kind of how we approach things with this core belief that the food system is unsustainable. I mean the rise of diabetes, heart disease, global warming, all of these things are highly attributed to our modern food system.

Simon Mainwaring:

I completely agree, and it's interesting, it's sort of we're shifting away from sort of the remedial approach, which is, "Let's fix the problem after it's occurred," to the preventative approach where food is medicine and so on.

Paul Coletta:

Yes.

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Simon Mainwaring:

And the reason I was so excited to talk to you today is because even though the meal subscription space is getting so competitive, what you do is something completely different. And this comes back to the Omnichannel marketing, but also your approach, your go-to-market plan. You actually do something where the degree of difficulty is much higher than for other companies. You're bringing high quality, perishable food to market with a very quick turnaround time. And so you've had to do something at point of sale with a wholesale or retail that is very different. You've had to prove out the model yourself and take all the risk. Can you explain what that system looks like, and some of the challenges in it?

Paul Coletta:

Yeah. The way I would sum up what you just said is we are trying to scale ultra fresh, clean food. So we're trying to crack the code on basically short shelf life food at scale. And nobody has really done that. And I would tell you, "We haven't yet done that." I mean, we're still working hard at it. I think we've had a lot of success, and I think we'll get there, but we're trying to crack the code on ultra fresh, clean food at scale.

Paul Coletta:

And what makes that really challenging is this idea of waste, of food that is past its expiration and has to be thrown out. That is why I think our current food system is so processed. I think it has been all about shelf life, which if you really understand shelf life is about stripping nutrient density from a food so that it optimizes for shelf life, and ultimately profit, at the expense of human health and the environment. So we're trying to flip that on its head and say, "Is there a model that can both be better for human health and the planet, and ultimately be profitable?" At the end of the day, this has to be profitable.

Simon Mainwaring:

I mean, without that sort of margin, there is no mission, you can't be out there trying to change the world. So you must've got some pushback.

Paul Coletta:

Right.

Simon Mainwaring:

As you spoke to your peers in the industry, you've come on board to Urban Remedy, your CEO, they're like, "You're crazy," because it's counter-intuitive. It goes against every efficiency that the existing industry has built, right?

Paul Coletta:

Pushback is an understatement.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Paul Coletta:

I'll start there.

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Simon Mainwaring:

"Hey, did you talk to Paul? He's absolutely berko, he's crazy, he's certifiable."

Paul Coletta:

Yeah, what the hell? Look, I mean, I'll be honest, there are days I wake up, and I go, "What the hell are we doing here? This is really hard." But I think the payoff is so big. It's so big for our customers. I think it's potentially big for our investors. So I mean, we've stayed at it, and I have this mantra internally, "Progress, not perfect." And as long as we are moving in the right direction, even though it doesn't feel like we are, I feel like we have permission to continue to go and try to realize this food is healing. Food is healing is not a tagline, it's our mission. That's our mission, this idea that food is healing. And I think we've proven a lot of progress. We have a long way to go, and we have the team to get it done. We have the partners to get it done, and I think we ultimately will, but we're not there yet.

Simon Mainwaring:

And it's easy to walk past words like that and go, "Oh, that sounds great. It's aspirational. I like that there is a company out there," but your point is well taken, which is this is an active, living, breathing, dynamic commitment of the company to heal through food. So could you unpack for a second what that means in terms of your supply chain, what that means in terms of how you rally your internal culture, what that means in terms of how you go to market? Help people understand how a commitment like that fuels the business.

Paul Coletta:

Well, This is what I love about talking to you, Simon. You bring up culture in this conversation, and I would want to start there, and tell you that any success we've had to date has been about our culture and our people. And that is the foundation from which we are trying to grow and reach more consumers. So if I could start there for a minute, and then I can talk about supply chain and other things, but you got me wound up with culture and people.

