

Simon Mannering:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead with We. I'm Simon Mannering, and today I'm joined by Linda Boardman, CEO at Bragg Live foods, a legacy natural food care company that's over 100 years old, who shares with me how to stay relevant, innovate, and win over new audiences. Linda, welcome to Lead With We.

Linda Boardman:

Well, thank you. I'm thrilled to be here.

Simon Mannering:

So, Linda, you joined the company in 2019. So tell us, what did you know about Bragg back then, and what made you joined the company?

Linda Boardman:

Love this question. I've worked in natural foods for a long time, started out many years ago in marketing at Whole Foods Market, as a matter of fact. So Bragg is definitely a brand that I feel like I grew up with in my career. In fact, probably 10 years ago, was working with a business consultant who asked me what my goal for my career was, and I said I was very committed to natural products and organic industry, and I hope to help bring these legacy brands forward. So I feel like I've really fulfilled the wish in that way.

Simon Mannering:

Isn't it funny? Life is sort of serendipitous that way, where sort of the clearer you are about your intention, the more it suddenly happens. You're like, "Wow, how did that come along?" And for those that maybe don't know the Bragg brand, it's been around what? 65 years?

Linda Boardman:

More than a hundred years, yes.

Simon Mannering:

More than a hundred years. I did not realize it's quite so long.

Linda Boardman:

Yes.

Simon Mannering:

Oh, that's right. Paul led the company for 65 years.

Linda Boardman:

Yes. Yes.

Simon Mannering:

That's right.

Linda Boardman:

Yes.

Simon Mannering:

And so for those who don't know a legacy brand, you were carving out this whole sort of organic better for you category for decades before anyone else was really awake to it. From your time at the company, what was that like back then? What did they tell you about it be? Because it was like being pioneers in a space that wasn't even proven out yet in a way.

Linda Boardman:

Absolutely. We used the word pioneer often, and Paul Bragg was really ahead of his time. He had a passion for teaching health, and really the company was focused on health education. The products almost sprung out of his design to bring more solutions to people out of his healthful living mission. So it's wonderful today to see how that's come forward, where he was talking about things like organic intermittent fasting, the importance of deep breathing, getting exercise in everyday, plant-based diet, back before people were talking about these things.

Simon Mannering:

And why was that? Where did that come from with him? Do you have a sense of that?

Linda Boardman:

Yes. Paul Bragg had some physical ailments as a young man, and found some mentors who taught him about healthy lifestyle, and he was so impassioned by this, he wanted to bring it back and teach it to everyone. He did a great deal of work in physical fitness, and then got into nutrition, and actually was one of the first health food store entrepreneurs that we know of in the United States.

Simon Mannering:

Isn't that amazing? I mean, time and time again I've been lucky enough to interview a lot of people, and it always comes back to a personal story. Someone had a transformative experience in their life. So for any of the folks listening, when you do have that experience, and something really... You're struck by how powerfully transformative it is in your life. You can lean into that, because if you need it, so many others can benefit from it. And for those who don't know Bragg, sort of their mission in the first place, what is that mission of Bragg? What's the role that they see themselves playing in the world?

Linda Boardman:

We still hold onto the founding mission of Paul Bragg, and then of Patricia Bragg, who took the reins from him in 1970s. So we inspire and nourish people to live healthy, vibrant lives.

Simon Mannering:

Got it.

Linda Boardman:

And so it's a whole really lifestyle focused mission, and really, as I mentioned earlier with Paul, our products are ways to help people bring health into their life, and make it easier for them, and more relevant, and accessible.

Simon Mannering:

And as someone who's been sort of an expert in this area, and you've had so much experience here, over time, I mean, a lot of things change, but have you seen anything remain constant as this whole movement grew, and there's more of better for you better for the planet products? What do you see that doesn't change through all of this?

Linda Boardman:

Well, I think that people's concern and understanding of how what they put into and onto their bodies affects them. I think we've seen that awareness grow over time, but it's an innate need within people, and if you look back at Paul's legacy, he worked with Hollywood movie stars. He worked with Jack LaLanne. Do you even know who Jack LaLanne was?

Simon Mannering:

I do know who Jack... I'm not that young. I know. Yeah.

Linda Boardman:

So he worked with Jack LaLanne, and inspired Jack LaLanne into his healthful life and exercise, which became his legacy.

