

Simon Mainwaring:

Mental health is a challenge everyone faces today, both in terms of our personal mental health, given all the challenges we hear about in the news every day, and also in terms of the wellbeing of our employees and company culture. The COVID pandemic has accelerated our awareness of the need to actively manage our mental health, as so many of us became more open and vulnerable about how we were feeling at work and at home.

Today, we'll hear about a brand that has taken this issue head on to better serve employees, customers, suppliers, and the world at large in ways that also build its business. You'll learn the strategies and tactics they use internally and externally to fortify their culture and improve the lives of so many people struggling with mental health and wellbeing. So if you want you, your teams and customers to feel better this year, so your company can do better, listen in now.

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. And this week I'm talking with Taryn Bird, the senior director for Social Impact at Kate Spade New York, and we'll discuss how companies of any size can address a sensitive issue like mental health in ways that offer real value to the lives of employees and customers, and how your company can authentically commit to a purposeful issue in ways that deliver real results for people and your business. So Taryn, welcome to Lead With We.

Taryn Bird:

Thank you, Simon. Thanks for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

I could not be more excited for this topic because A, it's so important, but also it's so sensitive, and I want everyone listening into this episode to know that we're going to be talking about mental health and wellness, and it's a huge opportunity for positive impact, but it's also a very sensitive issue that can trigger things for people who are struggling in different ways, either privately or publicly. So I want to put that out there upfront, that we're going to be digging into this issue so everyone can be mindful of it.

So just in broad terms, Taryn, help us understand how you at Kate Spade understand really what mental health and wellness is in this broadest sense.

Taryn Bird:

Well, Kate Spade New York, a lot of you know us probably for our handbags. We're a brand that was founded 30 years ago. We're celebrating our 30th anniversary this year. And we're a brand that believes in joy, that believes in the power of joy, that believes in the connective ability of joy, the ripple impact of joy, and also the deeper meaning of joy. And so as we think about our work and the work that we do to bring joy into the world, whether you're on our website, you're in our store, you are on our social media channels, we know that mental health is a really important part of that. And mental health is a really important part of not only our journey to personal fulfillment, but our ability to experience joy from the inside out.

Simon Mainwaring:

And I think that's really well put. There's two dimensions here which are so important. One is the fact that mental health is so near and present and real as an issue in business at large today, after COVID,

after Ukraine, after all the pressures of the last couple of years. And at the same time, it's a huge impact opportunity for all companies, but especially companies like Kate Spade and what you're doing. So tell us about how long has Kate Spade been invested in this sort of mental health and wellness commitment?

Taryn Bird:

Well, I'm really glad you brought up the point about the insides and the outsides, right? Because there's the people component of this internally and the human resources component to it. And then there's also the impact side to it in the social impact that you're making in the communities where you live, you operate your business. And my role at the company ... I've been here about 10 years, I'll be celebrating my 10-year anniversary this year. And my role here has always been very much grounded in the social impact work that we do in the communities that we're looking to positively impact, whether being here in New York City or in Rwanda. And so as a brand, we've definitely had quite a journey over the last 10 years. We started our mental health work in partnership with a social enterprise initiative that's based in Rwanda, where we are the social impact investor and client to an employee-owned B Corp certified, Rwandan led manufacturing partner, where women who work there not only have access to full-time employment, but also a suite of mental health support.

And as part of that, we really saw firsthand not only the short-term impact, but the more longer term impact that investing in a woman's mental health can have on her empowerment and her voice, her choice, and her power. And sometimes I think empowerment can be like this, really ... It is a really broad word, and especially when we use it in the gender space, it can mean a lot of different things. But I think when you really ... I kind of like to think about it very simply in terms of, "Is this impacting my voice? Is this impacting my choice? Is this impacting my power?"

And when you think about those three things, and particularly for women, our mental health is directly connected to those three things. And as our work in Rwanda had shown that Georgetown University came alongside us in 2017, they studied this work, they found that women who worked at the factory were achieving higher levels of voice, choice, and power because of the mental health support that they were experiencing and had access to. And so we thought, "Huh, we're doing something a little different here and there's something pretty unique about this partnership and about this work."

And then in 2018, we lost our founder to death by suicide, Kate Brosnahan Spade, and we made a commitment to support mental health initiatives here in the United States. And at that point in time, our philanthropic and our social impact initiatives within the company were actually bifurcated. They were in two different departments.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, right.

Taryn Bird:

And in 2019, we said, "All right, we're going to bring everything together under one team," because our work in Rwanda is through a social entrepreneurship lens. So it is actually commercially viable. It's a profit generating part of our business. And so what we did is we housed everything under one team, even though there's different types of financial support that go towards each program. So as a whole, our social impact work is inclusive of our social enterprise work in Rwanda, our corporate partnerships, which are global, and then you have our New York based partnerships, which we fund through

endowment in a foundation that's focused on mental health and empowerment here in the New York City area.

