Transcript of ‘B-Corps, Brands and Business’

Season 2, Episode 4, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business here at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Jan, it's time to put your job on the line once more as we talk to one of the people who, I have a general consensus, may be able to get you fired.

Jan: I'm not at all worried, Paul. I certainly won't be fired for this.

Paul: Yes. 'Cause we're gonna be talking to someone from Pentland Brands, someone who is in charge of corporate responsibility at Pentland Brands.

And Pentland Brands are, essentially, the same type of people who are sponsoring the Pentland Centre.

Jan: Uh, they are indeed. So, we've got lots of things in common.

And one of the things we've got in common is a passion about sustainability and business. So that's pretty cool, eh?

Paul: Yeah, it's, it's good to actually go behind the scenes at a company that's, when we discuss and discover how broad Pentland Brands is, pretty huge company in lots of ways. And finding out what they do regarding sustainability activities.

Jan: And who's gonna tell us about that, Paul?

Paul: Well, Jan, today we're joined by Kaiesha Gibson, who is the Head of Corporate Responsibility at Pentland Brands. Hello, Kaiesha.

Kaiesha: Hello.

Paul: Thank you very much for joining us. And can I check, do you have the power to get Jan fired?

Kaiesha: No, [laughs] and I wouldn't even try. Wouldn't even try.

Jan: Oh, bless you. You see the girls are in this together, you're on a thin and sticky wicket there.

Paul: Next time can you find someone who can get you fired? Just you know…

Jan: …they exist, they exist.

Paul: Yeah. Well thanks very much for joining us, Kaeisha.

Uh, first of all, I'd like to get a little bit of an idea of who Pentland Brands are. Because, like I've said, there's so many companies and brand names within Pentland Brands that people maybe don't necessarily realise they're owned by the same overarching company.

Kaiesha: Yes. So, Pentland Brands are the people behind some of the world's best loved sport, outdoor and lifestyle brands.

We own Speedo, Berghaus, Canterbury of New Zealand, um, Endura, Ellesse, Red or Dead, Kangaroos and Mitre. Um, and we are also the UK footwear and apparel licensee for Kickers.

And they're all pioneering brands, so that does make life better.

Paul: That's quite a few companies there.

Kaiesha: A lot. [laughs]

Jan: And one of the things that, um, so I, when we first started working together, I didn't know that you had Canterbury of New Zealand. And um, I had heard it was foreign-owned and I was quite upset.

And then I got over it when I knew it was you who owned it. So I think, oh, that's all right then, I can think that's okay, 'cause I'm from Canterbury…

Kaiesha …oh are you? OK…

Jan: …of New Zealand. Yes.

Kaiesha: Alright, we're gonna wheel you out [laughs] for representation should anyone push back.

Paul: All of those brands together. How does it work as, uh, an overarching company then Kaiesha? How does Pentland Brands work with all those smaller brands within it?

Kaiesha: So, Pentland Brands is kind of the company that supports the brands, um, in terms of company structure. So, we have a lot of shared services, sustainability, corporate responsibility, be one of them.

Yeah, there's some shared services and then we've got the brands team who focus on the product, marketing. Some of the strategy when we talk about sustainability comes from our team, but the brands will have their own, um, strategies.

So, it's a delicate balance, but we, we have perfected it, I believe.

Paul: And what's your role then, within Pentland Brands? What, what do you do in your role as Head of Corporate Responsibility?

Kaiesha: So, we are also called the Positive Business Team, which sounds a lot nicer, but it's not always clear what we do.

So as a department, we manage the social and environmental responsibility of our brands. We do that from a people, planet perspective. We also positively contribute to kind of wider society through the charity and community engagement.

So the brands will have some personal charities that they work with. We'll look at the more general one that goes across all of our brands, where we can link them to our brands, um, that work will happen as well.

In essence, my role is to manage our global social and environmental programme of work across the brands, staying ahead of various internal and external sustainability requirements, of which there are quite a few, and then to help the business deliver on its positive business strategy.

Jan: One of the things I've been really struck by when I've been working with Pentland Brands is the fact that the brands really matter.

And you were talking about that balance between, if you like, you know, the overall vision, and the vision for each brand and those, um, sort of co-evolving and managing together.

