

Simon Mainwaring:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mannering, and today I'm joined by Stacey Pool, CMO of the fast, casual restaurant chain Noodles & Company. We're going to talk about how does a massive restaurant chain survive and actually thrive through the critical and constantly disruptive challenges that COVID-19 has brought on so many industries? Stacey, welcome to Lead With We.

Stacey Pool:

Thanks for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's a pleasure to have you here. One of the things I'm always fascinated about is how anyone in their own life journey ends up at a purposeful company. I know you came from Vail Resorts. Give us a little bit of a sense of that journey, how you went from Vail Resorts to what, in 2019, you started at Noodles & Co.

Stacey Pool:

Yeah. I started two months before the pandemic, which was crazy.

Simon Mainwaring:

Beautiful timing, right? Just

Stacey Pool:

Yes, seriously.

Simon Mainwaring:

...straight into it.

Stacey Pool:

Yeah, yeah. I think I'm just going to start with what you said about joining from Vail Resorts. Vail Resorts is extremely purpose driven. I was blessed with being able to work for the CEO of Vail Resorts. During my time there, I got to learn a ton about the way that we think about the environment back when I was there, about just what it means to do the right thing and to think about what impact you are having on the environment. There was a lot of things that launched during my time there. But the beauty of that experience was what moving over into the restaurant space is being really able to understand how do I take what I learned there, even just the basic stuff I learned, and make sure that we're thinking about it at Noodles & Company?

Stacey Pool:

I really joined for a couple of reasons. One is that, of course, I love the fact that we, just at the core of who we are, it is very much about taking care of our people, taking care of our communities, taking of our guests, which so much of that is about the environmental impact you have. Then the second thing I would say, and this may be just more selfishly for me, is I loved the opportunity with the brand. I thought there was so much tremendous potential. Being able to actually come to this brand and re-

shape the way we think about ourselves and how we want to put it out to people that do care about brands that are doing the right thing, that was really intriguing to me. It's been fun to get to go through that over the last 18 months.

Simon Mainwaring:

I so appreciate that. I think about the last 18 months as a lifetime. There was life pre-COVID, and then there's life post-COVID, and the whole pandemic has been almost different phases. It's like rings on a tree. To your point about leadership, I'd love you to share with us some of the things that you've learned or ways in which you've grown. I know that there was the initial, "Send everybody home, re-tool the business," and there's lessons there. Then there's "Keep everybody happy." And then there's, "Oh, how do we get everybody back to work?" There's been labor challenges, particularly in the restaurant industry. Could you speak to some of those leadership lessons through that 18 months?

Stacey Pool:

Yeah. I think a lot of it's culminating in, for me, together right now, which is I actually have found the moment right now to be the most difficult that I've been navigating. The primary reasons for that is that for the last 18 months, we've been going through so much that as leaders, we've had to be very understanding and be there for our teams and help, really help them with challenging times, whether it was personally or professionally, and help them navigate through it. So I feel like one of the things that I really learned as a leader, and not learned, I would say, but just reinforced, is about putting people first. But I do think that there's a balance because I think you still have to move the business forward too. So the last 18 months, for me, has been about people.

Stacey Pool:

But the second thing about that that's really happening right now at this moment is that I feel like the employees are so exhausted, and they are defining that exhaustion as burn-out, but it's really about connection. We've been home for so long that people have gotten comfortable being home, and they've gotten comfortable with the flexibility, but at least my observations are that they don't understand how lack of connection is impacting their mental health. I'm trying to find ways to inspire them to come together every once in a while because we are not requiring people to go back. But how do we bring people together to re-energize one another, to drive collaboration, to drive creativity, when people do like that flexibility? But that connection is really missing right now.

Simon Mainwaring:

I agree with you. I consider myself a thousand hugs waiting to happen now. I'm just going to hurl myself with strangers if we ever get a chance to get out there again.

Simon Mainwaring:

ut your point is well taken. I think, over the years, we've all learned that, "Oh, the web is great, and social media is great. We get to stay in touch with people all around the world." But it's this arms-length intimacy that we wove into our lives or weaved into our lives over the last decade, shall we say. But then COVID gave us nothing but that. And that goes against what is sort of fundamental or innate as a human being. You want that human connection, whether you're hugging someone or just talking to them or seeing a smiling face and so on.

Simon Mainwaring:

How have you maintained that connective tissue through all of these phases of COVID? What are you doing to win employees back, to keep their spirits lifted, to get the best out of them, as best as anyone can at this time?

Stacey Pool:

I would say, being a human, I think more than anything, I think that often when you grow in your career, people view you as less human. I have been very human through all of this. I've shared my frustrations. I've shared my challenges. I've had my kids in the video with me. I just think showing that human side of you is so critical because you're relatable then, and people can connect with you. For me, that's been a really big one.

