



Executive Summary

In an interview with Whitney "Anna" Walker, she discusses both of her companies, and how she has ingrained the triple bottom line into her business models. She speaks about the process and motivations behind manufacturing responsible products, specifically the Anna Sova Food Paint, a patented zero-VOC paint that is made of 94% food ingredients. Describing the "five considerations" that are taken into account for every product that is developed, The Antique Drapery Rod Co. and Anna Sova have proven that a company can be socially and environmentally responsible while still being profitable.

A New Value Chain for Wellbeing

An Interview with Anna Sova's Whitney Walker

CONDUCTED BY RACHEL STAROBINSKY

WHITNEY "ANNA" WALKER, THE CEO OF ANNA SOVA AND THE ANTIQUE DRAPERY ROD CO. HAS EMBEDDED SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY INTO HER COMPANIES FOR OVER TWO DECADES. DESIGNING WELLBEING IS A PART OF HER CORE VALUES AS A PRODUCT, TEXTILE AND INTERIOR DESIGNER. MOST FAMOUS FOR THE ANNA SOVA "FOOD-PAINT," SHE HAS MADE A NAME FOR HERSELF IN ECO-FRIENDLY HOME GOODS. HER COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS AND FAIR TRADE, HAS MADE HER A MODEL IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. SHE HAS PROVEN THAT AN ENVIRONMENTALLY AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE COMPANY CAN ALSO BE A PROFITABLE ONE.

Designing Wellbeing: For All and Each 8

RS: Your company has built a reputation on having an eco-centric product line. The great thing about the line is that it not only deals with the well being of the consumer, but it also deals with that of the people and the community who are involved with the production of these items. Designing wellbeing seems to be ingrained in your business model.

WW: I've been in manufacturing for 20-25 years. The other company that I own, The Antique Drapery Rod Company, was also founded with an eco-responsible business model. The original labels from years ago said 'recycled steel, recycled aluminum with packaging made from recycled paper and plastic.' Over time I found that being involved in a production process you learn so much about the products that American consumers are so distanced from. These include things such as a death, not just of human beings but that of the consumer goods, as well as the birth of the goods, and where the goods actually come from. I've traveled to 47 countries, and in over 30 of those countries I've been to the manufacturing facilities. I review video and photos of all of the facilities to find out exactly how all of the products are made, and get involved in the very, very, very beginning. Some of the conditions that I've seen are absolutely horrifying. I personally feel that once you're aware of how products are produced, you will only buy products that you know are responsibly produced.

RS: You really do get involved from the beginning of the manufacturing process. What would you say has been your biggest hurdle, in getting involved in the beginning and then sustaining these practices within your business?

WW: Well, I see designing a product in three different steps.

First: Choose products for which there are markets. You can design all the products you want, but unless people are going to buy them, it does not bring about change. I don't sell any products I would not personally use in my home.

Second: Analyze the ingredients used to make the product. Are they the healthiest ingredients?

If I want to build paint, then I look at the ingredients. I painted murals in college, some in New York. I did mural restoration and that involves a lot of mixing paint from scratch. Some of the paints were really toxic using formulas that were over 150 years old containing lead, arsenic, etc. Some of the ingredients are just as carcinogenic as

“...once you're aware of how products are produced, you will only buy products that you know are responsibly produced.”

the petrochemical ingredients that we use now. I went to Egypt to study how paint was made for the ancient temples. When visiting the temples, you realize the paintings have become part of the stone walls, and have lasted over 4,000 years. These paints were made from sheep casein, pigments and lime. It's my understanding the sheep's milk protein bonded the pigments to the stone, which is great. However, many of the natural pigments could not be used today because they would be considered too toxic. I've experienced it again and again, people think that natural and/or ancient ingredients must be healthy when, in fact, they may not be.

Often when you become involved with the process, you wake up and realize there is a more contemporary and safer alternative than the ancient way. I want to design a paint; I've got some ancient formulas and I'll build some new formulas, and I'll see what's available in the marketplace now.

Strategy in Action

People, Planet, Profit - The Triple Bottom Line: How do you create a product that is both socially and environmentally responsible?

