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Sustainability and Hospitality: People, Planet and Prosperity

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SUSTAINABILITY AND HOSPITALITY

People, planet and prosperity

An interview with Jared Meyers, Chairman, Legacy Vacation Resorts, a Certified B Corporation, by Alan Fyall.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST REALIZE THE POWER OF SUSTAINABILITY AS A FORCE FOR GOOD IN BUSINESS AND THE ROLE IT COULD PLAY IN IMPROVING THE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM INDUSTRY?

As far back as I can remember, I've always thought of the concept of "givers" and "takers" in life but about ten years ago I really began to appreciate how one can live more harmoniously with the wider environment and start to address the imbalance between profit and power on the one hand, and a more holistic view to society and living on the other. The family business environment I grew up in showed me how singular focused decisions left collateral damage to other stakeholders. I learned of an industry rampant with greenwashing and quickly realized that there was more to sustainability than reduced towel washing and limiting the usage of plastic straws! Although tangible examples of sustainable practices, I've always viewed sustainability more holistically with it representing a move from shareholder primacy to stakeholder capitalism. I thus came to the conclusion that the power of business could be used to make a much more positive impact on society in general and especially in hospitality and tourism than had previously been the case. As a veteran in the industry, I wished to be at the forefront of this movement; it being an agenda I believe in passionately.

WHAT OR WHO WERE THOSE EARLY INFLUENCERS THAT MADE SUCH A POSITIVE IMPACT ON YOU TO ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY WAS CENTRAL TO YOUR APPROACH TO BUSINESS?

I am a strong believer in lifelong learning so have been influenced by many people over the years. However, the influence on my life of the readings of Tao Te Ching is significant with the spiritual and interconnected views on life helping to shape how I see the world and how I can contribute to it being a better place. This learning impacted my view on the apparent endless pursuit of "more" with the realization that sensible and more equitable forms of growth were possible. More recent influence has come from Elon Musk who has proved that you can build a very successful business around solving a massive worldwide problem. Musk's ambition was not to sell more cars, but to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy. This is how I like to think of my businesses; improving society through addressing problems that are real. Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia, has been another strong influence in that he demonstrated how successful you can be with pure intentions. Patagonia is, for me and many others, the gold standard as to how business can (should) be done and how you can always strive to be better.

CLIMATE CHANGE HAS BEEN A TOPIC OF POLITICAL DEBATE IN FLORIDA FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS NOW. WHAT CLIMATE IMPACTS ARE YOU HAVING TO DEAL WITH AS A RESORT OWNER AND HOW SERIOUSLY DO YOU THINK THE INDUSTRY IS ACTING TO MITIGATE IMPACTS AND ADAPT TO CHANGE?

As an owner and operator of vacation resorts across four states, the impacts of climate change are very real. It is definitely warmer than before with this impacting when and for how long people stay outside. When the weather is too hot it limits choices for those on vacation. Similarly, in recent years we have experienced serious flooding, the increasing costs of hurricanes, and the environmental damage caused by red tide in Florida and its negative economic impact on large parts of the hospitality and tourism industry. In Colorado and Nevada, the negative impacts are caused by extreme dry heat, droughts and wildfires with serious impacts on the quality of air we breathe posing problems for those on vacation. In the winter months the changing climate is contributing to a shortening of the ski season so it is not just the summer months where the challenges of climate change are real.

Legacy Vacation Resorts is the only Certified B Corporation resort hospitality company in Florida to date.

Toiletry dispensers reduce plastic waste.

A carbon bill showing the impact of a week's stay.

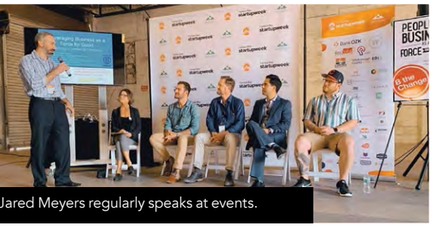
YOU ARE A FIRM ADVOCATE FOR CERTIFIED B CORPORATIONS. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THEY ARE, HOW THEY CONTRIBUTE TO BUSINESS SUCCESS, AND HOW THEY COMPLEMENT YOUR PASSION FOR SUSTAINABLE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM?

Certified B Corporations fit perfectly with my view on how businesses should be run so I am a passionate believer in combining their "for profit with positive impact" orientation on the community and environment; this includes such important agendas as racial justice, climate action, free trade certification, and a more holistic means to conduct business. Contributing to charities, making a donation or two are all good but B Corporations are committed to inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economic systems with the daily actions and thought processes of B Corporations leading to a better world.

LEGACY VACATION RESORTS IS THE ONLY CERTIFIED B CORPORATION RESORT HOSPITALITY COMPANY IN FLORIDA TO DATE. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS AND HOW DO YOU SEE THINGS CHANGING IN THE FUTURE? TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU THINK CHANGE WILL BE DRIVEN BY NEWER, MORE SOCIALLY AND ENVIRONMENTALLY AWARE YOUNGER MARKETS?

When I first became aware of Certified B Corporations, I was shocked and disappointed that there were only 17 in Florida with none being in the hotel industry. This lack of awareness and engagement is not unique to the hospitality industry, however, in that it is evident across all industries. I'm not convinced that this is solely a people problem as much as it is a system-wide problem with education of consumers and workers contributing to positive change. This is one of the reasons why we launched "Florida For Good" as a means to raise awareness and levels of engagement. The younger generation is clearly grasping the need for change, they see it with their values changing and for many, change can't come fast enough. Despite Florida being the third most populous state in the country, people are largely unaware of what business really can do to change the world for the better. Hopefully "Florida For Good" and the younger generation can change things in the future.

B Corporations are committed to inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economic systems.


