**John Steel:** Welcome everybody to the Building Better Business podcast. So, I mean, first of all, today, I just want to introduce our three guests, and it's wonderful to have here, Lucy Reynolds from Boots. Hi Lucy.

**Lucy Reynolds:** Hi everybody. Thanks for inviting me on the podcast, John. Really happy to be here.

**John Steel:** Well, it's wonderful to have you here, and thank you for your time. And you're the CSR Communications VP.

**Lucy Reynolds:** Yeah, something like that, yes.

**John Steel:** So it's great to have Lucy here. And also, we've got Lee Mann from The Body Shop, so great to have you here too Lee. Welcome.

**Lee Mann:** Hi everyone. Yeah, nice to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

**John Steel:** And finally, I’d like to welcome Helen Bird from WRAP. And for those of you who don't know, WRAP is a charity that is doing some groundbreaking work in the climate crisis with a number of companies – perhaps you should say a bit more about WRAP, but welcome, Helen.

**Helen Bird:** Hi John. Hi. Welcome everybody. Yeah, so WRAP is a climate action NGO, and our job really is to help save the planet.

**John Steel:** In today's podcast, we're going to talk very much about plastic, everything plastic. I was in London yesterday, as I was coming back, I saw a quote from Mike Barry, the ex-M&S, which I thought was great, which was the only thing more dangerous than the absence of progress is the illusion of progress. So very much I want us to be very honest about where we are and the scale of what we need to do and how we can move forward. So that's a little bit of backdrop anyway. So in terms of plastic, I’m going to, in a minute, ask Helen to provide some context, and then, we're going to very much look at reduction in plastic, kind of, reusability, and recycling, and I think also, discuss between us a little bit about citizens and how to help everybody to navigate what has become quite an omnipresent and complex situation. I mean, Helen, if you could just perhaps bring to life the plastic issue for us all, and I think also, it'd be great if you could link it to not only the environmental issues, but also to the climate crisis. [00:02:00]

**Helen Bird:** So I think I’d start by just setting a bit of context. So as I sit here, I’m looking out of my window, the frames are made of plastic, the smoke alarm, pair of glasses, my computer, phone, and, of course, we use it for plastic packaging, more than half or two thirds of plastic production is for plastic packaging. And that's not a bad thing in its own right. The problem is when we're using it unnecessarily, if we're using it excessively, if the design is poor, and it can't be recycled, the lack of recycling infrastructure, and, of course, the devastation that it causes when it leaks into the natural environment. Here in the UK, we use around 2.3 million tons of plastic packaging with about two thirds of that coming from households. So we are using a lot of plastic, and we would probably all agree that actually we need to stop looking at reducing the use of plastic. But it's important to remember why it's used, and the functionality that it gives, so – and the products that packaging is used to contain will have a far greater carbon impact than the packaging itself. So that protection of the product is absolutely paramount. But the Ellen MacArthur Foundation predicts that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish. Only 10% of the plastic that's ever been produced has been recycled. And in terms of the climate context, around about 5% of the world's oil production is used for plastic, and that results in around about 4% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Now, that's more than double of the aviation sector. So plastic is absolutely contributing to climate change, which is one of the key reasons why we need to reduce the use of plastic, but not just reduce plastic per se, we also need to increase the recycling of it, to reduce the overall carbon impacts.

**John Steel:** Lucy from Boots' point of view, how do you see [00:04:00] the role of plastic currently, and, I guess, if we move into the first subjects in terms of thinking about plastic reduction, where are you at with that?