But the whole branded aspect I thought was really powerful. And I, the first, after the first time I visited, I, I looked at myself and thought I'm not very well branded. Um [laughs] and, you know, people are so, you know, groovy and creative and quite a young team of people really pushing these things forward.

I mean, it seems to me, from what you've said, but also from what I've observed, that the brands carry so much of the energy of the company.

And, and how does that feel like, or why is that the case?

Kaiesha: Definitely, it's our face towards the public, and it would be remiss if they didn't hold the energy. They are the ones carrying the torch.

We just facilitate, in terms of my role, it's about the values of the brand, which align to the values of Pentland Brands and, and Pentland Group. And so it's our job just to make sure that it's done, implemented, and communicated effectively.

So we shouldn't, there shouldn't be a disconnect otherwise we are doing something wrong, I would say.

Paul: Do, do you find when it comes to the brands that are under the Pentland Brands umbrella, that there is some level of uniformity and shared purpose when it comes to issues of corporate responsibility?

Kaiesha: Definitely. Previously as a business, we used to have a corporate responsibility rep, and this is years ago, for each brand. We decided to bring that in house. So it means there can be more cohesion.

But in terms of the brands we have and their focus on improving health, the fact that they're sports and outdoors, that they're in nature, whether it's football or walking or, or mountain biking with Endura, there's no way for those values not to align.

It is about making sure where our products are used is preserved. It's about, we want to improve people's health and that includes mental, um, health as well as physical.

And we all know the power of kind of like being out in nature, respecting, respecting the space. And actually we normally talk about having, um, a brand for generations and generations. We want to be here for a long time, and to do that, it is about being sustainable.

Jan: That's really quite cool.

What I'd like to turn the conversation to now is about B Corp certification and so, so if you could maybe tell us what B in the B Corp means we can start unpacking how do you have approached that particular task and, and challenge for the, for the brands?

Kaiesha: Basically, B Corp is an organisation that is trying to make businesses be a force for good. And in terms of, they have a declaration of, um, interdependence, which I think represents the values we have as an organisation really well.

Which is, we must be the change we seek in the world, that, um, businesses ought to be conducted as if people in place matter. Um, that through products, practices, and profits, businesses should aspire to do no harm and benefit all.

And that we do that with the understanding that we are all connected and dependent on one another, and therefore responsible for each other and the future generations.

So, the fact that it ties in well with the reason why the Pentland, or the Rubin Foundation is, is supporting the Pentland Centre, it's, these are long held values.

We felt it was a great opportunity to kind of go through an independent verification, which gives us a holistic overview of the impact of our brands. Because it focuses on how the business is one, not just on specific products. You have to go through recertification, um, every three years, of which Berghaus will be due theirs next year.

In the meantime, you have to write an annual report. So it's always about looking forward about challenging yourself, um, and looking for ways to improve. And while it is great to be told what you are doing right, it's also helpful to know or to be given guidance on how to do things better as well.

Paul: So, is it the Berghaus brand within Pentland Brands that's got the B Corp, or is it the wider Pentland Brands that has the B Corp?

Kaiesha: No, so we were originally looking, um, at doing it as Pentland Brands, but due to the complicated structure, or the boring stuff, it wasn't feasible.

So, um, as a business, we have started with Berghaus. For us, it made sense to choose that company only because it's, it's pioneering in its approach anyway. It's a clear British brand that always wants to challenge itself and it's ready to be held up to global standards. And so we went with Berghaus, but we are starting the journey and getting others certified.

Jan: And for some of our listeners, 'cause we have a global listenership, they won't necessarily recognise Berghaus. So if you maybe tell, um, our listeners

what kind of goods Berghaus are, are connected to, and then they'll be able to appreciate how, how it is a classic, a classic brand, especially when it rains.

[Paul and Kaiesha laugh]

Kaiesha: So, um, Berghaus is an outdoor gear brand. It's been going since the sixties, creating beautifully designed outdoor gear that is built to last. So when it was originally started, I think it had, um, an enthusiast for walking and someone who had an engineer background, and they just wanted to push the boundaries and, and make good quality product that met their needs, and that's something we continue to do, something we continue to be passionate about.