Jared Meyers regularly speaks at events.

Meyers is a firm advocate for Certified B Corps.

Conscious Capitalism encourages businesses to harness the power of capitalism for good.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES TO DATE IN IMPLEMENTING MORE SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE APPROACHES TO BUSINESS?

The biggest high-level challenge remains the fact that so many people still believe in the outdated concept of profit maximization as the only way to proceed. The single pursuit of profit is wrong in that profit maximization at all costs represents a "source code" error. A better, more conscious form of capitalism is possible, one that provides greater equity and sharing, one that is more regenerative and inclusive, and one that can combine profit and positive impact.

A second challenge is the short-term nature of most businesses with the quarterly mindset frequently serving as a barrier to longer-term change and positive impact. Responsible behavior is challenging in such short-term timescales with government having a unique role to play in creating the conditions to incentivize longer-term good behavior.

The third challenge is our current scenario of what seem like constant crises with the industry seemingly in constant survival mode. Although understandable in a way, waiting for the right moment to change will not lead to change as another crisis will appear in the meantime. Businesses need to learn to be more resilient and be better prepared for the next crisis: as there will be one. As bad as COVID-19 has been, it has exposed weaknesses in the industry and allowed us to see what we need to fortify in our foundation and what system changes are needed. The industry really does have an opportunity to learn from its past mistakes.

WHAT CAN STATE LEGISLATURES AND TOURISTS THEMSELVES DO TO ENCOURAGE THE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM INDUSTRY TO BE A SUSTAINABLE FORCE FOR GOOD?

Although there is not much evidence to date of change, daily efforts to stimulate change at the state level suggest that change is possible with actions at the city and county levels showing real signs of progress. Evidence of sustainability action plans is good with scope to get more businesses on board in the future. A common set of metrics on a common scorecard that everyone can use would be useful as it will hopefully incentivise good, sustainable behaviors. The future really lies with more community forms of tourism where the benefits experienced by the local community are very clear, be they economic and/or non-economic. In addition, the benefits need to be shared more equitably; this being an area where government really can make a positive contribution.

COVID-19 HAS SERVED AS A MAJOR DISRUPTOR TO THE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM INDUSTRY GLOBALLY OVER THE PAST 18 MONTHS. HOW DO YOU THINK THE INDUSTRY MAY CHANGE FOR THE BETTER ONCE THE PANDEMIC EVENTUALLY PASSES?

The extent to which COVID-19 really will change the industry for the better remains to be seen. Who are we? How do we operate? How should we rebuild? These are all current and important questions. Returning to what we had before is not really an option, or it shouldn't be. We as an industry need to cope better if another pandemic comes along. The industry's weaknesses have been exposed with the impacts predictable. As an industry we need to be far more resilient next time with the entire system needing to be more adaptive. For example, at Legacy Vacation Resorts we feel strongly about paying a living wage. When COVID-19 struck, we had this advanced income program that we use to help our employees when they're in financial need. It's not a program that we designed from scratch, rather it is one that we learned about from Rhino Foods, the company that makes cookie dough for Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream. The program provides loaned funds to employees for emergency expenditures which is then repaid via automatic payroll deductions, thus building the borrower's credit score. Once the loan is paid off, the payroll deduction is continued and rolled into a savings account. In essence, they become invested employees throughout the whole process. To conclude, disruption has clearly occurred on a great scale. The future direction of the hospitality industry is in our hands.

WHAT ROLE DO YOU THINK EDUCATION CAN PLAY IN SHAPING THE "TOURISTS OF TOMORROW" AND ENSURING THAT FLORIDA IN PARTICULAR RETAINS A WORLD-LEADING INDUSTRY THAT IS MORE SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS?

Long term, education is the single most important contributor to change. The current generation is our future generation so we need new ideas and new ways to communicate the interconnectedness of the industry and how we can enhance its shared prosperity. Young people understand the need for change, they are our future business leaders and will bring with them their new values and understandings of our future world. The young generation are also future consumers so the way in which they spend their money will shape the future direction of businesses, with their spend directly related to their values. The launch of Climate First Bank, the nation's first climate-focused bank which opened June 1, 2021, is a great example of a bank whose values are to come from its commitment to people, the planet and prosperity. To date, most banks use customers' dollars to invest in fossil fuels and other industries that are harming our planet. What people don't realize is almost every student is going to become an impact investor just by putting money into a bank in the future. Hence, when they think more holistically about our economy, they realize that there's all these individual decisions that they make that can promote a better future for the world … and for our world of hospitality and tourism!

Jared Meyers

Chairman, Legacy Vacation Resorts
W: https://www.legacyvacationresorts.com/

Disruption has clearly occurred on a great scale. The future direction of the hospitality industry is in our hands.

Jared Meyers is a values-driven professional utilizing his time, resources and abilities to improve social, environmental and economic issues through Certified B Corporations and the Business for Good movement. Meyers owns two successful Florida-based B Corps, Legacy Vacation Resorts (LVR) and Salt Palm Development (SPD), and is also a Founding Director for Climate First Bank. Meyers co-founded the For Good Movement, a nonprofit that oversees Florida For Good and B Tourism. Florida For Good serves as a connector between B Corps, Conscious Capitalism, 1% for the Planet and like-minded organizations/networks. B Tourism serves a global network of Certified B Corporation travel and tourism companies as well as other conscious travel organizations taking collective action for the betterment of society and the health of our planet. The platform serves as a resource for the regenerative travel movement and to help travelers enjoy a vacation experience that understands interdependence and interconnectedness.

At a recent event.

This interview was conducted by **Dr. Alan Fyall**, Visit Orlando Endowed Chair of Tourism Marketing and Associate Dean Academic Affairs, Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida.