

'YES' Is The Word

Riding the crest of a body and sex positive eco-friendly wave comes The YES YES Company Ltd. and its co-founders, Susi Lennox and Sarah Brooks, visionaries in the world of pure and natural intimacy products. YES is a brand that has paved the way for a fresher, cleaner, environmentally sound and a more conscientious take on sexual wellness products such as personal lubricants, vaginal moisturisers and intimate washes. The ever growing range of products are developed in line with the ethos and values of the co-founders, values that place kindness, purity and respect with long-overdue thought into how a brand behaves in a world that is only just waking up to some serious imbalances, in terms of corporate behaviour, and ecological impact but also the way we care for and respect our bodies as they change.

Adherence to these principles has not made for an easy road in the development of the business, but it has grown steadily from its inception in 2003 from a clear idea between two strong women to be a significant game changer with global impact in the intimate wellbeing market, employing 25 people in 2 locations with products sold in nearly 100 countries worldwide via online portals and traditional retail channels.

YES has developed an impressive network of distributors worldwide, that share Susi and Sarah's vision for products that are effective and safe without chemical compromise. The co-founders are proud that the YES range are the first intimacy products ever to attain certified organic status from the Soil Association in the UK. Many YES products are also Class IIa medical devices, with two of them, YES WB and YES VM, available on prescription from the NHS in the UK, making them the only certified organic medical devices on the drug tariff. The business is continuing its fast growth trajectory with a planned retail launch in the USA as well as new products coming online at regular intervals.

Laying the foundations

Susi Lennox and Sarah Brooks met over thirty years ago, in the 80's. At the time, Sarah was working at Exxon Chemical Ltd and Susi was a management consultant, their backgrounds are hugely different. Described by Susi as the yin and yang of the business, Sarah has a degree in chemistry and styles herself 'Head of Tricky Things', whereas Susi, the company's 'Alchemical Director', comes from a background in English literature. They like to keep things whimsical in the company, as much as they are able, a fact that shines through their self-appointed titles and their inherently different but equally welcoming management styles.

With a broad background in education, during the 70's, Susi further developed her learning while raising her three daughters, studying the New Psychologies, qualifying as a Yoga teacher and a practitioner of complementary therapies. Her passion for meditation, consciousness studies and planetary issues informed the work she took into organisations with personal development programmes. Her experience in this domain opened a door into Management Consultancy allowing Susi to go on to work for a number of world-class organisations, including BP Ltd, Exxon Chemical Europe, Bayer AG in a variety of roles.

This period of her career saw her travelling extensively and broadening her skill set, giving her a depth and range of experience that has proven invaluable in her current incarnation as co-CEO of a successful and growing health and wellbeing business.

For Sarah, one of the main lures of the management consultancy role was the freedom to act as an agent of change, particularly within larger companies where culture can - and often did - become entrenched and immovable. Sarah saw that the larger the business, the more difficult it could

become for the individual to flourish and bring their entire self to work, so big business was missing out on the creativity, ideas and enthusiasm of their people by burying them under process and red tape, effectively stifling innovation and agility. Further Sarah saw that the impact of a strong corporate culture, that can from time to time feel at odds with personal values and ethics, can be gently soul destroying over time. Susi and Sarah's awareness of the cultural impact on employees was a strong motivator in defining and agreeing the founding principles of YES.

They decided to create a business that mirrored their own values, where respect for the planet, people (whether employees or customers), and the human body came first. Natural, side effect free and designed to match human physiology such as the pH of YES vaginal lubricants matching typical healthy vaginal pH, were the founding product design principles of YES. Susi and Sarah both benefitted from the management consulting experiences in other ways, as the business is organised in a flexible way, with the flattest possible structure, strong administrative practices (to limit the volume of process and paperwork) and an open communication policy that encourages discussion and actively feeds ideas.

Sarah joined Exxon Chemical Ltd, after completing her chemistry degree, in the 9 years on Exxon's management fast track, Sarah worked in Sales, Sales Management, Logistics, Quality Management Systems and later in Esso Petroleum as a General Manager of an Esso subsidiary, refuelling aeroplanes and as an Organisational Development Manager. The Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska initiated Sarah's awareness of the ethical and environmental impact that businesses can have on the environment.

The realisation that business must be a force for good and that we all, whatever a role in life, have a responsibility to tread lightly on the planet changed Sarah's career instantly. Sarah left Exxon to join Susi's consulting company and worked on various business improvement projects in Indonesia, The Philippines, Australia and California. Watching orangutans making their sleeping nests in East Kalimantan was an unexpected highlight.