Simon Mainwaring:

And it's such a complicated issue inherently, just mental health itself. But you are pointing to the work you're doing in Rwanda, and there's probably systemic issues that affect a woman's sense of empowerment and the opportunities that come from that and so on. And then you've got these more acute issues that are more timely, for example, COVID, and all the things that we experienced in the last couple of years. So how do you throttle between all of those, because some are sort of more timeless problems and some are more timely.

Taryn Bird:

To answer that question, let me mention one piece kind of following up on the journey aspect, because we decided to bring all of our social and philanthropic initiatives under one team. And what was important about that was that really gave us the opportunity to then take what was working and what we saw to be really effective at an intervention in a rural part of Rwanda and actually apply it to the balance of our social impact portfolio.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Taryn Bird:

So that was actually a really ... It was a way in which we were able to integrate mental health into a more traditional women's empowerment program. And so, Simon, the piece of that, that I think you're speaking to in terms of episodically, how do you also address this, right? And so when you look at investments in the mental health space, and particularly in women, in gender specific mental health, you look at it on a spectrum, right? You can fund initiatives that are focused on prevention, all the way to treatment.

And I would say where we at Kate Spade are really focused, this year, we'll be investing \$5 million in women's mental health and empowerment initiatives globally. And where we've really focused a lot of those dollars is on prevention, education, and also community-based solutions to mental health support and empowerment resources for women and girls. And so there's lots of different ways in which you can work in the mental health space, but we've found our social and philanthropic dollars to be most impactful in those three areas.

Simon Mainwaring:

And just to place devil's advocate for a second, it's such a sensitive issue, and there are so many topics today where you've seen companies step into a sensitive issue and then face backlash, or you're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't.

Taryn Bird:

Right.

Simon Mainwaring:

So through the lens of Kate Spade, why is it so important for you to lean into a sensitive issue like mental health? Because I don't think anyone argues that it's an important issue. We all feel it in our own lives. I know I do personally. But for a company to lean into a sensitive issue, why is it important? And then how do you navigate that?

Taryn Bird:

Well, I think it goes back a little bit to what I was talking about, about being a brand that stands for joy and all the facets in which joy manifests itself. And if you're going to stand for one part of it, you need to stand for all of it. And I think that we're an occasion brand. People come into our stores because there's really important moments in their life that are coming up, and that ranges in terms of the types of occasions that are coming up in people's lives. And it's important for us to be a brand and a friend, in many ways, that can stand alongside him, her, and them as they're going through that.

And so I think the piece, just going back to why mental health, why be a brand that stands for women's mental health? And I think it's important to note too, that we believe that mental health is a fundamental human for everybody, everyone, where we feel like we're uniquely positioned to make an impact, given our customer base, given our supply chain, given our corporate and our field composition is specifically in the women and girls space. We also look at other companies like Harry's, who are really making significant impact in the men's mental health space. And so that's really where we feel like we can move the needle. But it's important, I just do want to mention that we believe that good mental health is a fundamental human for everybody.

I do want to say one thing just about that, like in terms of why the brand and why this topic and why now. And you mentioned COVID. I think COVID exposed a lot of inequities in our world. And particularly when you look at the impact that it had on women, the impact that it had on women of color, the impact that it had on young girls, not only here in the United States, but globally, mental health was significantly impacted and not in the ways that were positive. And so I think in some ways the pandemic exposed what was already there, but just really brought a magnifying glass to it.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's very close to home. I mean, I've got two daughters, 23 and 20 who grew up in a city like Los Angeles and who missed out on graduations and all of those things that were timely, specific to COVID, but there's also the much broader issues in and around mental health. Can you give us a sense of just how pervasive the problem is? Because I think the power of a brand like yours is that destigmatizes the issue and allows people to talk about it. But I get a sense that everyone is suffering in some way.

Taryn Bird:

I mean, statistically, it's one in four of us will experience a mental health condition in the course of our lives. But when you think about being impacted by a mental health condition, asking yourself, do you love someone that lives with a mental health condition? Are you a friend of somebody or a coworker of somebody who lives with a mental health condition? Then you're talking about four and four, that we might not be living with a mental health condition, but we love someone who has a mental health condition. And when you look even deeper at the statistics for women, there's different and specific types of mental health conditions that are specific based off of your gender. And women, the three most common mental health conditions that women live with globally are anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

And I was actually really surprised about the PTSD component because when you think of PTSD, you think of veterans, that's what comes to my mind right away.