Jan: And certainly I can attest to that, that built to last um, we have a, the oldest piece of outdoor gear in our house is a Berghaus rucksack that was bought in the early 1980s.

And it's still a, a favourite and it's still going strong, so, so it's a, a testimony. So maybe, we have bought some new stuff between 1980 and now, I'd like to assure you of that.

Paul: I really think this speaks as much to the resilience and the hardwearing nature of Berghaus as it does to your tight-fistedness. [Jan laughs]

So, well, you will, so you, you say, Kaiesha, that you are coming towards the renewal there, at three years on from getting there. So what have you learned during those three years and what benefits have you seen during those three years when it comes to Berghaus being a B Corp?

Kaiesha: For us, I think it's, it's a force for the business to get behind in terms of it's a benefit. Granted, we are communicating with our consumers and customers, but for us, in terms of our employees, know we are also dedicated and our employees are consumers.

And so knowing that we've got the certification, being able to feel proud for the company you work for is, is an underrated feeling. It's actually really nice to be able to do that.

There's learnings that we've taken to other businesses. And when we went through the process, it was an opportunity to see if, where we thought we needed to build in certain areas was aligned, which it, it was, so it's, it is nice to know that there wasn't new stuff thrown out at us.

But yeah, I think for me it was a personal achievement to, to go through the process and it, and it was long. [laughs] But it was, it gave you better visibility of the business and how all the departments, like the work they do, and how that comes together to make a really strong brand.

Paul: And are you aware what the level of customer awareness is when it comes to, uh, Berghaus being a B Corp, and what impact that has on customers' attitudes towards you?

Kaiesha: It's a easily recognisable symbol, but I would like to believe that because we, as a brand, have always shown our commitment to people and the planet, it won't be new. There will, or maybe there's some new consumers who don't know our history and it's a good check-in.

But we are doing it because we wanna get better over overall. You can, you can always see that in the product and how we communicate in general.

So I don't have figures, um, in that area, but when you go into the B Corp website, when they talk about the stats that associated in terms of greater innovation, better D&I, better retention, I think we have all of that as well. And I'm not sure if it's causal or coincidental, but yeah, there's alignment in there, for sure.

Jan: One of the things that caught my eye about, about Berghaus is your Repairhaus service. And so our listeners might be really keen to hear about that activity.

And then once you've explained that, I'm gonna see if it was a relationship between that and the B Corp process.

So maybe just start with, what is Repairhaus?

Kaiesha: Repairhaus is our service where we offer, um, our customers to send in any old product that has maybe damaged or broken. So, for example, a zip, they send it in to us, we repair it and send it back to the customer. If we can't, we'll find a place to donate it to.

But it, it wasn't actually related to B Corp, it's something that we had in place. Yeah, it's a popular service, but we're proud of it because it's a clear commitment to, actually, we don't want our customers to waste money and we, we believe in our goods.

We'll always repair them where possible.

Jan: And I think particularly that sort of belief in your goods is absolutely central to it. Because if you, if you thought that in offering that you were gonna be inundated, that wouldn't necessarily be a vote for confidence in your goods.

But the fact that you can offer that I think is a really good, good evidence that that you don't expect everyone to need it and I think that's, you know, a really good as aspect of it.

Kaiesha: We have had people send in products for repair probably from the same timeframe as your jacket, so there's no time limit. It's, that in itself is very impressive. Almost as old as I am, which is crazy.

Jan: [laughs] Exactly.

Paul: Have you picked up lessons from doing the B Corp process that you think other companies that might be thinking about taking part in B Corp certifications could learn from?

Kaiesha: There's definitely lessons to be learned just in terms of how you approach it. When we first did it, I think I wasn't prepared for how many different departments need to be involved, and that's definitely not a bad thing.

It means, again, that it's not just something that's done to the business, but people are involved and get an understanding of why they're doing things. And like most jobs, you can work in one department, everyone's doing their own thing, it was a, a chance to widen it out.

And then I would say the tool is free. B Corp make it really, really easy. There's a lot of advice and guidance in different learning styles. The questions are clear. There's a section which is called Learn More to expand on it.

But I would say, give yourself time. There are a lot of questions. Generally one person, unless it's a very small business, is not gonna know all the answers. Do it with a group.