Simon Mannering:

Yeah. A whole movement that he built. Yeah.

Linda Boardman:

Exactly. So this kind of goes back to people hungry for this knowledge, eager to find ways to live more healthful, vibrant lives, and looking for people to help them find that path. So I think that's the constant. The thing that's changed is how we bring that message across. Used to be Paul Bragg would rent out a hall in Hollywood or in Burbank, and people would come to listen to him. We have pictures in our archives of halls filled with people listening to Paul. Today, we use tools like social media, which is just kind of the different ways that have come to be to get that message across.

Simon Mannering:

On Lead With We, we try and look at how people work together and do business in ways that benefit everyone. We're working together to really improve everybody's lives. And when you've got a legacy brand, that's a different type of challenge, because decade after decade, you've got to stay relevant. You've got to engage new consumers, who are using new technology tools to communicate, and talk about brands, and so on. What would you say about how you engage these different generations as they come through, and especially younger demos now?

Linda Boardman:

Wow. Well, I've been really excited by the interest level by younger generations. I think that they have shown to have such interest in learning what's behind what they see on the label, the story behind the

products, where things come from, sourcing, more ingredient knowledge. So I think that's a real positive in terms of the coming trends in food and product knowledge. And I think in terms of a legacy brand, and how that moves forward to today, one of the things that I hear most frequently when it comes to Bragg is that many people were introduced to Bragg Apple Cider Vinegar through their grandmother or their mother, but today they have found more ways to bring it into their life.

Linda Boardman:

And that could be people who are using it in a face mask with Aztec clay for their skin, or for a hair rinse, or for are daily shot to get their daily dose of wellness, their dose of acetic acid in their apple CI or vinegar, but it's kind of their spin on the traditional products that their parents and grandparents used in their wellness regimen.

Simon Mannering:

Yeah. It's interesting to see how it takes different sort of delivery formats, or the way that people enjoy a product over time. I mean, you probably found since 2019, there's certain things that are constant within the company. To keep a company alive since 1912, a purposeful brand, that is a truly unique achievement.

Linda Boardman:

It is.

Simon Mannering:

So as you come in there, and you take the sort of lead in your role, what gets passed on to you? Because all these social enterprises starting up today, they would dream of being a century old brand, and a lot of them do talk about wanting to be around in a 100 years, but what are some of those constants that were shared with you that really have allowed it to last?

Linda Boardman:

Well, we go back to the word that we started with, and we talk about this a lot at Bragg, being pioneers. I think that's such an important mindset that we bring too at Bragg. I'm sure that I annoy my team at times, but I really believe that with our joint efforts, we can solve many problems, and Paul Bragg kind of proved that. He thought outside of the box. He brought products to market to address health concerns. He taught people how to use apple cider vinegar, and really lean into the time tested health benefits that had been part of folklore.

Linda Boardman:

So now we're taking that to the next level and saying, "How do we take all of these health solutions, and make them more relevant and accessible, so that you can use them in your lifestyle today, whether that's on the run, or in the workplace, or different day parts?" So I really think it's about being pioneering in your spirit, which is how Paul Bragg started the company.

Simon Mannering:

Yeah. It's a really powerful point, because often you have that incentive or that kind of motivation at the beginning of a company, but then you're like, "Oh, you get some marketplace traction, you build out

your portfolio," and you lose that hunger, that sort of mindset of change, and iteration, and innovation, and I think that's critical for longevity. Would you say?

Linda Boardman:

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. One of our other core values at Bragg is being bold, and that means that you've got to take some risks at times, and there are things that maybe are coming onto the market that don't meet our quality standards, or that we think are not in line with our legacy of quality ingredients, and organics, and plant-based diet, and we turn away from those. Because we think it's important, you've got to kind of live by the guidelines and healthy lifestyle mission of the brand, even if that means turning down what could be a business opportunity.

Simon Mannering:

Well, give us a sense of what that's like, because, again, to withstand the test of time, you've got to make the right decisions, even when there's a real bottom line cost to making that decision. So rarely do sort of young companies, or even sort of companies that want to become more purposeful, do they get a window into what goes on in that boardroom, when you go, "Wow, we've got this grocer or this retail partner that says they want to buy an enormous amount of our product, but it's not appropriate to what we're doing," or whatever the decision may be. How do you process that? Do you look to your mission? Do you look to your values? How does it work?