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure, completely.

Taryn Bird:

And women and girls, because of our proximity to sexual violence and also inter-partner violence are twice as likely to experience trauma in their life in comparison to men. And so that manifests in a variety of different mental health conditions and a variety of mental health issues that women can then experience over the course of their life. And I mean, going back to what we said about COVID, I mean, COVID just exacerbated this. And so we're talking about these really big statistics and big numbers. And when I think about myself, for example, and I think about the experiences that I've had, maybe some of my friends have had, I think one thing that the pandemic did bring to life is people are talking about it more.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, for sure.

Taryn Bird:

And I think that's actually a really good thing. I think that that's a really positive step we're taking. I think what's missing now is the resources that are in place to meet the need and the demand. And that's where philanthropic and social capital can come in to provide resources that either public institutions or the public sector aren't equipped to manage and handle, which is definitely what we're seeing in the United States.

Simon Mainwaring:

And I think it's only going to get more important. I mean, if you think about the stress of the climate emergency that has places on everyone's lives, but also young minds and how they feel about themselves and their future. And I want to kind of point to a solution for a moment. I mean, you mentioned that the efforts in Rwanda, there were some learnings in that pilot program that allowed you to bring across to your efforts here in the US and New York and to kind of bring it all under one tent. What were some of those learnings in terms of how for these issues, whether they're systemic issues or whether they're more sort of episodic issues?

Taryn Bird:

The first, I have to say, when we started our work in Rwanda about 10 years ago, something I've always really appreciated about this company and about this brand was the level of entrepreneurship that sat within the real makeup of the company. I've come to talk about it in terms of we're a large publicly traded company, publicly traded brand that sits in a house of brands, a tapestry.

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure.

Taryn Bird:

But the culture of entrepreneurialism, it's always been something that's excited me working here. I mean, I came from a government job before I came here. When they told me I'd be spending a lot of time in Rwanda in this job, I thought, "Yeah, okay, you're large company. How hands-on are we going to

be?" And we've truly walked a really tight and, I think, important partnership with our Rwandan colleagues at Abahizi, which is the name of the manufacturing facility.

And the piece that I'll bring to that and the entrepreneurial piece that I think that's really important, I like to call it corporate entrepreneurship because you're working in a larger company, but you have this opportunity to really think about, "All right, I got these assets. I have these internal assets. How can we best deploy them for the purpose of good and for the purpose of impact?"

And in terms of our work in Rwanda, pieces that were highly effective in terms of delivering a mental health resource and support tool, particularly in a community that didn't have any, was the first of which was providing resources and tools at the office. As part of the employee experience at Abahizi, every man and woman has access to a community-based counselor who is on staff at the factory.

Simon Mainwaring:

Wow.

Taryn Bird:

And why that's important, because as a philanthropic and social impact funder, what that allows us to do is see, "Whoa, this isn't just about the resource." And I think we miss this a lot, particularly when we're talking about women's initiatives. We're not just talking about the resource being available. You have to manage time. Women are, we hold a lot. And as part of that, there's responsibilities that exist. If you're responsible for bringing in income, that's one piece of it. Taking care of the family, that's another piece of it. Cooking dinner, making breakfast, getting the kids to school.

I remember actually in one of our first planning sessions with the Rwandan team, we had a member of the production team walk through her day and she wrote down what happened from the morning she woke up to the end of the day. And the amount of work that took place outside of work blew my mind.

Simon Mainwaring:

Mm. Right.

Taryn Bird:

And I bring that up as a point because we're not just talking about having resources available for women. We have to balance the fact that there is limited time that she has to be able to access that resource. So when we look at, what I think was successful about what we did in Rwanda, is we baked it into the employee experience, right? So that access to the mental health support that she or he or they can get at the factory is part of their job from the normal working hours. And so we've actually taken that approach to some of the programs that we've funded here in New York City. When you look at the work that we've done with the Grace Institute or some of the work that we've funded with an organization called Rising Tide Capital, which works with women entrepreneurs here in the New Jersey area, we are funding access to mental health support that takes place during a trading program that's already in place.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. So you're-

Taryn Bird:

So the time component to it is baked in.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's baked in.

Taryn

Bird:

Mm-hmm.

Simon Mainwaring:

So your advice to young companies, mature companies, or global enterprises is it's not necessarily enough just to have a resource outside that people could tap into, but to really bake it-

Taryn Bird:

Yes.

Simon Mainwaring:

... into the culture and the organization itself.

Taryn Bird:

A thousand percent. I think a huge piece of that, especially if you're at a company that has an EAP program, an employee assistance program, making it part of the culture, to talk about it. We have signs all over our office that talk about EAP, I mean, encouraging people to use it because that's a resource that we have. I think these initiatives and these programs, particularly mental health, have always been like, "Oh, these sit over here and I'll access them whenever I need them."