And I would say whatever the outcome is, whether you get, you reached a minimum threshold score of 80 points. So you, whether you reach it or it comes below, I think you can use the questions as guidance to kind of shape how you approach it going forward.

Paul: It's interesting there that you mentioned smaller companies because, in my mind when it comes to B Corp, a lot of the businesses I am aware of that take part in the B Corp process tend to be a little bit smaller.

Not necessarily, you know, I'm not talking about one-man operations or one-woman operations, I'm talking about just smaller SMEs maybe. Is there something special when it comes to going for B Corp certification as a brand as opposed to maybe as a small business?

Kaiesha: I would say regardless, maybe not going for the certification, but once you are there, there's a whole community. When you are part of larger organisations, there's generally a lot of collaborative work anyway.

I, I don't know what it's like for smaller and medium sized enterprises, but the, the resources, the engagement, the activities and initiatives that are available are really useful.

I do think there's also a bit where there's a legal amendment that needs to be made when you join B Corp, which may or may not have a bearing. It might be easier to update the constitutional documents of a business.

So basically it's a requirement for businesses to consider the impact of their decisions on all stakeholders in the company. So whether that's workers, the community that you operate in, customers and even your supply base, I guess.

So it's that, writing it in, making sure that that's constantly being looked at. You can get distracted by profits. [laughing] Profits are important, otherwise, um, it wouldn't be a sustainable business.

But in terms of what you don't want it to be is at the cost of all else. I think sustainability and work in this area is an investment rather than a cost. And so it's important that the impact on people and planet are always considered. And it will last throughout kind of changes in leadership.

It's your North Star, I guess, depending on whatever changes happen in the business. And I, I really like that aspect of it.

Paul: I guess the question is then, what's next when it comes to Pentland Brands in the B Corp context? You say that you know, you're gonna start maybe looking at other brands that might undertake the B Corp process.

Kaiesha: So I'm really happy to say we have another brand, um, already B Corp certified, which happened in May this year. That brand is Endura. It is our

cycling apparel maverick, no nonsense brand, founded in Scotland. And has strong mountain biking roots. And it's kind of focuses on having high performance and function cycle apparel available to all.

And again, it's a brand that has strong ties to the outdoors and the environment. And the fact that their philosophy is that we never take the easy route and never complacent and always thinking about the next part of the journey is perfect for being a B Corp certified company.

But on top of that, we are also looking to extend or to get other brands certified. And while we're doing that, we can use the learnings that we've had through each process.

Because you identify different areas and there may be slight differences between the two. You take all of that learning and then you use it meaningfully and kind of make a positive impact to all the brands.

Paul: So, one final question Kaiesha, what's giving you optimism for the future, having gone through all of this work on B Corps?

Kaiesha: I would say the fact that it continues to grow, the fact that there's other companies that want to join. If we all have that same approach, then we can make real impact.

This field sustainability is huge and there is always so much to do, and depending on which day you get me, I can be very optimistic about, optimistic about it, or I can go the other way. [laughs]

But actually in terms of the impact we're, we're setting, sounds very grandiose and I promise I'm not a narcissist, but like the stuff we're doing is putting in place to kind of make sure the world goes on for a little bit longer.

Businesses have to take responsibility and, and I like the fact that we're doing it, makes me really proud to work for Pentland Brands. It makes me optimistic for the future.

I, I like having conversations with, like my younger siblings and hearing them talk about this, and realise it's getting out there and it's something that they consider.

So, yeah, it's a, maybe a more of a private optimism, but still valid, I think.

Paul: That's wonderful. Kaiesha, thank you so, so much for joining us today. It's been such a brilliant conversation and it is a very optimistic, positive conversation, which for me and Jan, isn't that common.

Jan: Well, I think, uh, Kaiesha has the tough job, you know, sustainability managers do a really tough job. And so that's the fact you can do it with a smile on your face. But also, perhaps more importantly, the fact you can generate these fantastic outcomes through the B Corp certification process, uh, fills my heart with joy.

Paul: Thanks very much, Kaiesha.

Kaiesha: Oh, thank you. [laughs] Thank you very much.

[Theme music]

Paul: Well, Jan, I'm delighted to say you haven't been fired.