**Lucy Reynolds:** I think that we are at really interesting points where consumers also really want to use less plastic, and they're looking to retailers to help them to do that. We survey people about what issues were most important to them relating to our business. Actually, for the first time last year, plastic and the reduction of plastic was number one. So we've got to a point now where I think there is mass understanding that we need to use less plastic, and if we do use plastic, we need to be able to recycle it, and I think that consumers are more and more looking to us as retailers to help them to do that. So we've got a number of initiatives that we've put in place to help consumers to use less plastic or to recycle. I think one of the biggest ones we've done and working together with WRAP actually is we've introduced a recycling scheme, where consumers can bring back health and beauty products that come in plastic. The tricky thing about a lot of the health and beauty products is that they can't be recycled in curb-side recycling. People want to make a change, they want to be good, they want to be responsible, sometimes our infrastructure makes it hard for them to do that. So for us, it's all about helping consumers to be able to make the right choices, and to be able to use less plastic and to recycle it. So yes, we've introduced a recycling scheme, it's now in the majority of our stores, so you can bring back your health and beauty products, and we actually reward customers are doing that, so they gain advantage card points for products that they bring back as well.

**John Steel:** As a consumer or citizen, you can bring in those plastic materials wherever they came from into the Boots' store?

**Lucy Reynolds:** Of course, yeah, you could have bought them from anywhere, and you could bring those in. There's a couple of outliers at the moment, which is medical products and hazardous – or hazardous products, for example, blister packs or hair dye bottles, they're [00:06:00] the only outliers right now. We're actively looking for solutions, particularly around blister packs recycling. We've also got contact lens recycling scheme, and we're looking at what we can do for glasses and opticians as well.

**John Steel:** How does Body Shop see this issue, and what's going on with you?

**Lee Mann:** To start with echoing what Helena and Lucy have said, it's really about a more responsible way forward of using plastics. I think we all agree though, that we should be looking at, you know, do we really need that single use piece of plastic, should we really be producing more plastic when there's probably enough plastic in the environment today to recycle it than making new plastic. So what can we do? So as a group, part of [inaudible 00:06:45] and the Body Shop, yes, we've got targets with Ellen MacArthur, etc. We're looking at reducing, and we're moving towards having all of our plastics and our packaging actually either repurposed, recycled, or reused. So that’s really our ultimate goal, whilst also reducing plastics through a number of initiatives, such as, getting rid of those plastics where we don't need them, and introducing refill schemes. The Body Shop, I think, was a bit of a pioneer of refill schemes. We used to do it back in the 90s, and we stopped doing it because there was no demand for it, but now, of course, it's back as, and quite rightly so, as something that customers really love and want to engage with. And we've got hundreds of refill stations in our stores now across the UK and rolling out globally, so it's become really popular. So that's another initiative, and another way that actually we can look at removing the use for new plastics. And, of course, all of our plastics are going to become 100% recycled materials themselves, and I think, at the Body Shop, even if I think about our bottles at the moment, we're about 90% recycled content, as well as them being recyclable. So there's lots of different initiatives going on, and the one piece that I sort of run under [00:08:00] my work as the Head of Community Fair Trade at the Body Shop is to look at the socioeconomic and environmental impacts of plastic. And we talk about the environmental law, but what we found is that not a lot of people talk about the people behind who I think are at the frontline of defence in terms of stopping plastic getting into our rivers, oceans, into our environments, and removing it. And those are people like waste pickers who live incredibly tough lives, and do a great job for all of us, yet go under the radar and unrecognised, and unrewarded for the work that they do. And through our very innovative program launching the world's first fairly traded recycled plastics, working with waste pickers in India, we've been able to bring the plight of waste because, I guess, to the global stage, whilst removing plastics from the environment, and then, getting it back into our product. So we see socioeconomic, environmental, and climate wins all around from that type of approach.

**John Steel:** I remember going to, I think it was a Waitrose store when they launched refills in quite a big way a couple of years ago, and I was really excited and energised by it, but it feels like it's getting the consumers to find a different way of behaving, isn't it? How's that working at the Body Shop in terms of kind of almost normalising it?

**Lee Mann:** I think it's about offering that choice, isn't it? I mean, like Lucy said, lots of research has been done to say that customers are actually looking for ways to be more responsible to support initiatives that can reduce plastic waste, other packaging, those sorts of things. And so, really, it's our responsibility to be able to provide those services to our customers; and we still sell a shower gel in our bottles, so customers that want to buy shower gel in a bottle can buy that, customers that want to refill can refill their products. So it's about offering that choice. And as more and more people are really excited by the fact that us as a company are able to offer them that choice, we're seeing the refill [00:10:00] revolution again, as it were, really being very popular. And, as I say, we've got a global expansion program to get it into all of our stores around the world, and you'll find hundreds in the UK now. So it's landing very well with customers, and, I guess, that is shown and proven in the fact that we are rolling it out, because, as a business, it's not something that we potentially offer if nobody wants that service. So it's there, and it's growing, and it’s popular, and I think it gives people choice.

