

ETSY'S

VALUES WARRIOR

MANY CORPORATIONS ARE MAKING AN effort to inject their core values into all aspects of their business. Etsy has gone further, creating a top-level executive position to make sure the company is acting on its principles. Last year, Etsy picked Heather Jassy, a five-year company veteran, to become its first of Senior Vice President of Values-Aligned Business, a position unique to Etsy that reports directly to CEO Chad Dickerson.

As the world's leading handmade marketplace, the company has a core mission to "reimagine commerce in ways that build a more fulfilling and lasting world." Etsy's service is a digital version of a community marketplace that attracts buyers and sellers interested in one-to-one relationships, quality workmanship and sustainable, human-scaled business practices. Its customers deliberately choose personal attention and individual creativity over impersonal transactions and mass production.

The service initially appealed the strongest to a younger audience of mostly Generation X-ers and Millennials, and its demographic still skews young. But as its customer base ages and digital commerce becomes a more common experience, Etsy's popularity is widening. It now includes a cross-section of customers bound more by values than age group, requiring both a broader playing field and a more focused strategy on social engagement.

That's where Jassy comes in. She describes her role in simple, direct terms. "Etsy wants its business to be a force for good in the world," she says. "My job is to make sure we're doing that."

We spoke with her about the details of that mission and how a "Millennial mindset" is reshaping business as we know it, for all generations.

HEATHER JASSY, Senior Vice President of Values-Aligned Business, tells Brunswick's SARAH LUBMAN how the "Millennial mindset" is helping reshape commerce

What does your title mean to you?

I really love my title. Since the position reports to the CEO, it shows how that goal is being taken seriously at the topmost levels of the company.

Broadly, it means that I have to do a few things: make sure we're living values within the bounds and vision of Etsy; find ways to carry that mission into our daily work of reimagining commerce, how we run the business; act as an advocate, lobbying on issues related to creative entrepreneurs that form our community, removing barriers for them; be critical about sustainability and the company's impact on the planet; and look at ways that we can share these values in the world.

What are some ways to implement the company's values?

We are instituting values training for all of our leaders and values-related processes for all products,





services and businesses. Later, we'll share what we learn with other companies. We're also leading various values initiatives, including the Maker Cities, where we align local Etsy entrepreneurs with local governments to co-create community projects.

How have your previous roles as a therapist and small business owner helped shape the way you approach your current role?

You never stop being a therapist! I worked in existential therapy, individual therapy and I was in a practice in Vancouver, BC. I had an independent bookstore business and I had a coaching business for creative entrepreneurs.

There's a human actualization thread through all of it. I want to help people become the best versions of themselves. Change happens best and sticks when you work with the natural grain of personality and belief system. So I think that experience allows me

“Business as unusual’ is a very Millennials concept – building for the long term, not having to choose between profits and people”

to put rigor behind the development of Etsy’s belief system and personality.

Etsy’s community focus already seems to have baked social purpose into the business model. Why did the company feel it had to go further?

Yes, that’s true. We’re very aware that our success is based on our sellers’ success. As a result, people throughout Etsy are thinking about our values all the time. They’re here because they want to do the right thing and Etsy is a place they can do that. We want to focus that impulse and reinforce it.

We want to continue to push to be the best version of ourselves – place values front and center – toward the goal of doing right for all your stakeholders, including your employees and the planet. Everybody in the company needs to think about how we do that. We need to own it, across every department.

Etsy was founded by a Millennial. How do you think that shaped the company?

Millennials are the largest generation in the workforce – by 2020 they'll make up 50 percent of the world's workers. Overwhelmingly, they believe that companies should treat employees with dignity and respect. They want to work for and give money to companies that are socially responsible.

"Business as unusual" is a very Millennials concept – building for the long term, not having to choose between profits and people. The best outcomes are good for as many people as possible. That translates to our interactions with our seller community: it's about how to support them and make their lives easier, not squeeze them.

What are the things sellers have to spend time on that take away from their time to be creative? Participation is what we want, and a space to be creative attracts participation. We spend a lot of time in sellers' studios, watching how they work and building tools based on what we find there. For instance, we realized that sellers were having to hand-write packing slips. So we created an online system that would streamline the process.

For buyers too, shopping through Etsy should be easy and should feel really good – you're supporting a small business, having a human-scale commercial interaction. This approach rejects the idea that everything is a race to the bottom on price and convenience.

Your CEO says, "the expectation that business will contribute meaningfully to society will become the norm." Do you see that happening?

I completely agree with him. Look at food, for example. There's been a real shift in how we think about food supply chains and what we put into our bodies. People care deeply about where it comes from, who's making it. There's a higher degree of consciousness about the things we put into our lives.

The transparency created by the internet forces a different kind of consumerism. The current business model of short-term, scorched-earth thinking is unsustainable – and unappealing. Millennials are keenly aware of this and are fast becoming the largest population of consumers. Successful businesses are going to have to become part of the solution if they want to survive because consumers are going to demand it.

Do you ever worry that Etsy is talking to itself?

I don't want us to be in that place. I think there are an increasing number of businesses thinking this

way – Millennials really get it. We want people to create success for themselves on their own terms. Whether that sounds crazy or like common sense, it is exactly how a business should be.

What can you tell us about Etsy's appeal to a broader audience, beyond Millennials?

The Millennial mindset is affecting how everyone thinks about business, about defining success in social and financial terms. The Etsy experience represents that mindset and it convinces people.

In addition to having this terrific mandate around being socially responsible, we have 40 million items for sale – so many incredibly beautiful things. When you shop on Etsy you have very human relationships. I remember each of the sellers I purchased from. If you have a question, you ask it of a real person and there's conversation, a back and forth. You get info about where something is coming from in the world. It sends a different message about what commerce should be.

Whether or not you're a Millennial, interacting with a thing, understanding how it's made and the person who made it, can change you.

How has that values-oriented approach affected hiring and employee engagement?

We launched our new parental leave policy in April – six-months, gender-blind parental leave and we include coaching for parents leaving and returning. When I posted about this on social media I got so many messages from friends who loved it and shared stories about how awful the policy was for them at their jobs. Most of them had maybe two weeks off. People were saying, "I want to work for a company that thinks of their employees that way."

But we also work hard. There is a phrase, "strong back, open heart" – this a concept we talk about a lot at Etsy. If you're just an open heart you can't get anything done, can't make change. A strong back with no heart may get things done, but at the expense of people around you. We need both.

To be a profitable, successful business and also socially good, sometimes you have to give tough feedback to people. Everybody isn't squishy all the time. One of the things we try to teach our younger employees in particular is that you can be kind and direct. The message is: we are all trying to be warriors for good in the world.

SARAH LUBMAN is a Partner in Brunswick's New York office. Before joining the firm she was a journalist for 17 years, working out of Japan, China and the US.



HEATHER JASSY

Senior Vice President of Values-Aligned Business at Etsy, Heather Jassy was formerly Senior Vice President of Members & Community. She also oversees the company's Hudson, New York office.

ETSY is a digital marketplace for creative entrepreneurs and their customers. Founded in 2005, it now hosts more than 1.7 million active sellers and 27.1 million buyers around the world.