



LEAD WITH WE
SEASON 2: EPISODE 023
Rachel Lincoln, prAna

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 Rachel Lincoln, director of sustainability at the California-based activewear brand, prAna. That has launched and scaled the Responsible Packaging Movement to now include over 80 brands who are investing their products and companies with greater humanity. And who are working together pre-competitively to level up the entire industry and drive growth. Rachel, welcome to Lead With We.

Rachel Lincoln:

Thank you so much for having me today. I'm super excited to be talking with you.

Simon Mainwaring:

I feel like we've got to chat more and more lately. I mean, we've been talking for about a year now since you really started sort of with the Responsible Packaging Movement and so on, and things have moved so fast so quickly.

Rachel Lincoln:

It really has. It's mind-boggling to me that it's been a year now and that we've been on this journey for over a decade specifically. With the Responsible Packaging Movement, launching it last year and getting the chance to meet you, and talk with you, and all the multiple conversations we've had about change advocacy, and how do we really inspire change in other brands and not just do it ourselves. That's really what was the impetus behind the movement.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, and it is. It's all about scale ultimately, but it's got to start somewhere and it's always got to start with that individual. Let's talk about you for a second to give people a little bit of context.

Firstly, you studied at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising. Why did you get into the whole fashion footwear apparel world in the first place?

Rachel Lincoln:

Oh, we're taking it way back.

Simon Mainwaring:

Way back. On the way back machine on the internet right now. Yeah.

Rachel Lincoln:

I love it. I had always wanted to work in fashion. Growing up, that was just what I loved. I loved designing clothes. I mean, I'm a font nerd, like a typographer nerd. I love that. I always want to do something. I thought I wanted to work in magazines or styling.

I went to the fashion Institute with this dream of working in fashion. For much of my career, I stayed in California. I worked in LA fashion and loved what I did. I got to the point where I didn't love how we were doing it and even considered changing careers completely, like going into medical or something.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah. What did you mean, you didn't like how you were doing it? What was that?

Rachel Lincoln:

It didn't sit right with my own value system of how we were just mass-producing clothes and bringing in millions of units every month from these countries that just weren't getting the value that we were paying for these garments. Someone was making the money, but I wasn't sure that it was the individuals making the clothing. It just didn't sit right.

Simon Mainwaring:

As opposed to leaving the industry, you thought, okay, I'm going to sort of retool it? How did you end up with prAna? Because I want to talk about prAna in a second, but did you consciously choose a brand that was doing it more effectively or responsibly? What was that like?

Rachel Lincoln:

Yeah. Honestly, being in the industry in Southern California, I had always heard about this brand prAna, but it was a really small company at the time when I started over 11 years ago. I think there were maybe 30 employees total and you never really met anyone who worked there because there was so many few people that worked there.

I got this opportunity and a job opened up and I figured if I was going to stay in the industry, it had to be at a brand that I could feel comfortable working for. That I knew that what they were doing was bigger than just making clothes and bigger than just destroying people.

I fought for the job. I got it. I've been there in many different roles now through the product creation process. Managed design team for a bit of time and then about four years ago had the luxury to take on leading sustainability. That's really where my passion always was and why I was driven to the brand. It's such an honor.

Simon Mainwaring:

It is an honor because that's sort of personal side of you aligns with the professional side. When you get that alignment between who you are and what you do, everything falls into place and you feel so fulfilled right?

Rachel Lincoln:

Absolutely. I never saw myself working at a brand for as long as I've been there. I figured three, five years max in the fashion industry. When I hear even myself say 11 years, it's a little intimidating

Simon Mainwaring:

It makes you feel old. It makes you feel old. It's like, how could I be 11 years anywhere? I'm 22 right?

Rachel Lincoln:

Absolutely. Second anniversary.

Simon Mainwaring:

Let's talk about RPM, the Responsible Packaging Movement. You saw the need, as you mentioned, but why did it get prioritized internally? You've got a thousand other things. COVID was happening. So many other things are going on. You've got so many competing priorities.

Why was it so important to lean into packaging? What was the problem? And then what was the responsible packaging movement? Just help us understand.

Rachel Lincoln:

It's a great question. I think there were two real impetuses that happened that brought us to really want to tell the story in a bigger way of what we're doing around packaging.

