

BEING LUSH

It was F Scott Fitzgerald who said, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to carry two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function”.

Often these “two opposing ideas” take a huge amount of imagination, innovation and hard work to make work together. A great example of this is found in one of the shops sitting on our high streets and in our shopping centres across the country. You probably smell them before you see them though...it’s Lush.

Mark Constantine is the CEO and co-founder of Lush, a brand that has seen a rapid growth since it began in 1995. Lush, like every other business, has had to work hard in a challenging economic context at times but they believe their philosophy and product will continue to thrive. When their latest turnover figures were released, Constantine said, “despite all the travails of the high street, customers still love our product innovation and find our stores an oasis of kindness”.

It is this “oasis of kindness” that perhaps sets Lush apart. Kindness in a number of areas too. Kindness to animals and to the environment is evident in their stance on animal testing and making natural products. The products are 100% vegetarian, 85% vegan, against animal testing and completely handmade and there is a huge emphasis on re-use of plastic. Lush seem to be kind to employees too with their ethical charter and a belief that happy staff is good for business. Constantine says on their website, “we believe in happy people making happy soap, putting our faces on the products and making our mums proud”.

Lush believes in treating people well, both their customers and their staff. If you are a member of staff, you are encouraged to ‘pay it forward’ in their special scheme which invites staff to give away products to customers at their discretion. Each gifted product comes with a card encouraging customers to go and pay the kindness forward. In their own words, they say “we believe that everyone deserves an occasional lovely surprise to lift them up and help brighten their day”.

Staff themselves are seen rather differently to traditional models of business at Lush. They are not structured in the traditional way and a lot of people don’t have official job titles and they take on lots of roles because that is what they believe helps people flourish. People progress through the connections they make; the more people they support, are supported by, collaborate with and invest in, the more integral they become to the company. The point of this, they say, is to be a family in which everyone can succeed, can enjoy the same benefits and have a share in the business they work hard for.

Lush also thought differently about cosmetics and injected fun into the process. Whether it is their famed ‘deli type’ approach where you can try before you buy, see demonstrations or purchase by weight or their playful products, like bubble bars, shaped bath bombs or seasonal shower jellies, fun for grown-ups seems to be at the heart. Their DIY in-store parties for teenagers and adults are also a real hit, it seems.

But you would be mistaken if you thought this was all bubbles and thoughtfulness, Lush want to make a profit too. They believe they can do both, that they can live in the heart of that paradox. Mark Constantine describes himself as a rebel, “a capitalist with a conscience, a hippy” and says very openly “I like making a profit”.

Lush is not the only business that has put kindness, ethical conduct and staff at its heart but it is interesting to see where others have faltered, Lush seem to be gaining ground. Having turned the cosmetics business on its head by being creative, using scientific innovation in its products, remembering kindness and people are at the heart and constantly asking “wouldn’t it be cool if?”, perhaps their scent will be lingering in our high streets for much longer yet.

APPLICATION

Lush, and companies like it, are great examples of leaders who are trying to do things differently AND lean into their values. Mary Portas, herself a fascinating example of leadership in business, refers to ‘the Plastic hours’ where we can mould what comes next. She argues that since the pandemic we have moved from a growth economy to a kindness economy, borne out by organisations like Timpson and Lush. She talks about 15 changes in her book ‘Rebuild’. Here are three that perhaps resonate with us in our context.

1) We have gone from me, me, me, to me AND we.

It isn’t just about the top people getting all the glory anymore, it should never have been that. Now it is about getting what the company or school needs AND getting what everyone else needs to. It is about the team, the health of it, the psychological safety in it and the benefits to it. People in the workplace want to feel useful, to invest, to benefit, to have some ownership in the kindness economy. People are far less interested in just trying to make you look good. The team at Lush are invested in the team, in the possibilities, and know the more they connect and invest, the better they will be.

2) We have moved from serving customers to serving customers AND community.

In the growth economy, it was all about the customers – giving them what they want; whether it hurt the wider community was almost irrelevant. It is different now, Portas argues. Every organisation knows that serving the people in front of you is not enough, people want to know you are doing more. We have seen this in schools too, people expect great teaching, of course they do, but they also expect great communication, some responsibility for the community you serve, being a good influence in the community, leading the way with what is right. We see this in a crisis when the leaders of schools are asked to speak, to communicate, to reassure. Arguably, schools are one of the last remaining places where such a diverse mix of young people come together in prolonged community. We are, of course, teaching our subjects and aiming for young people to achieve the best they can AND we are also in the business of creating great humans. It is both. Both serve the community. Both help the young people themselves. Both outcomes AND life chances are important. Lush want to serve their customers but they also want to do more in the community and be ethical in the way they trade.

3) We have gone from data, to data AND creative instinct.

Data has always been important in business and in school and will remain so BUT, Portas argues, data alone won’t get you where you need to be. The kindness economy needs people to be creative. Lush have been with their products. Timpson have been with their recruitment. We have to be in how we think about turning things on their heads. If the data tells you that a certain demographic of parents don’t engage with the school, what does your creative instinct tell you to try? Use the data to identify the problem and then use creative instinct to solve it.

Mary Portas encourages us to think about the change that is underway. It isn’t perfect, it isn’t black and white. It is the Kindness Economy she wants to encourage us to move towards, not the Righteous Economy where we sit in judgement on others. In a changing world, we need to continue to do the best we can to make the world we are operating in, the best it can be.

QUESTIONS

- 1) When Lush want to innovate, they ask the question, 'wouldn't it be cool if...?'. When is the last time you had a conversation like that? What is stopping you taking the time to innovate and generate ideas without judgement? If you did this, what would the impact be?
- 2) We can be results minded and people centred, kind, ethical, creative and innovative. Have you got the balance right here? Are there times of the year where you can feel yourself moving one way or the other? What structures could you put in place to help you do BOTH?
- 3) Making someone proud should never be underestimated. Lush put their employees' faces on their products to make their mums' proud. The English rugby team read letters from their parents when they were called up to play. The BBC montage at the Paris Olympics showed parents holding pictures of their Olympians when they were kids and showed footage of those kids as adults, hugging their own kids who had come to watch them. Feeling proud and feeling like we have made others proud is a big thing. Who do you want to make proud? What can we do to help our young people know people are proud of them?

There's one more thing we need to grasp if we are going to embrace a kindness economy. The growth economy was about being famous for saying, the kindness economy is about being famous for doing AND saying. Having a role model culture. We try to do that every day, we always have. I hope we will all continue to be the very best grown-ups our young people could ever meet, people who they are proud to call 'their teacher'.



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