Paul Coletta:

So I would describe our culture at Urban Remedy as a people first culture. And I think it's important to define culture. I ask this as an interview question when a prospective candidate brings up the issue of culture. And I always say, "Could you define for me culture?" And I'm amazed at how many people have never even thought about that question or stumble on it. And so here's my definition, and then we can talk about it as our foundation. I think of it as a group of people with a shared belief system, i.e., values, in pursuit of a common goal, i.e., mission. That's culture in my mind.

Paul Coletta:

And so this belief system, we have a set of values, which we can talk about, but this belief system is this idea around food is healing, it's also our mission, right? It's what we're trying to accomplish. And the people at Urban Remedy have been probably the thing. The people and culture are the thing that I think we as a team are most proud of. It's always been about people, and we really think of ourselves as a work family, but that has been very much the foundation of how we have grown. And it really is much of our success to date. Even though maybe the consumer can't see it, I think they can feel it in the products they buy. They can feel it in the commitments that we follow through on. I think they can feel the culture

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of Urban Remedy, this group of what I call patriots, not mercenaries, that care as much about the outcome as the income. We have built a culture of patriots.

Simon Mainwaring:

You see the fashion industry struggle with Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3, or Tier 4 suppliers who may have bad labor practices, or whatever else it might be, and yet you've got a higher degree of difficulty because you're dealing with perishable food. So in that hub and spoke model, how do you protect quality, not just from an operational efficiency point of view, but so you deliver on your promise? It's really hard. And again, I would tell you, I think we've done a good job, but I don't think we're there yet in terms of enabling the reach nationally that we need while also preserving the quality of our food. It comes down to, I think, three things.

Paul Coletta:

It comes down to partnerships, great partnerships with not only our folks, like Whole Foods was one of our distribution partners, but our logistics partner, REEF, it comes down to technology, specifically real time, inventory management and demand forecasting. I think technology is a critical component of how we crack the code of ultra fresh food at scale. And it comes down to people, I'm going to keep bringing it back to people. It comes down to people that have the right experience, but also have an open mind and are creative, because we're not following any playbook here. We are sort of iterating as we go. We're launching, learning, in some cases failing, in some cases succeeding.

Paul Coletta:

I have a picture in my office that anybody that knows me, it's been hanging for about 15 years, and it's two lines. One is a straight line to the right, and it says, "Success: the way people think is," and the other is a squiggly line, and it says, "This is the way it really is." And in both cases, the line is moving in the right direction, up and to the right, but on the right it's like at any moment you can zoom into what you're doing and going, "Oh my god. Are we headed in the right direction?" But when you pull out, and you look at what this business has done over a year, two years, the last seven years, we are definitely making progress.

Paul Coletta:

It's that squiggly line that I remind the team often of. It's like, "We're right here, and it doesn't feel like it, but pull back and look at where we've come from, and what we have accomplished together." And I think that helps me sort of bring the team along, that this is progress. This is progress.

Simon Mainwaring:

It is. It is a powerful demonstration of progress, and we should all go into investor meetings or client meetings and just show you squiggly lines and say, "Here's our plan," and just see what happens.

Paul Coletta:

That doesn't always work on the investor meetings, but it definitely helps the employees, I think, understand that we're moving, we're making progress.

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Simon Mainwaring:

And to that point, I keep hearing this expression in business over the last year or two about double click, let's double click on that and pushing in something. But to your point, let's zoom out. Let's zoom out and keep the bigger perspective in mind.

Paul Coletta:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

Now, let's talk about hospitals, because this is one of the powerful value propositions of a big idea like food is healing.

Paul Coletta:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's not just confined to the consumer who just wants dinner that night, or whatever it might be. It's really the role of food as medicine in your life. So help us understand what you're doing there.

