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Building a Sense of Purpose

Stephen Pain, VP of Sustainable Business and Communications at Unilever, talks to Criticaleye about creating a business vision that brings different stakeholders together

When Paul Polman became CEO of Unilever back in 2009, he made the bold decision to stop issuing quarterly profit reports. Instead, he told shareholders of the consumer product and food giant – which generates in the region of €50 billion a year in turnover and has over 400 brands – that the emphasis would be on long-term value creation and sustainability.

The company continues to strive towards a new business model which delivers its purpose: to make sustainable living commonplace. Significant investment has been made in R&D and building out a pipeline of innovations that seek to address the challenges of dwindling natural resources versus a global population that is expected to hit 10 billion by 2056.

Stephen Pain, VP of Sustainable Business and Communications at Unilever, describes three important elements in creating a purpose-driven business:

1. Communicate a clear vision and set ambitious goals

Unilever has a clear vision to decouple growth from its environmental footprint >



while increasing positive social impact. The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) has three ambitious goals to achieve by 2020. These are to improve health and well-being for more than a billion people, halve the environmental impact of its products, and enhance livelihoods for millions of people.

The USLP requires a mix of relaying the vision through leadership and communications channels, while simultaneously setting ambitious targets which are measured and tracked. Alignment across the leadership team is essential if the USLP is to be delivered. "Consistency is key in setting out the vision and purpose so that it frames decision-making throughout the business," says Stephen.

By way of example, Stephen explains how the company is working with smallholder farmers to source 100 per cent of agricultural raw material sustainably within the next four years (he says they've reached 60 per cent so far).

2. Engage all stakeholders in the conversation, particularly employees

The question of culture looms large when seeking to attract and retain the best talent. "The ability of employees to engage with the organisation beyond the fact that they do the job is very important," says Stephen.

"There must be a focus on having a keen sense of purpose and an understanding of the relationship between what you're doing, why you're doing it, who you're doing it for – and the benefits of doing it at all. It's really important to get this right, especially when you have more than 170,000 people around the world.

“Consistency is key in setting out the vision and purpose so that it frames decision-making”

Faced with huge amounts of disruptive change; standing still is not an option.”

The speed at which consumers provide feedback or express opinions, either through direct or indirect channels, means that an organisation cannot afford to be insular and inward looking. "People are much more aware of what's going on in the world now and the impact they have as consumers," says Stephen. "Through technology and being much more connected, we will look to improve all the time in how we engage with people through our brands. We want the Unilever brand to be the Trustmark for sustainable living."

3. Innovate through partnerships to develop new business models

New technologies enable more sustainable, effective and efficient ways of doing business and connecting with consumers, says Stephen. Increasingly, ideas are being sourced outside of Unilever's internal organisation and traditional partners.

Unilever Foundry provides a practical example of how new business partnerships are being nurtured. Stephen explains

that its collaboration platform connects Unilever's 400-plus brands and functions with start-ups to promote genuine breakthrough innovation.

"They can pitch to pilot their technology as solutions to specific brand challenges, innovate at hackathons, tap into Unilever's global expertise through our Foundry mentoring programme or innovate around sustainability challenges on our Ideas, [crowdsourcing] platform," he says.

"Since its inception we have had applications from over 4,500 start-ups, launched pilots using technology from 95 start-ups with over \$25 million spent with these companies in our network, recruiting more than 350 mentors to the global programme." ■

Stephen will be talking at Criticleye's forthcoming [Human Resources Director Retreat](#)



Stephen Pain

VP Sustainable Business and Communications
Unilever

Stephen is VP Sustainable Business and Communications at Unilever plc. He was formerly Group Corporate Affairs Director of Aviva plc, one of the world's largest savings, investments and insurance groups, and led the communication activity that supported the merger and integration of CGU and Norwich Union in 2000 and then, in 2002, the launch of the Aviva brand. Subsequently, he was the architect of the group's transformation from 40 brands to one global brand, Aviva.

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