
Interview

Sustainability at Unilever: An interview with Lesley Thorne, Global Sustainability Manager

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ABSTRACT Sue Mizera interviews Lesley Thorne, Global Sustainability Manager at Unilever about brand building and business building through global consumer engagement.

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Sue Mizera (SM): Could you give a little background about yourself and how you came to the role of Global Sustainability Manager in Unilever?

Lesley Thorne (LT): I have worked for Unilever for several years, mainly in consumer insight and marketing roles for the global laundry business. I joined the Global Sustainability Team in September of last year – my role involves using a combination of consumer insight and marketing to help shape and evaluate our behaviour change programmes and innovations, so we grow the business in a sustainable way. From initiatives to grow our brands whilst reducing the amount of hot water used in the shower, to improving hygiene by getting consumers to wash their hands with Lifebuoy before meals and after going to the toilet, we want to inspire people to adopt new, sustainable habits which in turn drive the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) and Unilever's goal of making sustainable living commonplace.

SM: Unilever wants to create sustainability and social value at the same time that it builds its brands and its businesses. Typically, companies have not talked about the value of their programmes – to them – in terms of brand and business building. Is Unilever unique in this kind of thinking?

LT: Unilever was founded on the business opportunity of serving unmet social needs. Our products include everyday things like soap, toothpaste and spreads, which all make small but important differences to people's lives. For example, Lifebuoy was the world's earliest packaged hygiene soap and played an important role in helping to prevent disease in Victorian Britain. Today, Lifebuoy soap still plays a role in preventing disease across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Poor hygiene and sanitation remain the cause of millions of preventable deaths, with 2 million children under 5 dying each year due to diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections. Yet studies show

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that simple actions such as washing hands with soap at key occasions (after toilet, when bathing and before breakfast, lunch and dinner) can significantly reduce the incidence of these diseases. One-third of the world's population only use soap once a day. So the business and health opportunity of increasing the frequency of hand washing with soap is clear, we can grow our business and save lives. The business opportunity of serving unmet social needs is as relevant to Unilever today as it was to William Lever when he first launched Lifebuoy.

Our Pureit water purifier is another good example. In developing countries, 80 per cent of diseases are water borne. According to UN estimates, over 2 billion people have limited access to safe drinking water. Of these, nearly 800 million lack even the most basic supply of clean water. This is a major public health issue. Pureit provides safe drinking water by killing all harmful viruses and bacteria. It is cheaper than boiling water and 15 times less expensive than bottled water. Another example of creating business value through social good. An approach that is core to the way Unilever operates.

SM: Last Fall, Unilever published *Inspiring Sustainable Living: Expert Insights into Consumer Behaviour & Unilever's Five Levers for Change*. Can you give a little background about where this comes from and how it aligns with Unilever's corporate policies?

LT: This booklet was published to share our experience of driving behaviour change. The 'Unilever Sustainable Living Plan' (USLP) depends on behaviour change for its delivery; we have set out three overarching goals – by 2020 we aim to help more than 1 billion people take action to improve their health and well-being, halve the environmental footprint of our products and source 100 per cent of our agricultural raw materials sustainably. The first and second of these three goals are very

much dependent on our ability to influence the behaviour of our consumers – inspiring them to adopt new, more sustainable products and behaviours when they cook, clean and wash. Unilever has a long history of using marketing and market research to help us tackle behaviour change challenges and we have distilled this knowledge into *The Five Levers for Change*, a coherent set of principles, which, if applied consistently to behaviour change interventions, should increase the likelihood of having a lasting impact. The *Inspiring Sustainable Living* publication and Five Levers for Change model is a key enabler for the targets we have committed to in the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan. Many of our USLP targets are dependent on achieving lasting behaviour change, from motivating consumers to brush their teeth at night, use lower temperatures for their machine washes or use less water in the shower. The Five Levers provides the framework for creating behaviour change interventions that will help us realise our USLP goals. We also see the value in making this publication available to others, the challenge of sustainable living requires us all to work together.

SM: How are The Five Levers distinctly Unilever? What are the goals, ambitions and intended usage of the publication, the five levers? What, if any, are the roles of partnerships you have, or intend to enter, to advance your goals and ambitions? Or is your partnership model one of direct contact with consumers globally?