Returning to the UK in 1995 Sarah began consulting to Bayer AG, in Germany, in Pharmacovigilance (the management of drug side effects).

Sarah, having worked on global drug side effect processes for Bayer, Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline and Eli Lilly, was well aware of the way drugs and healthcare products were marketed and monitored post-approval. That knowledge, combined with having been at Pfizer when Viagra was launched, imbued in her a hyper-consciousness when it came to the side-effects of both prescription and over the counter medications and treatments.

The launch of Viagra specifically was something of a watershed moment for both women.

The New York press printed letters from angry “Viagra wives” while older men were gleefully rediscovering their lost libido, their female partners were suffering, finding intercourse more painful, if not impossible, in later life as a result of menopausal vaginal dryness, which, in turn created an imbalance in the bedroom and disastrous consequences for relationships. The fallout from the launch of Viagra, as seen by both women and colloquially termed ‘the Viagra Wives Effect’ by them, brought them individually and collectively to a major turning point. They could see the effects of Viagra wreaking havoc on unsuspecting women and the feedback from the ‘Viagra Wives’ was heart-breaking; with tales of loss, infidelity and divorce. However, neither could understand why those women did not simply seek out a lubricant to solve their problems.

This thought evolved into an idea, a germ of a plan and so they began to research the market. It turned out there was little available and what was on the market was presented in such a way as to be distasteful and unappealing to the women searching for a solution to their newly discovered problem. A niche in the market had been exposed and Susi and Sarah set about making it theirs.

As far as alternatives go, at the time YES was created, there was nothing available that was free from harsh chemicals, sugar, synthetic flavours, smutty language or that seemed to work very well. Sarah and Susi, working as they had in the pharma drug safety divisions, were in a good position to evaluate the ingredients used in competitors' products.

These chemical formulations largely relied (and still do rely) on a glycerine or silicone base and disquieting ingredients such as paraben preservatives and propylene glycol. It was disturbing to them then, and remains so now, to think that many of those ingredients have potentially harmful effects on the body, particularly the more vulnerable and highly sensitive intimate tissues. For example glycerine is great in cosmetic formulations, but the intimate mucosal tissues are not protected by a layer of skin, and high concentrations of glycerine can damage vaginal tissues. So, it became a personal mission for them both to create alternatives that respect the body's physiology, and which are designed to be free from side-effects.

It is thought that 60% of what is applied to skin is absorbed into the bloodstream, particularly if applied to the mucosa (inside the eyes, mouth, nose, vagina, anus and penis tip). Bearing this in mind, it can be staggering to see the care and attention people put into nourishing their external skin with organic face creams and moisturisers, yet, when it comes to more sensitive, more intimate and internal areas, anything goes. The obvious gap in the market, highlighted by their time in pharma, was ready to be filled. Sarah and Susi became determined to offer a natural, side-effect free and high-performing alternative, which would enhance, rather than compromise, women's intimate health without using concerning chemicals or skin irritants.

*If we are what we eat, we could certainly become what we put in our
vaginas.*

Setting about ‘changing the world from the inside’

At 42 (Sarah) and 58 (Susi) years of age, both women felt they had supported the growth of other businesses for sufficient time and the pair were confident in their capability to build and nurture a successful commercial enterprise. Having formed the idea and made the decision to take the leap, they identified their concept: a certified organic, plant-based natural range of intimacy products like nothing the world had ever seen before. The next steps marked the beginning of a three-and-a-half-year journey for Susi and Sarah.

Step one saw them both selling their houses and, in May 2003, they set out to Bali – the ultimate environment in which to begin establishing the principles of their nascent business model, as well as reviewing their own lives and way of working together, laying the foundations from which they could construct The YES YES Company. Once prepared and planned, they returned to the UK and began a three-year research and development programme, testing hundreds of ingredients and preparing thousands of formulations until they had created what they believe to be the perfect launch products, a water-based lubricant and, as a natural alternative to silicone, a plant-oil based lubricant as well as a bulging pipeline of new product . By 2006 they were ready and had products that they were poised to share with the world.

It was a daring and perhaps reckless thing to do without external funding but, financing the research and development phase of the product was the responsibility of the founders; and selling their houses was the solution they chose. The freedom and autonomy that decision brought them has remained key in pursuing their vision without compromise. A welcome consequence of that decision was that it also ensured the company remained free from debt, wholly owned and controlled by the founders. The commitment Sarah and Susi had to their own vision and their clarity that there would be consumer demand for a new concept range of intimacy

products was such that they were confident in their decision and the risk they had taken.