- >> Understand the process of creating a product
- >> Determine the life cycle of the product
- >> Establish its holistic impact
- >> Consider effects on the consumer
- >> Develop an exit strategy for the product

Opposite: Whitney Walker, founder of Anna Sova.

Designing Wellbeing: For All and Each 10

A NEW VALUE CHAIN FOR WELLBEING



Right and Opposite: Displays of Anna Sova paint and packaging.

You find yourself inventing new ways to produce products from scratch, and there's always an alternative. That's probably one of the blessings that my parents and grandparents gave me was to never, ever believe there is only one option for anything. For any item you look at, there's always an alternative, a better way to do anything.

Third: Look at the labor to build the product. With the ikats production, you find groups of 4-12 year old children going out scavenging for dye materials for three or four days at a time. It may be part of what they've done for hundreds of years, however it is not a labor choice I would make. When I visit a production facility, the happiness and healthiness of the employees often defines the quality control as well. I believe the energy from the people who produce a product with pride is transferred to the end consumer.

RS: You've provided a lot of information on your website regarding your product line and the effects on the environment. It seems like education is a big part of what you're doing in both of your companies. Would you agree?

WW: I think education is part of the entire product. I believe an educated consumer will help bring about change. An example is Wal-Mart. Really look around the store, what do you think they are selling? Petrochemicals. When you walk into a Wal-Mart, look at the entire contents of the store, break it down and you'll find that the largest percentage of ingredients is petrochemical packaging,

injected molded plastic, and petrochemical textiles. Then you'll realize that Wal-Mart is actually in the oil business. In many of those goods, almost nothing is biodegradable. I don't think Wal-Mart wants to tell people this. When you learn to look at everything through the eyes of a product designer, you realize what we're actually doing is not just to the planet, but to ourselves; ultimately what we do to the planet affects us. For example I believe we have a fairly aggressive ban on petrochemical and toxic ingredients for the Antique Drapery Rod Company.

There are a lot of tough decisions. Twelve years ago, we did a lot of welding and I had 16 full-time welders. I loved the idea of forging out 1,400 and 3,000 yr old designs, and the steel was upcycled and could be recycled again. Then I realized how much energy we were using. More importantly, in the welding process, I realized we were using argon, which is not a good thing for

“When you learn to look at everything through the eyes of a product designer, you realize what we're actually doing is not just to the planet, but to ourselves...”

the planet. We decided to machine more pieces which uses less energy and only three welders. Finally, we decreased the amount of argon gas down to zero, and now weld a small amount with Helium which is healthier. It's a big difference.

There are five key levels to the way we think about a product's impact. It's not just that the cotton is organic, but that fair trade labor standards were applied in all stages of

CATALYST Insight
Always explore alternative, healthier ways to design.

11 CATALYSTsdr.com

A NEW VALUE CHAIN FOR WELLBEING



the process and that we have been personally involved from the ground to shipping.

1st level: Where do the product materials come from? This is the ground itself, the mining, growing, processing place, the water run off.

2nd level: What are the basic labor conditions where the product is made? That is one of the things I am most passionate about. I've made conscious decision not to put people in bad working conditions.

3rd level: What are the hidden labor conditions? The assembly, finishing, packaging and shipping conditions.

4th level: What are the effects on the consumers? Does it contain ingredients that might harm consumer wellness?

5th level: What are the long-term effects on the planet? What are the impacts of cumulative toxicity? Is it recyclable, biodegradable? ADR products can be resold on eBay or donated to the Salvation Army or Habitat for Humanity.

RS: Not only are you supporting economies abroad, but you're also helping out locally with your Homeless Hiring Project. Is this project still in effect?