Paul Coletta:

So, I mean, for any of us that's ever been to a hospital, I think we might agree it's some of the worst food you can find. And it just makes no sense that somebody enters into a hospital or a doctor's office and is told that they need to make changes in their lifestyle. And then they walk out, and they're presented with candy bars and sodas as an offering. That makes no sense. And so we decided about two or three years ago, just as a, again, launch and learn, let's throw an automated kiosk, these are kiosks that use RFID. You come and you put your credit card in, you open it, you can take anything out, close the refrigerator, and it scans for the missing item, which it charges you. That was the original way we entered into hospitals. And we immediately got a positive reaction, not just in terms of sales, but we had patients, and interestingly enough, doctors and nurses going, "Yes, please, and we want more."

Paul Coletta:

Since then, we've scaled into their cafeterias and have taken over dedicated of the cafeterias in California. Our number one kiosk anywhere nationally is at UCSF, one of our premier hospitals here in the Bay Area, and we're doing an amazing volume through that store. And that's just confirmation, I think, for us that there is a great need there, and we have a strong point of difference. And that's always what we're looking for, right? We're looking for the need, and we're looking for the unique thing we do better than anywhere else. That intersection is where we like to go, and I think healthcare has that intersection. It is the intersection between a great need and a strong point of difference. And so we are thinking, we're stepping back right now and thinking about how to make that a bigger sort of dedicated focus. It's huge white space. It's huge white space.

Simon Mainwaring:

Huge, massive. I mean, the corporate need out there, let alone hospitals, and also it's not bad advertising. It's kind of like the food that doctors and nurses choose. But I think it's really powerful what

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you're saying about this intersection between opportunity or need and your unique value proposition, because a lot of people might look at what you're doing and say, "High risk. And I don't know if I have that risk tolerance." But what if you recast that risk as an expression of the opportunity you uniquely have.

Paul Coletta:

Bingo.

Simon Mainwaring:

Because you're taking that risk.

Paul Coletta:

It is high risk, but it's also higher opportunity. It's a high risk, high reward opportunity. And I think it's important going in, whether you're an investor, an employee, a partner to understand it is high risk, high reward. Because if together we can crack the code on ultra fresh food at scale, everybody wins. With the consumer being first, they win. They win.

Simon Mainwaring:

I have a couple of questions about that that I think are really exciting. One is the role of technology. If you listen to him, and you're watching Paul today, you go, "Wow, that's incredible that it's even possible." And you mentioned the RFID tags, and the kiosks, and so on, but just from a technology point of view, is this a very complicated, high-tech thing that's prohibited to anybody else, or is it like how do you use technology to make this possible in ways that didn't seem like it was possible before?

Paul Coletta:

Yeah, I think we're just scratching the surface. I mean, the first was getting, and this we did last year, was getting an ERP system installed. Now, this is back-end. This is not front end. This is not consumer facing technology, but because we're dealing with short shelf life food, we need real time inventory management, and we need really good demand forecasting systems, and we need really good cost accounting systems. And that's where the priority was placed early on in technology was the backend systems that would enable us to really have the dashboard needed to scale this business. That got done last year.

Paul Coletta:

I can't believe we came as far as we did without that. That got done at great cost and great investment to the company, and that's already starting to bear fruit. That's showing up in things like reduced better in stock positions and reduced waste, which is purge in the channel. I think going forward, I'm thinking more about consumer facing technology that we need to bring to bear in order to fully realize this food is healing mission. And I have a lot of ideas there, it's going to require a lot of capital.

Simon Mainwaring:

This is where I press in and go, "Come on, divulge it all." No, it does, it takes capital, right? You've got to invest in your future and our future.

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Paul Coletta:

Well, I mean, I'll tell you one, I have a little dream. Okay? And I'm just riffing here with you, because I, obviously, haven't thought this all the way through, but when I think about the three need states that we're trying to enable for our consumer, she wants three things. She wants ultra fresh, clean, and convenient, and I'm going to get to the technology as it relates to the third, but let me define them really quick. Ultra fresh is nutrient dense food, whole food as close to nature as possible. Clean is free of herbicides, pesticides, and GMOs, and all of our products, not just some, are clean by that definition. Convenience is the one that I think is evolving the quickest in this age of Amazon, and especially post pandemic, right?