**John Steel:** Well, I mean, Helen, what more do we need to do? Are we making the level of progress we need to on reduction and recycling?

**Helen Bird:** Well, I think that we are on a journey.

**John Steel:** Yeah.

**Helen Bird:** We have – there's certainly been some really great progress across the industry. Under the UK Plastics Pact, for example, we've seen a 10% reduction in the use of plastic between 2018 and 2020, and some specific, really difficult plastics being eliminated, which is really, really positive. But we've still got a massive mountain to climb to address the crisis that remains, and clearly we need to focus on that reduction. And I think there’s a lot of excessive use of plastic, it can be particularly in, kind of, perhaps a beauty area in cosmetics is a lot of over engineering, we could probably, while a citizen may still receive an item of plastic packaging, we could probably reduce the amount of plastic that's actually used in that packaging. And I think the refill debate is interesting, but I think we're really scratching the surface of the opportunity at the moment. But this is really, really difficult for business, it's a very difficult nut to crack, because the commercials are so challenging. And while our evidence also shows that people are up for it, people are interested in and would like to give it a go. The reality of it is that not very many people are, and there [00:12:00] are a whole host of reasons behind that. So the convenience one is one of them, cost is another. And that's, again, I think with sort of thinking about the cost and bringing in some of the social aspects that Lee mentioned, if we introduce refill and reuse, it can't only be for the wealthy, it's got to be for every people to be able to take part in it. And the conundrum for business is that while reuse and refill is likely to cost more to deliver the product to people, you do need to give a price incentive because it's less convenient. For most people, you know, cost is going to be a big factor, particularly at the moment when everyone's feeling the squeeze.

**John Steel:** I think Lucy touched on it, and I’m sure you did as well, Helen, but recycling, sort of, end of life recycling, quite – my take on it as a consumer, I suppose, in the UK is it's pretty confusing. I mean, I can't work out the labels, and I’m trying to work out what I do with one part of the packaging and the other, and if I am in Grimsby one weekend, and then, I’m in [inaudible 00:13:08] the next weekend, I have to work out whether or not it's possible without being too dramatic. I mean, it feels like it's quite complex, and the infrastructure is one of the barriers. I mean, do you want to start us off Helen at a sort of macro point on the state of recycling, and am I getting melodramatic about all the different logos and my inability to navigate it or what's going on?

**Helen Bird:** Plastics, in particular, is a massive source of confusion to people. Can you recycle it? Can't you recycle it? Which bits of the packaging can you and can't you recycle? Ultimately, what we've got to move to is a system where if it's plastic and it's packaging or any packaging, you can put it in your recycling at home. But that involves the entire supply chain coming together, and also working with government. So it requires the consistency in the service provision, so – and that's something [00:14:00] that is still on the horizon, so government rolling out consistent regulation. So it means that, for example, every local authority will have to collect plastic pots, tubs, and trays, they will also have to collect plastic bags and wrapping by 2027, and that's going to really, really help reduce the complexity and the confusion. That will also help with labelling, because, at the moment, we've got a plethora of labels, some of which are completely meaningless, like the Green Dot, for example, which has got nothing to do with recycling. But even our most consistent way of labelling in the UK that we use through an organization called OPRL, the on-pack recycling labelling organization, that isn't perfect at the moment, because our collections are not consistent. So most people will be able to recycle a plastic pot, tub, or tray, but about 20% of the population won't, and the label will say that you can't put it in the recycling, and that's a cause of frustration and confusion for people. So that consistent collections is really, really essential, but the other thing is then, of course, is the design of the packaging, because it can only get recycled, if it's designed to be able to go through the infrastructure. So that is where business has got a really, really essential role to play, and they've also got an essential role to play to engage with people to be able to recycle. So we're great at recycling plastic bottles from the kitchen, but we're not so great at recycling plastic bottles that maybe come from other parts of the house like the bathroom.