Organic products organic process

Having been immersed in various corporate environments for a number of years, Sarah and Susi had seen the human concessions made to force fit into a corporate culture. In rejecting this approach, they actively chose to align themselves with an ethos they truly believed in, they promised themselves they would never compromise their starting vision. Non-discriminatory language, respecting the planet as much as their customers, transparency and above all, a product that helps rather than harms is not a little to ask in 2019, but when the YES range launched in 2006, it was ground-breaking. The clear values of their business are core to its identity and work towards its competitive advantage; YES leads the way in pure, natural body-safe intimacy products and has become a trusted award winning brand as a result of this reliable transparency.

The concern they felt about what women were putting into their bodies, through a lack of choice or knowledge, and the side effects they were likely suffering as a result, inspired them with the determination to create something that would not only empower women with the choice and means to help and heal their bodies rather than harm them, but also take back control of their own sexual experience in an arena that had spent so long tilted in favour of male pleasure. The fact that YES products are certified organic is testament to the desire to create clean natural and side-effect free products, the certification itself a demonstration of their commitment to treading lightly on the planet.

Taking a stand

The paucity of information and research around feminine intimate health, versus the male equivalent, that Sarah and Susi saw in 2003 has improved but still continues to be a problem today. The consequence of which is that shocking numbers of women of all ages continue to live in ignorance, without a satisfying intimate life and in many cases, in pain as well.

In 2018 there were 393 clinical trials on dyspareunia or the severe pain some women experience during penetrative sex. On male erectile dysfunction there were 1,954.

As issues like vaginal dryness / vaginal atrophy are only just becoming more acceptable to discuss, the huge number of women not only in the UK but globally living in discomfort, even pain, becomes more apparent. Opening up the dialogue when it comes to the menopause, post-cancer treatment symptoms, post-partum vaginal dryness and other vaginal and vulval conditions has been and continues to be central to the business. As is consciously using language that is compassionate, aware and above all, free from any kind of terminology that patronises, shames, sexualises or degrades women.

When it comes to intimate health issues, it can be painful, embarrassing, even traumatic for women to broach the subject. The YES YES Company not only creates sensitive and organic products, it has also worked hard to create a safe, respectful, informative and dignified space for women to talk about and research their conditions and options with a sensitivity that reflects the company's values system. The same goes for imagery, influencers, health care professionals and other people they work with – remaining true to their own authentic tone of voice. Treating women with respect and as autonomous, intelligent adults. Susi and Sarah may be the only CEOs on the planet who say their mission is to “make vaginas happy”.

This adherence to respect and dignity extends to the way the company interacts with all of its stakeholders. In fact, aligning themselves with people with similar values has been something Susi and Sarah have made sure to keep in mind when they recruit, seek allies and suppliers, and form any kind of third-party relationship. Finding people they like, respect, and who align with the values of the brand isn't just a caprice, it is also key in sending out an undiluted message. In building a team, they have been sure to recruit not only on a skill basis, but also on a shared value set.

For the founders, working to become a brand trusted by women is about honesty, transparency and communication. That clarity extends to every element of the business but particularly around the cornerstone of the product range, the ingredients that are used to make them. Ensuring that each ingredient is included for a positive purpose, is safe, appropriate and effective has made the YES range a valued resource for healthcare professionals to recommend for women managing vaginal and vulval symptoms associated with cancer treatment, pregnancy and post-birth, and peri-/post-menopause. Natural compounds derived from aloe, flax (Linseed) seed, shea and cocoa seeds are all used to replace chemical compounds more commonly found in traditional intimate products. Many of the natural ingredients used in YES products were chosen because they have an impressive pedigree, while some like flax seed gum have been used for over 6,000 years to heal.

Operating in a highly competitive market and surrounded by traditionally formulated products based on silicone or glycerine, the founders have carved a niche of unassailable competitive differentiation by patenting their unique formulations. These formulations are not the only way that the range that Sarah and Susi developed is unique though; YES BUT, a patented anal lubricant is the only water-based product that meets with WHO guidelines for pH and Osmolality, factors that help reduce the risk of sexually transmitted diseases.

Living in the NOW and overcoming challenges

In a time when the dialogue around sex has never been more frank, there are mountains to scale in terms of awareness, market reach and education. Susi and Sarah have positioned themselves and their company to straddle health, wellbeing and pleasure in a mindful/eco-consciousness way and while they were the first of their kind to do that in this arena, it wasn't long before pretenders tried to snap at their heels. These products have never managed to boast the same ecological, chemical and physiological credentials as YES, and as Sarah says, "They just didn't work very well either." The founders are not complacent though, Sarah is clear that their role is to continue to drive product innovation and widen market access.