Paul Coletta:

Consumers want an easier way to get the products they want, in this case, food, where they work, where they play, and where they live. I have always wanted to expand our... We have always wanted to expand our offering into an automated system that would allow for dynamic pricing. So one of the challenges in this world, as we've talked about, is waste. What if there was technology and an algorithm that actually saw the expiration of a given product and dynamically priced it to ensure that not only it's sold, and we didn't throw it away at risk to the planet, because that's not good for anyone.

Simon Mainwaring:

Wow.

Paul Coletta:

And at risk to the PNL, that's certainly not good for us, but also enabled affordability. In the same way that hotels like HotelTonight, or airlines have dynamic pricing, why isn't there dynamic pricing for fresh food?

Simon Mainwaring:

I have visions of your customers waiting, three hours left, two hours left, price goes down, grab it.

Paul Coletta:

Boom. Let's get it. But look, I'm sure somebody's going to figure this out in the future, but this has been a dream of ours for a long time is an automated self service piece of technology that allows for dynamic pricing of perishable prepared food. And I've never seen anyone do it, maybe it's out there, and I'm just not aware of it. I do believe the technology exists, and it will take somebody with the vision and the resources to put it together in a solution that's good for the consumer from an affordability standpoint, it's good for the PNL, it's good for the planet, because it eliminates or reduces waste.

Simon Mainwaring:

You're touching on a really important topic, which is for a lot of people, the type of food, the quality, the health management, the wellbeing that you're enabling through Urban Remedy is just price prohibitive. Not because of you, just more broadly, anyone. Help us understand how we solve for it, because there's food deserts, it's disproportionate to communities of color.



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Paul Coletta:

Yeah. I don't think we're doing enough. And by "we," I mean our industry, right? Organic food today in the US is about a \$60 billion business. It's been growing at about 15% CAGR every year. Unfortunately, most of that is processed organic food, it's not fresh organic food. You look at the top five, 10 players, it's heavily processed organic food, but it's organic. And in my mind that's a better solution for the health of the planet and the body, and it has moved largely to mass market. The top players in organic food today are Costco, Walmart, and Kroger.

Simon Mainwaring:

Kroger, yeah.

Paul Coletta:

Right? Yeah. It has moved mass market, that's been a huge shift in the last five or 10 years, but it's still not what I would call accessible to everyone. It is still not accessible to everyone, and I think that's a shame. I think clean, ultra fresh food should be accessible to everybody in every income.

Simon Mainwaring:

How do we do it? What are the barriers?

Paul Coletta:

One of the barriers is scale. I think the bigger the industry becomes, the more efficient the supply chain will become, more capacity, more efficiency. I think that will allow us over time to bring the price down. In the same way an electric car that I bought seven years ago was I could probably get the same car with twice the capability for about half the price that I paid 10 years ago. I think early adopters, or people that can afford it, are jumping in voting with their dollars, and then over time that creates efficiency, and it creates demand, which then drives efficiency in a supply chain that's seeking to meet that demand.

Paul Coletta:

So I think some of it is just pure scale. I think a lot of it is pure scale. I think the second thing are companies like ours that see the problem, and are trying to solve for it. And one of the ways we're trying to solve for it is you remember I talked about waste?

Simon Mainwaring:

Yep.

Paul Coletta:

So let's just take a product like one of our cold pressed juices. When we make that juice, we are using high quality whole fruits and vegetables, and the by-product of that is pulp. This clean, organic, nutrient dense, high fiber pulp. It has always been a dream of ours and a challenge to take that pulp and turn it, upcycle it to food. And as it would normally be thrown away, and we don't throw it away, we give it to hog and cattle farmers to use in their food. So we're trying to do the best we can with it, but I think the ultimate would be to upcycle that food into products that were a half or a third the price of products that weren't upcycled.