**John Steel:** You want to build on your views and experience of recycling?

**Lucy Reynolds:** I guess, when you look at a product, and Helen touched on this, the product journey starts with the supplier. And then, we're kind of in the middle of it as a retailer, and it ends with the consumer using a product, and I think we need to think about holistically the whole product journey. So absolutely creating using less plastic to start with, but as Helen said, making sure that if you are going to use plastic, then it is recyclable, and it's [00:16:00] a bit of an overused word, but collaboration is really important. So it's collaborating with our suppliers at the start of the journey to make sure that the products, you know, we're using the right material; and then, at the end of the journey, making sure that we make things easy for consumers in terms of recycling any plastic that is used with the product. And I think in between there are lots of other things that we can do as well to make things easy. So we talked about reducing plastic as well as recycling, and we now make sure that any boots.com deliveries, for example, are packaged in, you know, there's no single-use plastic, there's no plastic at all, they're all plastic free. Labelling is very important, it can be confusing. We're working with OPRL, and I mention them on the on-pack recycling label to make sure that labelling is clear, and that we can have that label on as many of our products as possible. So I think 80% of our own brand products carry at the moment, all new products will carry it going forward. But I think it is important that people recognise that label, and we make it easier for customers to make choices, so they know where they see that label that that product is recyclable at end of life. And it's just about our role as a retailer in making that easy for people.

**Lee Mann:** At the Body Shop, we're a global brand, so we operate and retail our products in more than 70 markets around the world. And you can imagine that, actually, the complexity of recycling schemes on a global level is a lot grander, as you could imagine. And we have to think about the global picture, because what we have right at the beginning of our new product development processes is a whole sort of set of scorecard criteria, looking at the sustainability of the product, its naturality, is it going to be impacting what type of packaging, do we need it, and how's that packaging going to be used through the lifecycle of the product, what about afterwards – and these things are really important, because if you think [00:18:00] that it's something like a third of the world's population doesn't have any access to waste management infrastructure systems. You know, in the UK, we have trouble, but we're very lucky that we have systems in place, and this is where it leads to quite a lot of issues with waste entering our environments in those countries where these sort of organised systems are not available for people. So we have to think about the design development of a product from its inception, all the way through to the end of use. So that's how we sort of look at it at the Body Shop, but I think we certainly have to think about it more broadly than just a UK focus, as a global operations. And then, in those countries where – so we have like a take-back scheme as well, and we had to pause it through Coronavirus, of course, but we have a take-back scheme for people to be able to deposit packaging in. And what we're saying is, actually, how do we put that on a global scale, because in markets that don't have any such opportunity for people to recycle products, how do we introduce one in those markets for people to bring [inaudible 00:19:09] packaging and Body Shop packaging back into our stores for us to be able to repurpose those materials for them. So I think the recycling element is such an important thing, but it takes many different aspects, depending on where you are in the world, and all of this needs to be built into your design thinking.

**John Steel:** We touched about product design a little bit in the world of plastic. Am I living in a dream world where I, you know, shouldn't I be using a bar of soap rather than some kind of shower gel, and shouldn't I be using, can I get a bar of shampoo as well? Will consumers grasp this or am I far too optimistic at this time of day?

**Helen Bird:** So I think what's important is that consumers are offered a choice, but not just that they're offered a choice, but it's communicated [00:20:00] to them why there are benefits to using certain products. So concentrates is a really good example. So yeah, so a bar of soap is going to help a lot with that. You can -- you'll be pleased to know you can buy a bar of shampoo, but the, you know, I think what's important is that the functionality is there, and that the, you know, for the businesses, they will be thinking about the quality of the products, and, of course, it's got to be a product that people will use, and they love. Otherwise, they won't use it, and they won't buy it. But I think it's important then that businesses do say what impact their products are having on the environment. And so, that helps to inform people's choices, because otherwise everyone's just feeling in the dark.