LT: The Five Levers model is a distillation of Unilever's behaviour change knowledge. It is a framework for our behaviour change interventions. It moves us on from traditional 'push' advertising, which we know can drive awareness but is unlikely to impact behaviour, to an effective model for engaging consumers in lasting behaviour change. It is a holistic and long-term approach, which involves making the

behaviour the norm, demonstrating the benefits, reinforcing behaviour and reminding people to keep going. Unilever is well placed to leverage the Five Levers model directly with consumers around the world given our tremendous reach – 2 billion times a day someone, somewhere, uses a Unilever product. However, we recognise the tremendous value partnerships can bring to our behaviour change efforts, bringing expertise, credibility and often the means to further upscale our interventions in cost effective ways. For example, the use of digital partners opens up interesting possibilities for us. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can help us spread our message in a fun, engaging and meaningful way, drive awareness around new behaviours and help ‘normalise’ them. There is also significant benefit in partnering with industry, governments or NGO’s. Lifebuoy, for example, partners with Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) in Kenya and Bangladesh to expand the impact of its hand washing programmes and bring about changes in the hand washing habits of children and their families. The programme focused on training school teachers in a methodology that can be replicated and reinforced over time, thereby widening its impact and sustainability. Over 2010–2011, the programme reached almost 300 000 people directly (205 000 in Bangladesh and 80 300 in Kenya). So while Unilever has the ability to touch millions of consumers around the world through our product reach alone, we recognise that we are better placed to motivate people to adopt new, sustainable habits in collaboration with others. From making the right impact with our messages, to lending credibility to our programmes and providing the infrastructures to reach people at scale even in the remotest of areas, the right partnerships are critical to our efforts to inspire more sustainable behaviours in our consumers all over the world.

SM: Can you cite examples or case studies? E.g., Lifebuoy.

LT: We know that tooth decay remains one of the most common chronic childhood diseases with an estimated 60–90 per cent of school children worldwide having dental cavities. The most important behaviour for good oral health is brushing twice a day; this can reduce cavities by up to 50 per cent. However, only half of the world’s population brushes twice daily. We have designed a behaviour change intervention to help 50 million people change their oral care hygiene behaviour using the principles in the ‘Five Levers for Change’. Ahead of developing this intervention, we undertook some research to uncover ‘barrier’ insights which revealed a lack of understanding about the importance of night brushing; ‘trigger’ insights which helped us understand how to motivate children and their parents to adopt the habit; and ‘motivator’ insights which helped us identify ways to ensure that the new habit of brushing twice a day becomes an established part of the bedtime routine.

These new insights were brought to life in the ‘Pablo and Oliver’ programme for our Signal and Pepsodent toothpaste brands, which shows the fun times that a father and son can share when brushing their teeth together at night. We used all Five Levers for Change in the programme. To ‘make it understood’, we used powerful messages such as ‘brushing day and night with a fluoride toothpaste can cut tooth decay up to 50 per cent among children compared to brushing once’. To ‘make it easy’, we offered downloadable games to make brushing teeth at night an easy habit for the family to share. To ‘make it rewarding’, we offered prizes for continuing with the habit. To ‘make it desirable’, we created a strong role for dad in the campaign. We recognised the role fathers can play in passing on good habits to children and how this appeals to a father’s desire of seeing

himself as a good, involved and fun parent. To 'make it a habit', we created sticker diaries to encourage children to practise the new habit over several weeks, and we reminded parents by sending them mobile alerts to coincide with children's bedtime. Results have been very encouraging with increased brushing frequency in the countries running the programme.

Another example of the 'Five Levers for Change' in practice is our Lifebuoy 'School of 5' hand washing programme. Every year, 2 million children die from diarrhoea and respiratory diseases; yet hand washing with soap is one of the most cost-effective ways of preventing hygiene-related disease. The focus of our intervention is motivating people to wash their hands at five key occasions in the day, after going to the toilet, when they bathe and before breakfast, lunch and dinner. Our clinical trials in Mumbai during 2007 showed that people who were exposed to our hand washing intervention and washed with soap at the five key occasions experienced a 25 per cent reduction in the number of incidences of diarrhoea and a 46 per cent reduction in eye infections versus people who were not exposed to the intervention. The 'Five Levers for Change' principles were used in the design of this hand washing intervention programme. To make it 'understood', we used Lifebuoy soap's 'glow germ' demonstration to show children and mothers that 'visibly clean' hands are not 'hygienically clean'. Ultra-violet light shows the germs left behind on their hands when they wash only with water. To make it 'easy', we encouraged mother-child interactions around soap-use to help habits to start and to stick. For example, Mum's role of tracking her child's hand washing compliance via a daily sticker chart is important in helping to reinforce the behaviour at home. The mother-child structure makes something that can be difficult – remembering to use soap each and every time, a