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Paul Coletta:

And so we've begun to do that. We have three or four products we have that have been a result. Our founder Neka Pasquale, has just done a brilliant job of using those ingredients and upcycling them, like our Upbeet Burger. It's basically beet pulp that we've upcycled. We call it our Upbeet Burger, and we need to figure out how to get those into some of the more accessible, lower priced channels. And that's what we're doing, we just started a partnership with Safeway.

Paul Coletta:

We kind of started our distribution at the higher end of the grocery world with our primary partner, Whole Foods. But now we're innovating now that we have some scale, and we're starting to work to bring this food down into a more accessible price point, and one of the ways I think we can do it is through upcycling. Another, as I said, is scale. The more scale we have, the lower we can get our cost of goods, the lower we can drive our ingredient prices, and the more we can bring prices down to be something for everybody.

Simon Mainwaring:

What I love about the way that Urban Remedy is going to market is that you have that generosity or expansiveness of intent where you're like, "Oh, we want to prove to the Big Food system that an alternative is possible." You're the pilot for a programmatic solution that you want everyone to [inaudible 00:30:00]. Would that be fair?

Paul Coletta:

Yeah, definitely. I think if we're successful it will influence the industry. That's back to me saying I don't think it's just Big Food is a big problem, I think Big Food has a big problem. And companies like Urban Remedy, and there are so many others out there that I think are just doing a great job. And if we succeed, we will catch the attention of these bigger food companies, and they don't need to lose 10 points of market share, they just need to lose one to go, "Oh, okay. So this is where the consumer is headed." And that's why you see so many Big Food companies buying the small food companies, because I think more and more Big Food companies are shifting R&D to M&A, right? There's a shift from R&D to M&A, because oftentimes they are the victim of their own momentum, right? They're too big, it's like turning a battleship in the Mississippi.

Paul Coletta:

And so they look to these smaller, nimbler food companies that are, at this point, maybe super serving a smaller, addressable audience, but that's the first pin in a bowling alley. You knock that one down, and I think others follow. And I think Big Food companies have seen that, and you're seeing a lot of these mergers and acquisitions I think because of that. They're losing share. They see that they're losing it to smaller food companies that, quite honestly, are more hyper-focused on these need states. And I think that will only continue and accelerate.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's hard as a social entrepreneur, as a purposeful business leader, founder, whatever, to get a company off the ground, but the more momentum you build, the more leverage you have, the more the market forces reinforce and propel what you're doing, the better you're satisfying those consumer need states.

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And so as tough as it is at the beginning, you got to hold fast and just keep going, because you're unlocking so much momentum that will come later on. Would you say that's fair?

Paul Coletta:

Spot on. Our success will go well beyond what Urban Remedy would realize in its own success. I think our success... I define leadership as the ability to influence change, needed change, that's my definition of leadership. And I think of that sort of personally as a leader, but I also think of it for Urban Remedy as a leader. I think we are a leader in the ultra fresh, clean, and convenient food movement. And our success should influence needed change in the industry, that's this idea of re-imagining.

Paul Coletta:

It's not just Urban Remedy, and that's why... I mean, anybody that comes to me in this industry and is starting out, even some that you might think are directly competitive, I think we've always had this, "Hey, let us help you. Let us help you with the right supplier for packaging. Let us help you with the right supplier, the right farmers." Because there's room for all of us. And if we are really serious about changing the food system, that has to go beyond our own success, that has to translate to the success of the food industry at large. And so anybody that's out there struggling to try to do the same thing, my invitation to you is let's talk. Let's talk about how we do it together. And anybody out there that's already done it, help, come my way.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. Yeah, it's so powerful what you shared, that this whole idea that lead with your outcomes, and the income will follow. Really look at what you're trying to achieve.

Paul Coletta:

It will.

Simon Mainwaring:

Paul, thank you so much for these insights. It's so powerful because it's so practical, and I look forward to following the success of Urban Remedy, and the transformation of the industry as a whole. So, thank you.

Paul Coletta:

Thank you, Simon.

Simon Mainwaring:

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