In the early days, both Susi and Sarah donned 'multiple hats' when it came to managing the business, after all, there was no-one else to do it! While Sarah generally oversaw the technical and operational side of things and Susi the sales and marketing requirements of the embryonic business, they were still forced out of their respective comfort zones on a number of occasions. There have been a number of copycat products, some have infringed the YES patents, but not for long and none have been a match in terms of quality, efficacy or purity. Far from letting this faze them Susi and Sarah have responded by moving forward, extending the YES range according to YES customers' demands and continuing to act as pioneers on the intimacy world stage.

And speaking of world stages, it is reassuring to note that, on a playing field that is gradually becoming more levelled, they have not suffered internationally through being a female-led, female-centric brand. Their success has come through their strength of purpose and belief in the brand combined with forging alliances with people who believe in them. To quote Susi, "The issue is not one of gender, but of professional integrity, proven competence, sector expertise and depth of experience."

Today, 16 years on, neither founder has any intention of giving up despite turning 75 and 59 this year. Both women remain firmly in the driver's seat of the business on a daily basis. Their current challenges involve launching the range under the brand name AH! YES in the USA, developing several new products to add to the range and building the high street retail presence of the YES brand and that's just for starters. As Susi has stated, "With less to prove at an older age, this is not an ego play, but a mission play." Making a success of the YES brand has been about creating something important and something necessary to the development of women's intimate health products. In 2003 there was no whisper of an intimacy brand that could even stand up to the chemical-heavy alternatives, now more and more consumers are demanding the type of authentic care that is found pretty much exclusively in the YES range.

For Susi and Sarah, maintaining their own unique brand of egoless zeal, matched with the commitment that comes with maturity has been instrumental in YES's success. Their relationship with one another is unbreakable and, like their products, they maintain a transparency with one another that has allowed them to work together in harmony for over twenty years.

The feedback loops

When it comes to giving back, Sarah and Susi's company not only create some of the best products on the market, they also fight to broaden the dialogue around intimate health, thereby empowering a huge number of women to speak more freely about the issues that affect them on a daily basis. With a more open dialogue and an increased demand, comes more research into issues like vaginal atrophy, into side-effects post-cancer treatment, into enabling women to speak about the discomfort or outright pain they might feel during sex. The list goes on.

The testimonials from women and men who describe how YES products have changed their lives, healed their relationships, turned the clock back, helped them conceive, or fall back in love with their body and their partner are real and prove that the work Susi and Sarah continue to do is important. There are still challenges to be overcome in the world of intimate health, both in the UK, where the YES headquarters are based, and further afield.

It is in keeping with the values of the business that it is not simply driven by sales, profits and market share. A part of the purpose of developing a commercial enterprise was to give both founders a vehicle to make a difference, to give back to the causes that are close to their hearts and to have a platform from which to speak out on a number of issues. Their Mission has always been to “Change The World From The Inside.” A brief glance at some of the thousands of customer ‘Yestimonials’ on the YES website proves that YES is delivering on their mission, big time!

As part of its broad and varied Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme The YES YES Company contributes to a range of charities, including the Woodland Trust, Marie Curie, various animal protection charities (especially those focussed on protecting species displaced by deforestation in Indonesia) and the Yes to Life campaign. Additionally, they work to raise money for The Eve Appeal, a gynae cancer research charity, through donating a share of their profits from sales of YES VM, the YES vaginal moisturiser.

The future perfect

So where next for this mould-breaking business and its flamboyantly wonderful founders? One thing is certain, Sarah and Susi will ensure that the ethical, philanthropic values that they established way back when will continue to guide and colour The YES YES Company as it evolves further. Susi explains, “Being the founder of a business that is more than just a business

in this way is certainly gratifying, and a constant source of pride and humility.”

One final note, readers may wonder where the name of the business came from. It would be easy to assume that Susi and Sarah were giving a coy nod to the café scene in *When Harry Met Sally* – not so. In fact, the reference harks back to the final words of Ulysses when Joyce’s character Molly Bloom speaks:

‘And I first put my arms around him, yes, and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts, all perfume, yes, and his heart was going like mad and yes, I said yes, I will yes.’



Sarah Brooks and Susi Lennox, co-founders of The YES YES Company