Simon Mainwaring:

Exactly.

Taryn Bird:

Or, "I'll go exactly whenever I have the time for it." Well, guess what? You're not going to have the time. So it's so important to think about, "How do I make this as efficient and as easy as possible for whether it's my colleagues, my employees, the social impact partners that I'm going to be working with?" And I think that piece is really important too on a funding side, is to ask yourself as a funder, because I'm a funder, I'm not a direct implementer, is to say, "I need to be asking the questions of what's going to be the most efficient and effective use of a program and how my dollars can go to support that." Because it might not be in the traditional way that I think a program like this should work.

And so I think that's really important too, is if you are on the funding side, particularly in the mental health space, make sure you're asking the right questions about how a program should be structured and set up, especially if it's going to be something new for the organization, and really listen to your on-the-ground partners.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, I think listening could not be more important there. And I want to ask you about other support systems because the EAP system is something I'm not familiar with, and I think that that sounds really

powerful. But I feel like, in my personal life, I stay away from the headlines on the weekend. I stay away from social media. I needed to manage my mental health. I stay away from the news as much as I can because I just found it was just an assault on your mental health all the time.

What are, rather than a remedial capacity, in a preventative capacity, what sort of systems can we put in place or behaviors or habits not only in our own personal lives but in our work culture? Because every company is now being charged these days to look after the whole human being. So what can we do in a preventative capacity?

Taryn Bird:

Well, I think the first point ... Well, what I just really connect with what you're saying about avoiding the headlines. I am right in that boat with you. Finding the way to get your news, I think is completely, a really, really important component of not only self-care but self-regulation.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Taryn Bird:

Because that is going to throw you, but it's important for us to stay, obviously, informed and up to date on what's going on in the world. So I think an important component to it, and I probably would say a lot of people would say this first, especially if then you're in a role like mine, is you have to have leadership buy in. It has to be bought into from the top. I feel very fortunate at Kate Spade that our leadership team has incredibly bought into the important role that positive mental health plays, not only in our culture, but in the individual lives of all of our employees and friends and colleagues that work here.

I think the second piece to it though is, it's important to establish, we call them the community group. We have a community group of about 80 of us here at Kate Spade, both in our corporate and our field teams, that are really passionate about mental health. It's called Mind, Body, Soul. It's an initiative that we bring together, a group of us that are incredibly passionate but are really [inaudible 00:19:47] internal champions. The reality is that this topic is still very stigmatized. It needs more destigmatization. So having those kind of internal champions to understand, all right, I know what our mental health resources are here at the company. We have, and I'll just give you an example with Kate Spade, we have our EAP program, so our employee assistance program. We have bi-weekly meditations that we do twice a week with a meditation specialist. She's a meditation teacher. We do community-based meditation together on Zoom twice a week. We also have trained mental health first aiders within our organization through the National Council of Mental Wellbeing, who are folks within the organization that understand mental health support and tools and resources that we have.

It's important, I think, to create a warm and inviting environment with this topic. So having people within your organization who exude that warmth, who have a level of approachability, and that's not just HR. It needs to be people who are culture keepers within your organization to also really champion this issue and be a safe place that somebody can go to and ask the question to if they might have one.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, the permission to be vulnerable, for it to be a safe place and it not just to be an HR silo is so important. And I want to ask you a sort of the cynics question out there, which would say if you're a publicly traded company, there's downward pressure on share prices for a recession, inflation. If you're a startup, you are time and resource poor.

Taryn Bird:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

What is the ROI of prioritizing the mental health of your own employees and the issue more broadly? Because without that business case, it's hard to prioritize it or to defend it in such a difficult economic climate. So what have you seen?

Taryn Bird:

I think an important component to this, there's two pieces to that. There's the external component to it, which is the customer interest, the customer engagement, how the customer sees your brand as championing a societal issue. And so there's lots of different ways in which you can measure that. And then there's the internal side to it. So there's the culture aspects to it, there's the retention aspects to it, there's the attraction of top talent aspects to it. I think for all of those reasons, having an authentic societal issue that your brand is able to move the needle on and not feel like you have to be all things to all people. I think that, and that level of authenticity, is something I think that is really important. And that whether we're talking about ...

And I think we as customers, and I'm in this bucket, you have to accept that no company is perfect, just like no partner is perfect, no parent is perfect, no sibling is perfect. Every company has the issues that they're going to champion and has the issues that they have the internal capability and expertise to really invest and move the needle in. And you have to ask yourself as a consumer, "What's important to me and who do I want to align myself with and spend my dollars with and spend my time with really?" And I think the more and more that younger generations are starting to say, "Hey, this is really important to us to purchase and be associated and work for companies that take a stance on issues," is becoming a real, real factor in buying patterns, in consumer behavior, in employee retention.