The first one is as a brand over the years that we've been working with other brands, we've been so blessed to have other brands really kind of take us under their wing and share things with us that we wouldn't have been able to figure out just through a video conference or a single conversation. Things like learning about organic cotton in early 2000s. We were helped through that process from another brand in the outdoor space, which changed the trajectory of our brand.

We knew we had this great product that we knew other brands could do. We knew it was scalable of using responsible packaging, of roll tying, and coming up with a solution to eliminate poly bags. We also saw that no one was really taking us on our offer of like, "Hey, how can we teach you this?"

Simon Mainwaring:

We've got something too, come on. We've got prAna magic. Yeah.

Rachel Lincoln:

Come on, you don't want to change with us? Let's do this.

One of our team members was having a moment where she was just like, "Okay, how can we take this amazing concept that happens in sustainability groups?" Sustainability is pre-competitive, as is packaging.

Simon Mainwaring:

Now explain that for people because pre-competitive collaboration is critical and it's everything you're talking about, but just what does that mean?

Rachel Lincoln:

Pre-competitive means that we're not in competition with another company around sustainability. At the end of the day, the earth wins.

Simon Mainwaring:

Or we lose. The earth wins or we lose right?

Rachel Lincoln:

Exactly. As much as we'd love to launch something before somebody, and we'd love to be first to market with something, at the end of the day, it's all boats rise. If we're all using more organic cotton, then I'm going to share my supply chain with you because that makes it there'll be more organic cotton and the earth wins.

It's this pre-competitive space. It's really luxurious because there is no other area of business, in my opinion, that functions the way sustainability does. Where people talk openly about new technologies and new innovations because again, we all want everyone to do it.

We've figured out that packaging is also this place. There's no brand advantage to using responsible packaging and keeping it under wraps and not telling anybody, in our opinion. We wanted to leverage that pre-competitive nature in sustainability and also share what we learned.

The idea came that we said, "Hey, well, what about a pledge or a movement or something like that, where we can bring everyone together and share what we know in a time-lapse trajectory?" It's not just a one and done, but it's over time and we are really socializing change in a movement together and we're holding hands and we're kind of moving forward in the right direction together.

Simon Mainwaring:

Let me ask you, at no point, even when you're really well-intended, does anyone in business get off the hook as to what's the value proposition of doing this? How do you sell it internally? How do you get your leadership and CEO to buy off on prioritizing that?

Rachel Lincoln:

Of the Responsible Packaging Movement?

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah.

Rachel Lincoln:

We've always been a brand that wanted to stand for more than just making product. Even when you take it back to our brand promise, which is clothing for positive change, there's only so much we can do in the space of making great product. How do we pull ourselves as a brand that's beyond that and really create industry change? Because we are a small brand, small to midsize if you will, but we're a small brand.

It's not like by consumption quantities we're going to change the world. We needed to really find that space and I think our leadership understood that they understood that this was an area that prAna did own, and does own, of responsible packaging. And that we had this education platform that we could teach others to do the same.

Simon Mainwaring:

Now let's walk through the steps of doing that because I think every brand out there would love to catalyze a movement to raise awareness around what they're doing that's making an outsized difference in the world. That's what you did. The pledge was that the first step?

Rachel Lincoln:

We decided not to make it a pledge. We decided to make it a movement because we felt that that word was stronger. Truly, it's less about brands committing to us what they're going to do, which is a lot of what you see pledges out there today. It's about them committing to themselves and then working to create change in their own organization, through the education we're providing.

Simon Mainwaring:

I love that distinction. I have to say, I recall when you just started, we spoke way back when, and you were like, "Yeah, we're trying to do this thing. And I don't know if anyone's going to join and maybe it'll be good, and maybe it'll work, and maybe it won't, but we really care about it. Let's go."

Tell us what that early sort of first few months where you... How do you literally, you codify it into a movement, but what did it look like? How do you start it? How do you announce it? How do you launch it? How does anyone else learn from your example?

Rachel Lincoln:

Well, I feel like I became a part-time lawyer in the process of building this movement because there's a lot of legal discussions around what we could and couldn't do and what we could require, what we couldn't require, which I think was really helpful to us to set the scope and boundary of what we were doing.

To be honest, as you mentioned, we went out with a pretty low bar as I look at it now, but at the time it was like throwing this huge party that you weren't sure if anybody was actually going to show up to-

Simon Mainwaring:

That's my whole social life when I was younger.