Stacey Pool:

I think, transparency too, which just goes back to the humanity side, which is just being very authentic and honest about where you're at. The way that I've navigated it, honestly, is giving myself permission to be a human. I think that often, as leaders, we don't do that because we have to put on the perfect face. The last thing I am is perfect. I think, for me, getting through it and bringing people back is just being a human.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think this is a really important point to push in on because being a purposeful brand is arguably easy when things are good - we're all working together to change the world. We want to make a difference - and conditions are stable and normal. But it's a whole other level of stress test on a brand when things are as crazy as they've been, especially in your industry. I actually think that there's been some positives to this in the sense that we've all been forced to show our vulnerability, to your point. We've all been forced to be more human. Tell us some of the expectations of the vast number of employees that you have that have shown up. What are some of the things that you've heard them ask for, that you've had to provide, that those listening might not be aware of?

Stacey Pool:

Flexibility. I have a very young team, and what comes with that are young children too. A lot of people have been asking for that flexibility. We've accommodated everything from days off to take care of children to working in the morning and then working at night. For me, it's all about if we have a job to do, if you get your job done, do what you need to do. Just understand that everybody's going to need something different. Flexibility has been probably the most important thing.

Stacey Pool:

The other thing I would say is listening and checking in and just being very real that it's tough. Often, my employees just want to have somebody listen to them. That's been a huge thing too, is that, people asking for a little bit of grace and just being able to have somebody listen. That's been a big, big focus.

Stacey Pool:

But the other side of it too is that what hasn't stopped is the employee's desire to grow. We still are talking about career development, and we still are talking about opportunities to expand their leadership, expand their scope of responsibilities. It's an interesting balance where people need that

flexibility, but yet they still want to grow. It's definitely a balancing act, as a leader, is trying to find that right balance so that people stay engaged.

Simon Mainwaring:

How have you seen the food industry transform outright since you began at the company? But how's that also been accelerated because of COVID, because everyone now knows about climate. They know about COVID. They know about diversity and inclusion and equity. How are you seeing the industry changing?

Stacey Pool:

I think that there's a lot more transparency. I would say that across the industry, where people are sharing their practices. There's a ton of brands that have come out with the way that they're aligning to humane animal practices. You're seeing changes in packaging to reduce waste. You are seeing investment in local farming.

Stacey Pool:

We've been doing that for a very long time. We've had sustainable packaging practices for quite some time. And we talk about it every single week on what kind of progress we're making to even get better packaging in place to, reduce our waste. Anytime we're introducing a new product, we talk about how is this going to impact the environment? Actually, almost all of our core menu is plant-based, which is such a benefit for the environment.

Stacey Pool:

So we know, and we've committed to having this as part of our conversation. I think everybody has done that, is that it has become a core part of the strategy. It's become a core part of the conversation, and people are being, and companies are being transparent about their practices, which I think is changing the way that everybody does business.

Simon Mainwaring:

Well, yeah, I think that's absolutely true. One of the ways that you're serving your consumers is plant-based menu. You've also got huge commitment to animal welfare. Now, tell us a little bit about that because I see that being increasingly important to consumers as well.

Stacey Pool:

Yeah. We're very transparent on our animal welfare practices, everything we publish on our website, in terms of animal welfare. But we align with vendors that take care, are doing humane practices on animals. This happened probably three or four years ago, where we made the choice that we were going to be very selective about the vendors that we partner with. The pork, the beef that we serve is all served from vendors that are practicing humane activities. There's really nothing that we do anymore that isn't in line with that value system of really doing right.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's hard. It's hard to please everybody out there. There's the vast majority of population that do want animal protein. There's also those who are committed to plant-based I changed to a plant-based diet a few years ago, and remarkably, I still stand upright each day. It was miraculous. So there we are.

Simon Mainwaring:

But the expectations continue to increase. How is it driving innovation inside the company? You think about your evolving audience of consumers and employees, the higher expectations of purpose and sustainability, and that can either feel like a burden, or it can actually be an innovation unlock. What are different ways you're thinking about what you do because of these new expectations?

Stacey Pool:

Yeah. Well, in terms of the ingredients that we use, it's no different than what it was in the last three to four years. We definitely are focused on clean, humane, safe ingredients. That hasn't changed.

Stacey Pool:

But when you talk about our menu innovation, it is very oriented around healthy dietary choices and lifestyle choices. For example, three years ago, we introduced zoodles as a substitution to noodles, which has been extremely beneficial to our business, but also to our guests.

Simon Mainwaring:

What are they?

Stacey Pool:

They're zucchini noodles so they're spiraled zucchini noodles, absolutely delicious. If you ever get a chance to go to a Noodles, they are phenomenal.