So I think for all of those reasons. But the piece that we have to remind ourselves, and if you are sitting inside of the company right now, you can't be all things to all people. And being authentic and really focused, I think, is really important because I mean, as you mentioned, there's ... My goodness, you turn on the news and there's so many different societal issues that we could be trying to help to solve or lend our voice to an issue or a cause or invest a small amount of money or large amount of money to try to support. But we need to make sure that we're staying committed to issues that we are uniquely positioned to do so with.

Simon Mainwaring:

And Taryn, speaking about culture, it's one thing to speak about the culture that exists with the employees that you have and maybe even alumni. It's another to look sort of at the pipeline and onboarding and attracting the talent where your commitments really resonate with the employees. So how much do you talk about mental health when you are reaching out to prospective employees, or how much awareness do they have when they show up in the first place?

Taryn Bird:

I think that that's a really important avenue by which a lot of folks find us at Kate Spade, is through LinkedIn. And so on our LinkedIn profile, in the posts that we put up, and the content that we share, you'll notice that we do share a lot about our mental health work there, in addition to our more traditional channels on Instagram and TikTok and Facebook. But that is a place that we've started to talk

more about our mental health work because so many prospective employees are looking to learn more about the societal commitments that we're making and where we're looking to invest in the mental health space. So we have started to use that channel a bit more strategically.

And I don't know the answer to exactly how many, but I can tell you that we hear from our colleagues, both at the corporate office and in the field, that these are some of the most important questions that folks are asking, are about what are the societal issues that we're championing and how does that come to life as part of the employee experience? And so that's definitely something that we're very attuned to and really see as an area for us to continue, quite frankly, to grow and to nurture as well. But that's definitely an important ... But that topic point of mental health in interviews is something that we've heard is coming up a lot more.

Simon Mainwaring:

And one of the challenges, when there's so much need and so many companies now aspiring to play a meaningful role, is you can get lost in the noise.

Taryn Bird:

Totally.

Simon Mainwaring:

So how do you differentiate yourself in what is such a ubiquitous topic out there in and around mental health? So people go, "A, we know what Kate Spade is committed to, B, they're doing it authentically and we see how they're doing it in a unique way that makes me want to be a part of their brand community."

Taryn Bird:

Yeah. Well, something I've really appreciated about this brand, and this has been the case. We do the work and then we talk about it. We weren't talking about our work in mental health and the ways in which we were investing in mental health really until just the last few years, but we've been at it for about a decade. And so I've always appreciated that we haven't taken the approach of making the commitment and then doing the work. And I think that really shines through, especially when you're talking about authenticity and partners who can also speak on your behalf and you can speak about the type of relationship and partnership that you have.

I think the other piece that has definitely become something that I think ... The cancel culture and the ability for the internet to really cancel you, quite frankly, in a bunch of different facets. I keep going back to authenticity, because if you're staying connected to your authentic purpose, to your authentic community, to your authentic work that you've been championing, I think we have to say to ourselves, "This is where we feel like we can and we will continue to make a positive impact." And if you stay connected to that, that's going to ride you through, I think, some of the waves and the challenges that can come up.

I'll give you one example of that. I mean, I think being okay with being perfectly imperfect, especially in the mental health space is really important because obviously language is so incredibly important in mental health, and we don't get it right all the time, but we're going to continue to learn. We know we're on a journey. We're not perfect. We use the term perfectly imperfect quite frequently here, which I love. And it's about kind of the journey, not the short term flashy project or program that we're going to roll out.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Taryn Bird:

It's us and all of us being part of something bigger than just our organizations.

Simon Mainwaring:

And you mentioned language. You use perfectly imperfect. From a tactical point of view, for those listening that are trying to, not just in terms of showing up authentically in terms of your cause and impact to consumers at a brand level, but at a company level with employees, what language can we use? Because I know it's not as simple as just saying, "I'm not doing okay." What language do you equip your employees at Kate Spade with where, so they can sort of signal that they may need some support and need some time off, or they may need whatever it might be?

Taryn Bird:

Yeah, I can't say enough positive things about the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. They have been a really strong partner of ours and they do workplace mental health trainings. And I mentioned that we have 80 of us at Kate Spade that are trained mental health first aiders. You go through a six-hour program, and that ranges from our CEO to members of our store teams that have been trained in mental health first aid. And as part of that, you learn language that can be really helpful and supportive to someone who you think might be struggling. So they could be very, very simple questions that you're asking. "Hey, I noticed yesterday something was a little off. Is everything okay?" Or, "Hey, would you like to take five minutes to go get a coffee? I'd love to hear about your weekend and how everything was going," right? Again, it's going back to time, about being okay and dedicating time to check in with somebody.