Rachel Lincoln:

Same.

We decided that we were going to go out with a bang. We wanted to really reinforce this idea of collaboration. We reached out to a handful of some of our favorite brands and other sustainability teams that we knew well, that we knew were doing similar things in packaging.

We launched on launch day with the partnership of Outerknown, Mara Hoffman, and Toad&Co to really help create this loud clap, this sound. We knew if all of us did it together, it would be even louder than just prAna doing it.

Then we also solicited the help of two non-profits because we really wanted to make sure that not only were we reaching outside of our own stratosphere but that we were bringing the right type of education and the right type of credibility to the movement.

We partnered with 5 Gyres, which is an Oceanic Research Institute, looking at plastics in the water and we partnered with Canopy Planet, which is really focusing on protecting ancient and endangered forests from industry. With the five of us, plus prAna, so the six of us, we went out on launch day and said, "Okay, at this point in time, we're all going to go out together. We're all going to say, let's reduce the amount of plastic. Let's eliminate plastic and let's use paper responsibly in our packaging and see what happens."

Simon Mainwaring:

It sounds like you went out in a very collaborative way. When you talk about a movement, it's something you can create together. Do you think that was important in terms of getting that engagement from others?

Rachel Lincoln:

Absolutely important and absolutely purposeful.

As someone who leads a small team, we realized that all these things we could sign up for were pretty much just more work for us. We wanted to create a movement that was really bringing people in, not to do work, but to learn so that they could take that learning and go back and do actual work for their brand. Rather than building out the infrastructure of a movement.

Simon Mainwaring:

Give us a sense, a year plus in now. How many members are there of the Responsible Packaging Movement and what sort of industries do they cross? Because it's no longer just apparel right?

Rachel Lincoln:

No, it's definitely not just apparel, which I think surprised all of us in the leadership of the movement. We just assumed it was only going to be apparel because that's what we know.

We have over 80 brands as of today that have joined the RPM.

Simon Mainwaring:

That's amazing. I mean, when I first spoke to you, you were hoping to get four.

Rachel Lincoln:

I know. It's comical, isn't it.

To this day, I'm still flabbergasted by the amount of brands that are continuing to organically come to us. It's so reassuring that we're on the right path and the brands run the gamut. As I mentioned before, we have icicle brands, we have beauty brands, we have CBD companies. We have home goods.

Simon Mainwaring:

Because it's not about folding fabric in those cases.

Rachel Lincoln:

Correct.

Simon Mainwaring:

What are they doing to help each other?

Rachel Lincoln:

It's interesting when we have more than one brand of a singular consumer goods type, we try to connect them. One of the hopeful parts of the movement is this networking opportunity with brands that you may not ever get to a convention to meet somebody else in bicycles, but your problems are going to be the same.

We also didn't want to assume that the problems that a bike brand is going to have is different from a shoe brand or different from an apparel brand because at the end of the day, we all make packaging. We all make way too much packaging.

Simon Mainwaring:

Way too much.

Rachel Lincoln:

It's about also identifying what are the most responsible resources that we can use and is an agreement on those? Or can we educate around the differences and what that might look like for any brand regardless of the product type?

Simon Mainwaring:

Are you broadening it from just packaging? I know there's a lot of textile waste from landfills and the type of materials you use in the apparel industry. Are you taking what you're doing at prAna and then sharing that with others? Where does it begin and end, the movement?

Rachel Lincoln:

The movement right now is strictly packaging. Strictly what ends up at the consumer's door.

As a brand, at prAna, we're looking at all of that because it really indicates how do we shift from this standard linear model into a circularity model? We need to be looking at textile waste. We need to be looking at up-cycling. We need to be looking at re-commerce and all of those things. It's not part of the scope of the movement, but it is part of the scope of sustainability at prAna.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's really competitive now. Fast food, fast fashion, even beauty. Clean beauty, clean food, clean apparel, huge innovation opportunities. You've got biodegradable materials, you've got so many different things going on. How do you stay ahead?

I mean, it's so funny. At the beginning of the conversation we were talking about, should we even care? Now we're like, all right, who's winning the race to care more, but how do you compete? What are you doing to stay ahead? Because when you put your hand up and say, "We're going to launch this movement." You're creating an expectation on the brand.