**John Steel:** It's probably also thinking about suppliers, it's probably important that brand owners that are offering solutions from a brand that's got perhaps quite a good emotional relationship with consumers provide product formats that are environmentally friendly as well as the ones that are working quite well for that business model already. I think if it's always left down to pioneer brands to try and challenge brand leaders, that feels pretty tough, but you could do with a brand leader saying, not only can you have this shower gel, but you can have this shower, soap, or shampoo soap, and it will do it this well and get the reassurance. What were you going to say on that, Helen?

**Helen Bird:** There are things where there's arguably there are no brainers, and I liken this a little bit to almost like animal welfare standards that there isn't – there's an absolute expectation, there are things that should be done by retailers and their suppliers. So if it's the best thing to do for the environment, then that is what we should absolutely do. This is slightly moving away from kind of the beauty in cosmetics area, but for an example is plastic packaging that's used on fruit and vegetables. In many cases, you don't need the plastic packaging, and actually, [00:22:00] it exacerbates climate change because we're wasting more food. So there are certain products where you think, well, actually, we shouldn't be using plastic, and they shouldn't be the option for people to use plastic if that's not necessary.

**John Steel:** Lucy?

**Lucy Reynolds:** Yeah, I mean, I totally agree, Helen. I think for us at Boots, we do have an emotional connection with our consumers, we are a leader, a market leader, so we do have some responsibility, I think in this space. And, yes, absolutely, it's about making sure we have choice for consumers. So we do have shampoo bars, etc., and we also have sustainable edits, we use them in labelling called Be More, which allows people to choose products that perhaps are more sustainable. And sustainability means different things to different people actually. Some people choose to be more sustainable by choosing vegan products, and that's their route to sustainability, and reducing their own personal impact on the environment. Some people will look for plastic-free options, and make choices that way, but to Helen's point about, there are some things with just no brainers, I think, particularly, as a market leader, there are things that we should do. An example is that recently we have pledged to stop selling wipes with plastic in them, so by the end of the year, we've asked our suppliers to help us with that and come on board with that, and we won't sell any beauty wipes or baby wipes that contain plastic by the end of the year.

**Lee Mann:** As Lucy said, as individuals, we all are trying to do our bit in our way that we are familiar with or are comfortable with, whether that is lifestyle choices, or product selection, or brands you shop and don't shop with, but I’m not a big – a massive fan of this all the time. But I think that we could do with a bit more legislation around this issue, because it's okay to encourage business to change, it's okay to encourage consumer behaviour, but there comes a point when actually legislation is a route to forcing positive change, and [00:24:00] I think that that may be what we need to see. And I’m sort of encouraged a little bit at the moment by the changes what I’m seeing with the ASA here in the UK, the Advertising Standards Agency, in as much as then you approach to looking at issues around greenwashing, around it's not necessarily what you say about your product, it's what you're not saying about your product, and that can be misleading to consumers. And I think maybe we'll start to see something coming around on this topic, when it comes to packaging too, because we're already seeing it in terms of product claims that are falling foul of the new sort of guidelines. I’m not a huge fan of legislation all the time, but I think maybe this area could benefit from some legislative direction.

**John Steel:** Should we be getting legislation that says fruit and veg is not going near plastic, is that what we should be doing?

**Helen Bird:** There's absolutely a role for regulation, and I think there we're seeing some positive things that are coming down the line with things like consistency in household recycling and extended producer responsibility, the plastics tax, which was recently introduced. I think the caveat to it is, particularly for businesses, careful what you wish for, because legislation also can be a very blunt instrument; and on things like fruit and vegetables, for example, there are a number of areas where actually you need plastic packaging, so a blanket ban can cause unintended consequences, which we really need to be careful about. But the other thing that we need to remember is regulations take years and years to implement, and the crisis is now, so business doesn't have to wait for the regulations to come down the track.

**Lee Mann:** Like Helen says, I think with WRAP is a really a good example of that as organization that can actually help your business from, if you're on a journey, if you've only even started that journey yet, I think that's really important. So there are support systems and partners out there that can help you as an organization.