And I think the other thing that a lot of people misconceive, if I bring something up and I share something with someone that I've noticed, "Hey, is everything okay? I noticed that you were a little off yesterday," that that's going to be triggering or could actually have a negative impact on that person.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Taryn Bird:

Usually what that does is it actually emotionally connects the two of you and makes the other person feel like they're seen, that they're cared for, that somebody cares for them. And it's pretty amazing how many people don't feel that way in our world today.

Simon Mainwaring:

No, I think almost all of us, a lot of the time, feel like either we're not seen or appreciated in life generally, let alone at work.

Taryn Bird:

Mm-hmm.

Simon Mainwaring:

So I think the more that we can create the behaviors and language that enables that to happen, I think there's only upside to that. And I mean, do you see, because Kate Spade has been committed for more than a decade in this space, and we've seen the various rise and journey of social media and digital and mobile and now even AI, where the way that we manipulate our own lies because we only show the best aspects of our lives can also be compounded by people being manipulated in ways that can't even imagine. Is it getting better or is it getting worse? Is there more pressure on the mental health of everyone, but especially younger demographics, or are we more self-aware and for more choiceful than how we spend our time and therefore the trend is in a positive direction?

Taryn Bird:

Well, okay, before I answer that, I just want to say one thing because we've been working with We First. We've had lots of different conversations with you guys over the last, particularly the last year, and I just want to commend and honor you and your team because when you're in a meeting with you all, you're so kind. And every time you get on a meeting or a call with you, you're asking how we're doing and there's this really nice connection point at the front end. So I just wanted to acknowledge that because-

Simon Mainwaring:

Oh, thanks.

Taryn Bird:

... you as a company and as a partner, a corporate partner and organization that we've worked with, I've always felt like that level of care has always been there and that's-

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, we all-

Taryn Bird:

... important.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thank you. I think we all really like each other. We get on, we have a-

Taryn Bird:

You can tell.

Simon Mainwaring:

[inaudible 00:30:41] with each other.

Taryn Bird:

Yeah.

Simon Mainwaring:

So you're kind of just experiencing how we show up for each other, but I ... Thank you for calling that out. No one's ever said that, so thank you. But yeah, I mean, do you think we're headed in the right direction? Is it getting better?

Taryn Bird:

I think a lot more is being exposed. I think, especially with younger generations, they're talking more so we're seeing higher levels of mental health conditions with younger people. I also think that's a reflection of the fact that they're talking about it, that they're speaking to it, that they're reporting it. There's now mental health education in schools. I think with that rise of education comes a rise in, quite frankly, more individuals saying, "Oh yeah, me too."

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Taryn Bird:

Yeah. Like, "Oh, that's what that was? Oh yeah. That happens to me sometimes too." I think that's what we're seeing right now, is just more people and individuals acknowledging that they're living with a mental health condition and freeing themselves in many ways.

Simon Mainwaring:

And destigmatizing that and us feeling like we've got greater permission to show up that way with ourselves and with each other, it doesn't happen overnight. And I know that you partner with folks who are committed to this space. I know Lady Gaga is famously invested in this area as well. So how do you, how does any brand, partner with an influencer to accelerate or expand their reach in and around such a sensitive topic?

Taryn Bird:

Mm-hmm. You mentioned Lady Gaga and the Born This Way Foundation. They have been a partner of ours for the last three years, investing in youth mental health and also participating with us on our Social Impact Council, which was a council that we launched last year, seven women who are championing mental health and empowerment globally.

Cynthia Germanotta, who is the co-founder and CEO of the Born the Way Foundation is a member of that council. And so I look at that council. We also have Taraji P. Henson, a actress, a filmmaker, a mental health advocate for the Black community. She's also a member of that council, and we've been working with her and her team really closely on some really exciting partnerships that we're actually going to be rolling out this year. And then I look at someone like Jazz Thornton, who's also on the Council, who is a mental health activist based in New Zealand, an author, a filmmaker, creates beautiful content on TikTok, and speaks to a younger generation about mental health. And she's a lived survivor of attempted suicide herself. And she talks about that. And then I look at somebody like Norette Turimuci, who is also on the council, and she is a women's empowerment leader based in Rwanda that we've been working with over the course of almost the last five or six years, and really championing this work for women in Rwanda and has incredible insight and knowledge based on her experience.

And so I think it's really important to not only think about individuals for us, it's women that we're partnering directly with, that have a range of different experiences and backgrounds that can really help you to amplify and bring even more increased credibility and authenticity to the work that you're doing.