Rachel Lincoln:

Absolutely. With us, our innovation always comes down to better products and creating the best possible product that we can.

A few years ago we realized that we probably could be doing better in our overall material consumption of what types of materials are we using. There's plenty of innovations in this space. We always want to shy away from anything that's too gimmicky, or seasonal, or something like that, because we want long-term investments. We want to be able to say, "We used this in 2018 and we're still using it today." Our very first fair trade factory that we nominated in 2012 and got certified in 2012, we still work with them. We are about long-term business because that is sustainable.

When we look at our products, we set a goal a few years back to have 100% of our products have only preferred fibers by 2025. We've now excluded spandex because that industry is just not quite up to par, but we're working on it with some providers trying to figure out [crosstalk 00:17:16]

Simon Mainwaring:

That's it. I'm not going to wear any more spandex. I'm going to cut it out of my wardrobe right now.

Rachel Lincoln:

Well, look for recycled spandex. It is out there. We're just trying to make it more mass consumption.

Simon Mainwaring:

I'm going to make a note of that one. Recycled spandex. Yes, all right.

Rachel Lincoln:

We know that the environmental aspect of manufacturing clothing, the largest impact about 75% plus happens in the manufacturing stage. How we make our products is so important. Using recycled fibers, using regenerated materials and creating multiple loops for those products to stay in the ecosystem is so important as we continue forward.

Simon Mainwaring:

You mentioned regenerative there. You hear so much of that term, these days. Regenerative agri, regenerative practices applied to everything you can imagine. It's almost the buzzword for the day. How do you self-regulate internally at prAna to make sure you're walking your talk in the mix of all the other sort of business pressures we've had, on top of COVID and so on?

Is the sustainability kind of commitments, and milestones that you're achieving, and the metrics you're measuring yourself against, are they built into the culture and what success looks like at prAna? How is sustainably integrated authentically?

Rachel Lincoln:

Absolutely. Our corporate goals of sustainability, for the longest time, I think they were looked at as the sustainability team's goals. We've been able to over time, create this shift to where the ownership happens at the individual level. That there's KPIs to each department of how are you instituting these sustainability goals? How are you either making them happen or supporting them? What does that look like for your individual end-of-the-year review?

Whether you're a designer and you have to increase your uptake of responsible fibers, or you're a creative marketer, and you have to figure out how to tell the story of bluesign better. All of those things are embedded into our review process, into our goals, and our KPIs at the individual level, which is super exciting.

Simon Mainwaring:

It is super exciting. Executive compensation is a huge area. If you offset your carbon footprint or reduce your carbon footprint that determines executive pay. All those things are such powerful levers because they go to what productivity and work, and success looks like in a whole new sense.

What are you struggling with right now? Not just prAna, but maybe the whole industry? Where is a part of the system that could do better than everyone's trying to think through and innovate? Is there some sort of head-scratcher out there that you would share?

Rachel Lincoln:

I think the hardest thing of the system is that there's so many different directions you can go. Creating focus either in your organization or in the industry to say, "Yes, we're all going to do this and do it really, really well." That's not happening.

We're all doing incremental change along the way in all these little projects. We're trying our best. We're trying to do better across the board, but we need to have a strict definition of sustainability because right now it's become this term that just applies to anything that anybody wants to say it applies to.

Pretty soon words like regenerative and words like circularity are going to be the same. How do we have a consistent benchmark that we're working towards? Then we can all push in that direction to create dynamic change.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think we can't iterate or incrementally innovate our way to the solutions we need. We're not going to get there fast enough and its sufficient scale.

I think there's a lot of dollars invested in the infrastructure of the way things have always been done and there's a lot of dependence on the revenue stream from doing things that way. There's a lot of disincentives to change, but in your personal opinion, as someone who's been committed to prAna for 11 years, as to the role, the transformative role that business can play. How do you think it needs to change?

If you could wave a wand tomorrow, Rachel gets the big stick and just says, "Everyone must do this." What would you do?

Rachel Lincoln:

Wow. So much power.

Simon Mainwaring:

You're now part of the Marvel Universe.

Rachel Lincoln:

I think it would actually be two things. I think it would be that we need to close the loop on circularity. Meaning move away from this concept of take, make, waste into this idea of create, use, use, use, reuse, and return to nature.