Linda Boardman:

Absolutely. We talk a lot about our core values at Bragg. It's really the basis of our business, and why team members want to work at Bragg. Right? You want to know that you have a company that has a strong foundation, that that stands for something. So I think an example of that is apple cider vinegar actually right now is extremely popular, and there have been numbers of apple cider vinegar supplements that come on the market, but what we found when we tested these supplements is that none of them provide enough of acetic acid, which is one of the primary ingredients in apple cider vinegar, to provide benefits such as managing blood sugar, managing cholesterol, helping to manage weight. None of them were anywhere near enough acetic acid to actually provide that benefit.

Linda Boardman:

So Bragg said, "Until we can figure out how to do that right, we are not going to play in this space," even though there were new supplements coming out every day. So if going back to our core value of being bold, we introduced our supplement just a month ago, and we're the first we know of on the market that actually has an effective dose of acetic acid, but that was a hard boardroom discussion, to see all these supplements popping up all over the internet, all over the shelves, and in stores, mass market, and drug stores, and be making the decision, "Hey, we're not going to play there until we know that we can put out a product that's going to live up to the legacy of health solutions that Bragg stands for."

Simon Mannering:

And Bragg has been around before other people were even thinking about these sorts of considerations. How do you compete today when you got... You mentioned the supplements, and the competitors coming in, but how do you cut through the clutter of all the purposeful brands out there? You go to Expo West or something like that, and there are literally thousands and thousands of new products out there every year. How do you survive over 100 years? How do you keep cutting through? How do you stay top of mind in your category?

Linda Boardman:

Yeah. I think that's a wonderful question. I think that it's always about a balance of staying true to your roots. We have one of our core pillars in terms of our growth strategy is that we are the leader in apple cider vinegar. We need to be experts in apple cider vinegar. Since 2019, we opened, we have our own lab. We probably know as much about the science behind apple cider vinegar as anyone you could find. So we think that's really important that you always stay focused on your core, but innovation and being relevant to where consumers are going is very important, and that's why we continue to find new ways to bring our products to consumers that are going to taste better, that are going to be more portable, that are going to fit into their lives better. So I think that's the balance.

Simon Mannering:

Right.

Linda Boardman:

You can't forget where you came from. You don't want to minimize the importance of our legacy products like apple cider vinegar or nutritional yeast, another product that Bragg was really ahead of its time, and has been the leading brand in new nutritional yeast, but continuing to figure out how to make that relevant to today's consumer needs.

Simon Mannering:

The brand has been around for so many decades, and you are at the helm of sort of driving its relevance for the future. What's the biggest obstacle that you've had to overcome? What's the thing where you go, "Wow, that's been a really steep learning curve,"? What insights could you share with us about some of the challenges maybe Bragg has faced?

Linda Boardman:

I think that really it's been about how we get some of those messages across. As I was mentioning earlier, we have so much to say, and sometimes I feel frustrated that we haven't quite figured out how to get those messages across, and help people understand how to pick an apple cider vinegar product that's really going to meet their needs. And you don't want to get too sciencey, and technical, and get into of the minutia of acetic acid, and how this works, and the mother, and the bacteria, and what that is, but at the same time, you want to make sure you're getting those key messages across, so people understand when they're buying the product that they're getting what they expect from apple cider vinegar, and they're going to get the benefit that they're looking for from the product. So I think that's been a continual test and learn for us, and I don't think we've quite yet cracked the code, but I think we're getting closer.

Simon Mannering:

Yeah, there's always something, and storytelling is fluid. Algorithms change, demographics change, the world as we know it is sort of unrecognizable in the last 18 months. So it is, it's a really, really challenging time in terms of staying ahead, and what would your advice be in terms of someone who's sitting on the sideline, a brand that, Linda, is sort of sitting there saying, "Yeah, well I want to go to market, but I'm not sure if whether I should be purposeful, or how much I should lean into a mission, and let that inform what I do,"? What would you say to somebody sitting on the sideline?