**John Steel:** Helen you mentioned to bring [00:26:00] together more and more of businesses and help them on the journey?

**Helen Bird:** In 2018, we launched the UK Plastics Pact, and that's an initiative which brings across all of the actors in the value chain, which are focused on full target to eliminate problem plastic, to achieve 70% recycling rates, for all plastic packaging to be designed to be recyclable, and to achieve a 30% average recycled content; and that initiative is proved to be hugely successful in enabling that collaboration across the sector. And we've seen some really positive results in a really short period of time, which is one of the reasons why I think that sometimes voluntary action can really, really help rapid action versus sort of a backdrop of pending government regulations. So over the period since we launched the Plastics Pact, we've achieved a 10% reduction in plastic packaging, and lots of plastic packaging that subtle shifts that have been going on which perhaps if you were to walk into a supermarket, you might not notice, but actually a really, really important. So black plastic, for example, which can't be recycled, is now off the shelves, you don't see that. We're seeing a lot more of a simplified packaging, clear plastics, which are much easier to recycle. So huge, a seismic shift actually in some of those activities, and we've also seen the amount of recycled plastic that's used in plastic packaging double over that period of time.

**Lucy Reynolds:** This is not a topic for putting your arms around innovation and keeping it to yourself, this is a chance to share innovation and to collaborate across the industry. But regardless of commitments, regardless of targets, regardless of legislation, 91% of consumers want less packaging. [00:28:00]

**John Steel:** And how are we going to get there?

**Helen Bird:** So we're on a journey to eradicating the crisis that we have on plastic packaging, and there are a number of different solutions that are necessary in order to get to that point. So we've got to eradicate the pointless plastic that we use, get rid of the unnecessary stuff, and we also need to look at how we can just use less more generally, introduce more refill systems, but critically make sure that the plastic packaging is designed to be recycled; and recycling is not the only part of the solution, but it is a really, really important part of it, because for every ton of new plastic that's manufactured, it generates three times that amount in carbon emissions. So this is a climate issue that we need to be addressing, and recycling negates the need to produce new plastic. So that's absolutely a really, really important part of it. I think in terms of business, if a business was listening in today, then I’d say, what we need to remember is that actually, we need to think about putting the planet before short term profits in order for longer term gain, and relooking at business models to work out how it is that we get there. We need to invest in our recycling in the UK, we need to think about what business do to help support the recycling infrastructure directly in advance of government policy coming down the line, we're shipping far too much stuff overseas where we could be creating a thriving UK recycling industry.

**Lucy Reynolds:** I think my final takeout for people would be around overall resource consumption, and World Overshoot Day is fast approaching, so World Overshoot Day marks the day when our use of the world's ecological resources have been exhausted for that year, and this year, it falls on the 28th of July. So that's our global year, but actually in the UK, it was the 19th of May. [00:30:00] So we really have to tackle the issue of our consumption, and tackling plastic waste is one of those ways that we can do that.

**John Steel:** Lee, Body Shop has been a pioneer in ethics for a long, long time. What are your closing thoughts on this?

**Lee Mann:** You just reminded me of something actually, when you said that, yeah, since the 70s, when we were sort of born, we always existed to be a force for good in the world. And our founder, Anita Roddick said you can forget politics, and you can forget religion, the only thing that ever has and ever will change the world is business, and therefore, business has the responsibility and the obligation to do the right thing. And that's something that's really been in our DNA all this time. And when it comes to this topic, we've got to, as a human race, get rid of this unsustainable use of plastic. I think we all agree that there are times when plastic is used correctly is the right thing to do, because it can't be quite a sustainable material. But the unsustainable use is what we need to tackle, and there are lots and lots of initiatives going on. And we have talked about it before and we have used the word before, but collaborative efforts between stakeholders is really important. We need to offer consumers choice. We need to show the way. We need to show what can be done, what is being done, and we need to listen to people as well. Let’s hear from the praise that people are – that we receive, but let's also listen to the criticism as well in terms of what could we do more of, what could we do better.

**John Steel:** Thank you very much to all of you.