Not everything returns to nature. Some stuff just stays in that reuse cycle. That's how nature is built. It's given us the perfect model and we've chosen to ignore it for the longest time, but I think we have to look

at that end of life section of how we bring all of that amazing stuff that we've built, bring it back to be reused? That's a huge gap in circularity right now that we're passionate about helping to build that infrastructure with partnerships.

Then the other part is going back to the humanity of manufacturing. Whether you're making computer chips or you're making t-shirts, it's people. How do we honor those people and honor them with the right amount of pay so that they can support themselves and their family, regardless of what country they live in, and give them the rights that every human deserves?

Simon Mainwaring:

It's so true. Just Capital does surveys that look at the issues that are most important to Americans. The number one issue in their recent report was a fair and living wage for people here in the United States, but all around the world, in these very, very complex supply chains, the same should apply. It's such an important issue.

With a view to growing the Responsible Packaging Movement, you've got to tell that story. You've got to let consumers know that you're doing it. Brands want to know that they're a part of it, and then you want to attract other brands to join. How are you telling the story right now around RPM and what's working and what's not?

Rachel Lincoln:

We've been really leveraging our social platforms. Whether it's Facebook, or Instagram, or LinkedIn, or YouTube, we've been really trying to reach out to the individual consumers. Our company has always been very grassroots and that feels very authentic to us. It's changing one person at one time.

While that might not make change overnight, the change is real, if you will. If you can convince one person and they can be your evangelist, then they go convince some more. It's just this spider web of beautiful conversation. On top of that, we're doing things like this. Where we're joining up with the right people to share our message and to get the information out there.

Simon Mainwaring:

I completely agree. You've demonstrated something so powerful, which is the ability as a brand to really double down on something you're personally committed to as a company, which is responsible packaging and take it to scale. To share it with others. To catalyze, but build, and sustain, and succeed in creating this movement.

What is one trait that you might suggest that others embody to be a purposeful leader, to be a sustainability leader? Because you're doing something very important and very powerful, very well right now. What has this journey taught you that we could sort of maybe take away from?

Rachel Lincoln:

It's interesting. I think there's really two things that a strong leader or a brand who wants to be a leader has to have. They have to have vision, absolutely have a strong vision, know what they want and they have to be able to communicate it.

That's why for even in my role, it's important for me to be able to go out and talk about what we're doing, but it's also important for me to be partnering with our marketing and our creative team. So that

they can help to tell the story in other ways, and in alternative ways, that is not really my level of expertise.

You can have vision, but if you can't tell anybody about it, if you can't get people on board, then it's just a dream, but if you have vision and you can communicate it, then you can rally behind a goal. I think that is really what is the most important thing for any leader these days.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's a perfect segue into why we believe so deeply in leading with we in the sense that you've got to collaborate internally with all your different stakeholders inside the company and get their respective skillsets.

You've got to collaborate with your consumer out there, who for a long time, it was more of a transactional relationship for a lot of companies, but now you've got to work with them to achieve these results.

Then as you're saying in a pre-competitive sense, you've got to collaborate with your whole industry to level up everybody's game. That's what it means to lead with we. It's sort of like, how do we stop kind of acting, and thinking, and engaging in a silo or as an individual, and really say, "What could we do much more quickly if we do it together?" That's what we're also deeply passionate about.

Rachel, I look at the examples out there that are so powerful right now and the Responsible Packaging Movement is one of them. You've got like 80 brands now. You've got all the CEOs, the coalition of CEOs that came together to demand even more aggressive climate targets from the Biden Administration.

You look at the Plastic Pact amongst retailers in the United States. You look at Eco-Skies, which is the coalition of major airlines now saying that business travel, can offset their carbon footprint. You look at all these aggregators, these movements coming together, and that's the only way that we're going to get there.

I want to thank you for your time today and helping us understand how you've done that and had so much success over relatively short period of time, a year plus. I look forward to reconnecting again when it's not four, and it's not 80, but it's 300 brands and we all see what we can do together.

Rachel Lincoln:

That's amazing. Simon, it's always such a pleasure to talk with you, and you're such a fan of RPM and what we're doing, and it's so nice to be here and to be able to tell the story. Thank you for giving us that platform.

Simon Mainwaring:

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See you on the next episode and until then, let's all lead with we.