Jan: Well, it's always a bonus, isn't it, on any given day. [laughs]

Paul: Nothing wrote into the podcast, just generally you haven't been fired today, I was told to pass the message on.

But Kaiesha gave such a positive, really optimistic messages around corporations, brands, the B Corp process, their attitudes towards corporate responsibility and sustainability.

It was all such a, a really happy episode.

Jan: It was, but also kind of behind the scenes we, you, you got a sense of how much work it takes.

Paul: Hmm.

Jan: And particularly how much work that she personally has put into making this possible. And so that's always, you know, to be a sustainability leader in a, a for-profit organisation is a really tough, tough job to have. But she's rising to that challenge and, and making, you know, superb things happen.

Paul: And the rewards are there as well. So ,there's hard work, but there's the reward at the end of it by bringing all these people together, getting them to buy into the process, and having it run through the company.

Jan: Yeah, and I, I think the thing there, as I said on the podcast, I, I'd never really paid very much attention to brands 'cause I'm not very stylish in any kind of way, shape, or form. [Paul laughs]

But it's interesting to realise that brands are the carriers of all sorts of values for people. And I suppose Berghaus and Endura as a B Corp then become carriers for sustainability and that's, that's pretty amazing.

Paul: It really is. Yeah, the, the fact that they've taken it, the B Corp status with Berghaus. They've gone through the process, seen how it works. They've then been able to take it to Endura.

And I wouldn't be at all surprised if that was just the start and that the more of the brands start going along that route. And that's how it works, is you, you build and build.

And some brands will probably have a more natural fit with the idea of B Corp than other. But the longer we go along this process generally, the more firms are gonna have some kind of fit with sustainability and corporate responsibility.

Jan: Absolutely. So what brands are you keen on, Paul, as a branded, stylish young man?

Paul: I actually, I think I'm wearing only brands today. It's, it's not normally me.

So I'm wearing my Adidas trainers. I'm very much, am Adidas trainers. I find them very comfortable. And most of my Adidas trainers now are made from recycled plastic…

Jan: …oh, that's cool…

Paul: …yeah. It's something that I've noticed that they, I try almost always to buy the ones that are made of recycled plastic. So that's it.

I then got Rohan, who are uh…

Jan: …oh yeah.

Paul: …probably a competitor Berghaus, and therefore when this episode is listened to by people at Pentland Brands, they will send the hit squad after me for wearing Rohan.

But I do wear quite a lot of Rohan, I find their clothes really good, they're quite a nice, and they're an English brand as well, and not one that's necessarily that well known outside of the walking circles.

And then I've got Tommy Hilfiger. You know, which is a, a total, you know, left turn from Rohan. [Jan laughs] I wear quite a lot Tommy Hilfiger tops. I don't know what Tommy Hilfiger's sustainability credentials are.

I know Rohan are a very good English, British firm. And I know that Adidas, like I say, there's the sustainability element of these are trainers made from plastics.

So different brands, different levels of knowledge about their sustainability activities.

Jan: I have to say, I've got no idea what I'm wearing today.

Paul: You're wearing a T-shirt about Pluto, which I don't think is from a particular brand. [Jan laughs]

And likewise, if I was to show you my T-shirt, um, it's just of a mountain in Austria and it's not necessarily got any brand association. But yes, the brand associations with anything and everything to do with sustainability is a really interesting concept.

Jan: It is, it is…

Paul: …and it ties in a little bit with what we spoke to Steve Kempster about…

Jan: …it does…

Paul: …in the last episode, which was all about businesses and, their Good Dividends, good growth attitudes towards being good, not just in terms of profit, which is something that Kaiesha stressed, but in much wider terms as well.

Jan: And I suppose Kaiesha's, um, framing that she used was positive business, which fits really well with, with how we, you know, some of the things we chatted with Steve about as well. So, Good Dividends, positive business. These are in the same family of, of values and commitment to sustainability in business.

Paul: And there's gonna be a similar theme that runs slightly through the next episode when we'll be having Tim Lamont who works here at the Lancaster

Environment Centre, and he's gonna be telling us to how companies can contribute to nature restoration, which is another element of how companies can do good.

Jan: That is. Well, we look forward to that, for sure.

Paul: Indeed. Well, until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]