little easier. To make it 'desirable', Lifebuoy tapped into the insight that mums like to feel they are a good mum, and be seen in this way by others. So in its communication, the brand has linked washing hands with soap with being a good mother, which is a powerful motivator. To make it 'rewarding', the theme of positive reinforcement runs throughout the schools programme. For example, we issue rewards for completing the sticker diary designed to track how well children are sticking to the five occasions habit. To make it a 'habit', the programme runs over 21 consecutive days. Evidence has shown if we can get people to practice a behaviour over this time frame, it is likely to turn into a habit.

SM: What value do the publication and the five levers bring to sustainability, social value, brand building and business building for Unilever?

LT: The publication contains contributions from various experts, which highlight some of the big challenges around changing behaviour, and sets the context for Unilever's 'Five Levers for Change model' – our framework to inspire behaviour change for sustainable living. The publication is an enabler for our USLP goals of halving the environmental impact of our products and helping more than 1 billion people take action to improve their health and well-being. We have already enjoyed some success with the model and learnt an enormous amount through our health and hygiene campaigns in particular – encouraging people to wash their hands at the right time of day with Lifebuoy soap, brush teeth twice a day with Signal and Pepsodent to reduce tooth decay, and eat Flora or Becel margarine rather than butter for heart health. We recognise the potential for the Five Levers approach to be applied to the environmental challenges of helping consumers use less water and greenhouse gases,

and increase their recycling. As previously mentioned, the opportunity for creating business value through social good is core to our business approach and by using the 'Five Levers for Change' model to inspire new habits for social good, we are also creating the opportunity for business growth. We are sharing this model with others in the hope they will join the movement to create widespread and lasting change.

SM: What measures or KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) have you set for your programme? What will success look like?

LT: We have several targets around behaviour change for improved health and well-being, and reduced environmental impact, in the USLP. For example, influencing '50 million people to brush day and night by 2020' and inspiring consumers to 'wash at lower temperatures in 70 per cent of laundry machine washes by 2020'. In total, we have approximately 50 time-bound KPI's that underpin the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, which are regularly reviewed as part of our brand and functional team sustainability scorecards. They are also reviewed quarterly by the Unilever Leadership Executive. In terms of our behaviour change ambition, success is about spreading new, sustainable behaviours to as many people around the world as possible and having them adopted at mass scale over the long term, so the new behaviours become embedded as habits. This is our vision for making sustainable living commonplace.

SM: Finally, what are the personal and professional rewards you take from working in this new and emerging arena within Unilever?

LT: I find the subject of human behaviour and behaviour change to be highly complex but fascinating. It is clearly difficult

to predict or model human behaviour because it is influenced by so many factors, from culture through to values, attitudes, ethics, emotions and so on. Assumptions are challenged almost on a daily basis – you are convinced people will more than likely behave in a particular way only to be proved wrong! The topic of behaviour change pulls in perspectives from all over the world and from all types of disciplines. I have been exposed to some brilliant thinking and application from very different experts in the field – scientists, psychologists, academics, designers, public health advisors, marketers. Indeed, the fact that one subject can claim so many disciplines as being 'expert' is testament to the complex nature of the topic. The very different and sometimes conflicting perspectives and ideas make it an extremely thought-provoking area to work in.

Collaborating with different types of partners to leverage our complementary strengths and resources in our shared goal of behaviour change is something I really enjoy. I appreciate the opportunity to learn from very different organisations outside of Unilever and work together to make new behaviours meaningful, relevant, easy and habitual to people.

Finally, but most importantly, the social and environmental drivers behind our behaviour change targets is a big personal motivator for me. From working with the Lifebuoy team on their hand washing programmes which will grow our brand whilst reducing diarrhoeal disease, to designing behaviour change programmes that will encourage the users of our laundry brands to reduce water use, they all truly do make a difference to people's quality of life. The contribution of business to wider social goals is becoming ever clearer and it is really moving up the agenda, and for me personally, it is a very rewarding place to be.