Linda Boardman:

I tell our team all the time that I really believe that if we get the right people in the room, that we can figure out how to solve any problem that the business faces, and part of that is having people who are motivated by the company's mission and our core values. I think that that's the glue that keeps us all together, and we're all kind of rowing in the same direction. Overall, we're all very committed to watching the company promote more helpful solutions, and it's really rewarding to see people write into the company. We have so many consumers that call us, and write in, and talk about great health transformations, how they've used our products to help meet their weight goals, to help with different beauty regimens, and that's really rewarding to feel that that is the output of your work.

Simon Mannering:

And as someone who's been in this sort of category for a while now, and you've brought it to life through different brands and so on, what's one piece of advice, leadership advice, you'd give either a founder or someone at the helm of a bigger company that is trying to be more purposeful? What's one thing that you've learned on the way that you would share?

Linda Boardman:

You can't say it enough. I learned that the hard way in my career. I thought that I was saying the same things over and over again, and that people were very aware of our core values or our mission, but when I asked the question, some of the employees were like, "What?" You really have to repeat. You have to repeat. It's very important information. You need to repeat it, and make sure repeat people understand it, internalize it, discuss it, feel part of it, own it.

Linda Boardman:

We just put our core values up on the wall during COVID, and people weren't in the office, but we had a really cool piece of art made with our core values, and we sent pictures of it to everybody and said, "We're really looking forward to when you're back in the office, and we'll all be back looking at this together." We share a core value in each one of our town hall meetings, and talk about how these are being embodied in different actions going on in the company. So that would be my advice. You really need to keep returning to that, communicating it, and repeating it.

Simon Mannering:

Yep. I couldn't agree more. I think the common wisdom is that a consumer needs to see something seven times before they make an action. I don't know if that's true or not, or what research it was based on, but I think that's equally true. All of us, even when... It's astonishing to me, we found in our work as well, when you do deep dive with employees and companies, who've been there for years, and you ask them the same question, you get 10 different answers around the purpose, and mission, and values of a company. You're like, "Wow." And the leadership are like, "Are you serious?" And we're like, "Yeah. Really, look."

Simon Mannering:

And it's all over the board, and it is astonishing how you do need to kind of keep ringing that same bell over and over again, and as you look to the future, what can we expect from Bragg? I mean, you've got the supplements, and you're sort of competing in these new arenas and so on with DTC. What can you tell us that you won't get in trouble?

Linda Boardman:

Oh. Well, we are continuing to find new ways to bring our products to people. So our nutritional yeast has been doing great. I think there's so many people who are interested in finding plant-based alternatives, and nutritional yeast is used often as an all alternative to cheese, because it's got that nice kind of nutty cheesy flavor to it. So we're starting to expand that. We've got some exciting stuff up our sleeves on nutritional yeast. So I wanted to make sure that I emphasize that I've talked a lot about apple cider vinegar, but the rest of our products also have some excitement coming in the future. But I think we're also starting to expand across the world, which is really exciting, and we're getting more distribution outside of the United States, and that is part of Patricia Bragg's real strong desire. She loves to see Bragg spread out across the world, and help us to bring these health solutions to all corners of the earth, so that's super exciting as well.

Simon Mannering:

That is, that is. And I mean, the nice thing is when you're a purposeful company, that it's self evident that you need to share and grow your business, and you've always got a motivator for doing that, something that can propel that. If you're just selling widgets, or it's a very transactional relationship, you look at the marketplace opportunity, but you don't have that passion. You don't have that same drive. You don't have that sort of self evident logic where it's like, "No, we've got to get this out to as many people as possible."

Simon Mannering:

And I think people don't realize just how powerful the purpose is on a personal level, as a motivator, and to sustain a business over time. Linda, I can't thank you enough, and it's fascinating to hear how, I mean, a brand that's been around 112 years is still at the forefront of the industry, and still reinventing itself, and how you codify that, and how you compete in the marketplace is fascinating. So thank you so much for the insights.

Linda Boardman:

Well, thank you. I really enjoyed speaking with you today. It was a ton of fun, and I love to talk about Bragg, so I appreciate the opportunity.

Simon Mannering:

Thanks for joining us on this week's episode of Lead With We. Our show is produced by Goal 17 Media, and you can always find more information about our guests in the show notes of each episode. Make sure you subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and do share it with your friends and colleagues. You can also watch our episodes on YouTube at We First TV. I'm also excited to announce that my new book, Lead With We, is coming out November 9th, and it's currently available for pre-order at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Google Books. See you soon, and until then, let's all lead with we.