Stacey Pool:

But it helps. It really is oriented around somebody that is committed to a plant-based diet. We then introduced cauliflower noodles. They're infused with cauliflower, which again is just showing our commitment to a plant-based diet. We then launched cauliflower gnocchi. So you can kind of see this thread going through, where so much of the decisions that we make and that our part of our innovation, are health-oriented, but also plant-oriented. That's a pillar in our culinary roadmap that we have continued and will continue to innovate on.

Simon Mainwaring:

Help us understand how that happens. Is it the chicken and the egg? Is it the expectation of guests coming in the door, and you hear enough about it through your research that you make that change because the business case or the bottom line seems to be there? Or is it the other way round, where you look at it and go, "This is where things are going, and we're confident that there's an audience out there for it. So we're going to, preemptively, put it out there." How does that work?

Stacey Pool:

It's a little bit of a combination of both. If you look at the innovation over the last three years, a lot of that has been driven by understanding that a plant-based diet is the future. It wasn't necessarily. I think what's important about innovation is that your guest isn't telling you what to do. You are thinking about the macro trends. You're thinking about climate. You're thinking about the world around you. And you're innovating to support that change and driving that change.

Stacey Pool:

For us, a lot of the innovation has been about looking at those macro trends and just the things that are important to people. What we're seeing a lot more of now are actually more questions around what we're doing for the environment. That has absolutely grown throughout the pandemic, is what are we doing to improve our packaging? What are we doing to limit beef in our restaurants? It's really, honestly, a combination of both. We have to take both of those things into consideration as we build out the roadmap.

Simon Mainwaring:

You're a CMO of a massive company, with a huge population of employees and so many mouths to feed every day, in the middle of a pandemic, where you have both be a leader and you have to be vulnerable. I would like to think you probably enjoy a glass of white wine on a Friday afternoon, at the end of each week like that. What keeps you up at night? What are you struggling with right now? Or what's that obstacle you're trying to solve for? Maybe we can all learn from something that you are seeing and thinking through.

Stacey Pool:

What keeps me up at night are the people. I'm genuinely worried. I feel for the people in the front lines, whether it is frontline healthcare workers, or it's the restaurant employees. It is a hard, hard environment. It's the thing we talk about multiple times a day is can we do this? Can we do this initiative? Will our employees be able to handle it? Not that they can't handle it, they're operators, they can handle anything. But it is more about making sure that their mental state is okay. I think that, to me, that is really keeping me up at night is employees are getting treated poorly right now by frustrated guests, by stressed-out people, by angry people. It's hard. Not only are they dealing with trying to staff their restaurants, they're dealing with frustrated guests. They're dealing with supply chain issues. That concerns me tremendously. And it does not concern me from a business perspective. It concerns me for people's well-being. That is absolutely what keeps me up at night.

Simon Mainwaring:

That makes total sense. I think it's not just peculiar to the restaurant industry. It's across the board. I know you have a foundation, and you've also had a lot of employees in need, like any company over the last 18 months. Tell us about the giving fund. What is it? Why do you have it? What does it do? What difference has it been making?

Stacey Pool:

Our employee foundation is probably one of the most important things to us. We're all very proud of what we've created with the employee foundation. We have a lot of our employees that give to the foundation, and we have a lot of employees that apply for grants from the foundation.

Stacey Pool:

But what it did through COVID is it allowed employees to feel comfort and stability in a time of need. I would say too, during that timeframe, the exciting part was that people raised, increased their giving. Our employees increased their giving, to give back to their fellow employees. That is so unbelievably powerful. That is just a great representation of our culture, about loving and caring for one another.

Stacey Pool:

We definitely have this foundation that helps people through times of needs. We also have a part of it that gives scholarships, 10 scholarships a year, to employees' children, or employees that are working there, to be able to progress their lives and their careers, which is just unbelievable. But more than anything, I would say that it's just another demonstration of how passionate our employee base is on taking care of one another.

Simon Mainwaring:

When you inspire a culture like that, it is amazing. It's not all on leadership or CMO, CEO, founder. Everyone can support each other. What would you give us, one piece of advice right now, on the strength of what has been, must have been a fire hose of learning over the last 18 months, having just joined Noodles and Co.? What is one leadership trait that you would say that all of us should lean into, if we want to be a truly effective and authentic, purposeful brand?

Stacey Pool:

I think agility. I think that change is happening really, really fast right now. Guest expectations, employee expectations are changing so fast right now. I think you have to understand that agility's going to be critical. You've got to be able to move through change. You've got to be able to lead through change. You've got to be open to change yourself. I think that hiring the right people, that can be agile with you and that want to change the world and change your culture, it is just absolutely essential.

Simon Mainwaring:

Stacey. I can't thank you enough for sharing these insights because I don't think there's any industry that's more fascinating to me right now than the restaurant industry. And few chains out there have as many restaurants as you and such a large population to look after. Thanks for being so open and honest about it and sharing insights into Noodle and Co. And what it's doing.

Stacey Pool:

Thank you, Simon. I really enjoyed it.

Simon Mainwaring:

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