And so a piece with the council that I really love is we also have academics that are on there. We will be adding this year a Japanese-based professor who is an expert in social entrepreneurship and women's empowerment to join us on the council. I think that it's important for brands to really associate ourselves with individuals and for us women who are so incredibly authentic and really championing this issue in their own right. And we've always felt like there's more value in women's voices coming together collectively. And so it's not just about one singular person or one singular organization, but how can you use your platform or our platform to be a container for more people coming together and really championing and talking about the vital role that a woman's mental health plays in her empowerment.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, I mean obviously with Lead With We, we just believe in the power of the collective, and you mentioned-

Taryn Bird:

Mm, yeah,

Simon Mainwaring:

... you mentioned content there and TikTok, and when you got a sensitive issue like this, how do you navigate that? Because the folks listening, they might have a startup, they might have a heart-to-growth company, they may have a global enterprise, and it could be gun control, it could be women's empowerment, it could be mental health. These are all sensitive issues, social equity, racial equity. Is it about shining the spotlight on the influencer and it's the integrity and authenticity with which they show up, then that creates a halo effect for the brand, or how do you navigate it so it doesn't look like greenwashing, you're not trivializing the issue and so on?

Taryn Bird:

I think something that, again, for us that's really just speaking to that last point, when you say trivializing the issue, connecting your social impact work to your purpose, I think is incredibly important, that your brand purpose and the social and philanthropic investments and the societal issues that you are going to champion are all sunk up. So I would say that's really step one. I think then, step two, when you're looking at the different types of programs that you want to roll out, asking yourself, "What type of program do I want? What type of program is going to actually be most beneficial to the community that I'm looking to serve?"

And I'm thinking about something that we just ran in the holiday season, which was a holiday mental health guide with a mental and emotional health app called Mind. What we were able to do ... We're not mental health experts by any stretch.

Simon Mainwaring:

Sure.

Taryn Bird:

But what we can do is partner with mental health experts and then use our platforms to distribute the content that they create. And so that's what we've done with Mind, and we'll be running our second content series with them in February, going into March, that we're creating mental health resources and

tools and videos that our community then can engage with, and we use our platforms to promote that. So I think that that's really kind of an effective way to ask yourself, "What's my role in this? How can our platform be helpful in tackling or distributing or talking to this issue? And then who do I need to partner with in order to make that happen?"

Simon Mainwaring:

And building on that, you mentioned how the learnings in Rwanda were kind of port it over to your practices here in the US. Is it because of the, given the nature of Kate Spade, do you focus exclusively on women's mental health or girl's mental health, or it's such an expansive topic for all of us. So what does the future of that commitment look like for you?

Taryn Bird:

Well, that's a good question. I think it's one that we're asking ourselves right now, to be honest. I think we made a commitment to reach 100,000 women and girls with access to mental health and empowerment tools by 2025. We are well on our way to doing that. And as we think about what's next, I mean, we're going to be working through that this year. I think though, as we start to position the brand and we start to position our social impact work and our work in the mental health space, that's so incredibly connected to our ability to experience and to embody joy.

I think that that's something that ... The part that really excites me about us continuing to be a brand that champions joy in all of its expression is that it's a warm, welcoming, and inviting invitation to mental health and caring for yourself. And I think that that's something that the space, the mental health space has struggled with over the years. It is a very, obviously, rightfully so, it can be very clinical. And as we've talked about, there's stigmas associated with it. So I think what makes me excited about the work that we can continue to do and play our small role in this, because there's many other players here, is continue to be a warm and inviting opportunity to invite women and girls to care for their mental health and to see that that's an empowering choice and decision.

Simon Mainwaring:

And we talked about the sort of ROI for necessary reasons to the business, but how does it show up for the women who get this support? What are the positive outcomes that you've observed, in Rwanda or here in the US? So we can really understand what we're unlocking for people.

Taryn Bird:

Yeah. You know, Simon, I'll answer that actually through a personal narrative experience, if that's okay, because I think it's going to provide a touchstone to something that is a much broader impact that we hope to see in the world.

I lost my mother to death by suicide six years ago.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right.

Taryn Bird:

And as part of that, I now live with a mental health condition called PTSD and CPTSD. And as part of that, receiving those diagnoses and learning about what I can do to not manage it, I think this is a really, really important piece to live with, right? To live with, to not feel like this is something that is a part of me that

has to be hidden the way, that has to be put behind a door and it can only come out and be tended to whenever is the right time to do that. This is a part of me and I have to learn how to live with this. And I think with women, something that we don't talk enough about is the impact of trauma and how that manifests for women. Whether you've experienced little T trauma or big T trauma, it is ... There was a woman that actually, the CEO of Women Deliver. She said something at the UN event that we had last year, and she said, "For many women in developing countries, trauma is life."