WW: We actually have two new, full-time employees we hired from a shelter when we moved (we opened up a new facility in Dallas this year). During the move we probably had up to 40 employees from homeless shelters for a period of two weeks. It's sad because America is very divided on the issue of the homeless. I believe there are so many homeless men and women who really want jobs. I know this from personal experience; if you go down and work in a shelter you will find

some people might need medical care, some might be suffering from depression or some other ailment, but there are others who have slipped through the cracks and have no personal support system. I've found many homeless men and women make great employees for us. When you ask them 'would you like to come to work with us?' They may answer: 'Is it ok if I come dressed like this?' It breaks your heart when you hear those words, because these people do not have a change of clothing and are very self-conscious. Then they ask, 'Is this a job I can do?' I have hired people with doctorates, masters, and people who have written books on best-seller lists. We've checked it out, and their credentials are real. You find a lot of people have fallen

“It's really less than 100 years that we've been working on destroying the planet.”

through the cracks because they don't have family. Or something critical has happened in their lives, a bad divorce or they have lost their job. Once they've lost their home, their sense of self worth is so low that they don't want to contact their friends. It's amazing how many people will work incredibly hard, once you hire them and give them a leg up. Once they've been with you a few months, they will gain their self worth back.

RS: Anna Sova encompasses the triple bottom line. You have been practicing this business model for over twenty years, and many would say that you were ahead of your time. Would you agree?

WW: People have been doing it for thousands of years. If you look at ancient cultures, sustainability was absolutely essential to their survival. It's really less than 100 years that we've been working on destroying the planet.

13 CATALYSTsdr.com



RS: What was the thought process behind the development of your food paint?

WW: The deciding factor for me in building the paint products was how to make the healthiest paint you could buy. I love the idea of paint, but I knew what was in paint was toxic. As an interior designer, you use a lot of paint when your projects are offices, homes, hospitals, etc. Thirty years ago, a partnership I was in painted the largest children's hospital in Dallas. The paints that were used were incredibly toxic because they had to pass the hospital 'durability' test, and have long-term durability. It didn't make me physically sick, but I saw the reaction it caused in my employees.

We would be painting the ceiling tiles. Later young children would be on their back on a gurney, going into surgery. They're seeing all these happy clouds and sunshine on the ceiling tiles, but the paint fumes were still incredibly noxious after a few years. Why would you want to expose a child who's already sick with an illness and is about to have surgery, and make them sicker? That was one of the driving forces. The other was when we were building the paint, my grandmother was ill. She wanted to redecorate her home. I would test the paint in one of the spare bedrooms, or in a room on the other end of the house, and the fumes would be so strong that it would make her more ill.

We started the paint project in 1998. We went to different paint manufacturers, we discussed how to make different paints with them. We realized that the VOCs (Volatile Organic Compounds) were so high, in these manufacturing facilities that anything we made was going to be toxic because it was going to absorb VOCs in the manufacturing process. So my father and I built a factory from scratch. We rented a manufacturing space, bought mixing equipment, hired a couple of paint chemists and started having ingredients delivered. The ingredients would have 18" disclaimers on what the paint industry called non-toxic. I realized that there was no such thing as non-toxic in the paint industry.

try. Our paint is manufactured in Texas. In the beginning we mixed everything from scratch. We went from paint grade ingredients to pharmaceutical to cosmetic to food-grade ingredients. Almost all of the ingredients, up to 94% are food ingredients. We patented our paint in 2003. In our stucco paint, we use food grade bamboo cellulose, which is really important. Regular cellulose is highly carcinogenic. I have not pursued a patent for the stucco paint because I would pre-

“I realized that there was no such thing as non-toxic in the paint industry.”

fer that other paint companies use something healthier. It's healthier for the planet and the consumer.

RS: Are there any new product developments that we can look forward to in the future?

WW: We are looking at essential aromatherapy that goes into the paint. The fragrance lasts about six months. It's a subtle fragrance. The Japanese have used orange essential oils to increase productivity when they manufacture cars. The most basic of our senses that will cause the biggest shift in our sense of wellbeing is the sense of smell. Some people think it's music, some think it's light, but it is actually the sense of smell.

RS: Do you carry your work ethic outside of your work life?

WW: The key is once you have that piece of information you can choose to make it a part of your life or ignore it. I choose to keep it part of my everyday life. I have a strong opinion of little things such as plastic straws in water glasses. You look at everything differently, take whatever action you can and hope you make a change. **c**

RELATED RESOURCES:

- Anna Sova: www.annasova.com
- Anna Sova Paint: www.healthyzerovocpaint.com
- Green Seal: www.greenseal.org

CATALYST Insight
When all the elements are balanced properly, socially and environmentally responsible businesses can still be profitable.

Designing Wellbeing: For All and Each 14