Simon Mainwaring:

Mm-hmm, wow.

Taryn Bird:

And when I thought about that, it's so true. And the permission that you feel that you have to attain in order to care for that, in order to heal from that, is one that society has taught us to look out here for ...

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, right.

Taryn Bird:

... when it's in here. And I think a big part of that, the ways in which that caring for and tending to our mental health are connected to increased levels of voice, choice, and power for women, we haven't seen that impact yet in the world. But if we start investing more in women's mental health, I guarantee you we will.

Simon Mainwaring:

That's right.

Taryn Bird:

And that's the piece that I think we're going to keep plugging away because we believe that is an inherent right for women, but it's also something that is just not looked at. It's not prioritized, and it should be.

Simon Mainwaring:

So powerfully said, Taryn. And when you sort of telescope out from the issue itself to the company, its culture, its employees, its business, give listeners a sense of how such an authentic commitment to something so deep and meaningful animates the company. How does it sort of infuse the company with something that has intrinsic business value at the same time so people can understand how you can thrive on purpose and profit at the same time?

Taryn Bird:

I've had the opportunity to spend a good amount of time with my colleagues here at Kate Spade, whether it be here at our offices here in New York City or our colleagues that run the stores. And even members of this community that no longer work at the company. Something I love about Kate Spade is when I see a colleague that used to work here, they say, we. They talk about the company as we're a community, we're still ... I think that that is something that I've definitely experienced while working here. The warm culture, I mean, don't get me wrong, it's not perfect, but there's a level of warmth,

there's a level of joy, and there's a level, I think, of community that I've found here at Kate Spade that has been really authentic. And I think you do experience that when you go to our stores and when you have an opportunity to chat with one of our colleagues that's there, that is a very authentic expression.

And I mean, one of my absolute favorite memories of working here has been getting the opportunity to participate in our Store Leaders Conference. It's such a amazing experience to connect with stores from around the US and to really hear about the customer experience, to hear about the customer stories, to hear about all the different ways in which a brand that stands for joy can really manifest in the simple day-to-day exchanges. Isn't that what we're all looking for at the end of the day?

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah.

Taryn Bird:

To be seen, to be recognized, to be in community with. And I think if your brand can do that, you're setting yourself up for a lot of success.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think you're absolutely right. I think as the crises we're solving for become more acute, the most counterintuitive, a powerful thing a brand can do is to lead with their integrity. Because the scrutiny, the distrust, the sensitivity to greenwashing is only increasing. So the more you lean into the integrity of your intent and action, the better position you are to be elevated by the market forces that are shaping the future and those who will lead the future. And I want to say, Taryn, I just commend Kate Spade on not only how long it's been committed to this issue, but the authenticity with which it's doing it.

Because so many brands struggle, "Well, what issues should I lean into and how tangentially should I do it and how do I integrate it into my business?"

But when there is that alignment between who you are and what you do and what you make and what you are committed to, and it's infused through the whole organization, they become one and the same thing. And I can hear the value it offers to the business, but also everyone that works there. So I want to sort of share my respect for you leading the charge and that capacity and everyone at We First and the leadership team for their commitment to everyone at Kate Spade, and the leadership team, for really showing up authentically to that end and giving us all permission to kind of show up in a way that's really going to move the needle, not because we think we need to be purposeful, not because we're managing the optics, but because this is a real issue that needs to be treated seriously and we need to drive real results. So hats off to that, and thank you so much for the insights today.

Taryn Bird:

Yeah, thank you for having me. And one last thing, I think I'll just say, and I know I've said this earlier in our time together, but this is something that is piquing your interest, whether it be mental health or another societal issue that you feel like your company can really champion or make a positive impact on, no impact is too small. And I think that that's something for us to really remember because on all of the reels and the highlights, whatever you're looking at, you're seeing these larger commitments or these larger programs or these massive investments that are being made. And when you're asking yourselves, "Okay, well I got to start somewhere," and nowhere is too small. And I think that that's really important to remember, to just get started, and to not forget that.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, you are never too small to lead, as they say, outright and in around any specific issue. And thank you for equipping us for 2023 about how we can more responsibly approach mental health for ourselves and for our company. Because we do know the future is challenging, but if we all show up together, there's nothing we can't do. So thank you, Taryn, and here's to honoring our truth and our vulnerability individually and collectively more effectively as we move forward, because I think we'll find more joy, as you say.

Taryn Bird:

I love that. Here's to more joy. I'm in for that.

Simon Mainwaring:

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