



BRAND SECRETS AND STRATEGIES PODCAST #47

Hello and thank you for joining us today. This is the Brand Secrets and Strategies Podcast #47

Welcome to the Brand Secrets and Strategies podcast where the focus is on empowering brands and raising the bar.

I'm your host Dan Lohman. This weekly show is dedicated to getting your brand on the shelf and keeping it there.

Get ready to learn actionable insights and strategic solutions to grow your brand and save you valuable time and money.

LETS ROLL UP OUR SLEEVES AND GET STARTED!

Dan: Welcome. If you've been listening to this podcast for a while, you hear me talk about what makes natural natural, all the components about natural, why it's important, and how we as a community work together to support one another, how we think beyond the four corners of our package, and how we unite to do more than just sell products, to benefit the planet, to improve our healthy way of life, and much, much more. A couple of episodes ago, you heard me talking with Gary Hirshberg about the



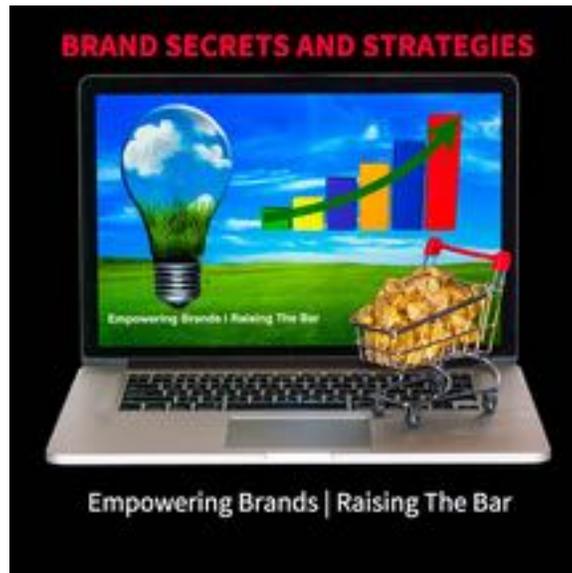
importance of regenerative agriculture. That's the starting place for our conversation today, where I'm talking with Neil about regenerative business practices. What I love about the conversation that we're about to share with you is how Neil was able to capitalize on these strategies, and use them, and make them a part of everything he did from when he started and ran a natural food store, all the way up to being a CEO of some of the most prominent and iconic brands in the natural channel.

Neil shares with us his passion for regenerative business practices and how he incorporated those strategies at the Climate Collaborative and OSC2, in addition to the many other groups that he works with. Here's Neil. Hello, Neil. Thank you for joining us today. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Neil:

Sure, Daniel. I have a 42-year history in the industry. I grew up in rural South Dakota and got a real connection with the land and farming. Grew up in a small town where my grandparents farmed, and my father grew up on the farm that I spent time on as a kid. When I went to college starting in the late '60s and took up a business career, it was a time of radical change for college students of my age, and I quickly started digging into a lot of the things that were causing some pretty dramatic shifts in farms, and especially family farms, agribusiness, starting to do what it has done and continue to do to impact our food system.

By the time I got out of college, I had become a vegetarian. I had read a couple of key books that were real transformative, 'Diet for A Small Planet', read a lot of what Adelle Davis was talking about



around health, and much to the chagrin of my parents, I completely shifted how I thought about food and health. At that time of course, it was a pretty radical shift for young people to be doing that.

Dan: Yeah.

Neil: What it did is it led me to, with my wife and another couple, opening up a retail store in Kalispell, Montana in 1976. We couldn't find the food we wanted to eat, and we had two small children, and one thing led to another. Back in those days, with a \$2,000 loan, we opened up a retail store. For nine years, I was a retailer. Went through a lot of transformation, which was a real learning experience.

Back in those days, there was a lot of activity around the co-ops, which were very predominant back in those days as far as the retail scene, and also distributors were either worker collectives or were co-op-owned, and we turned our store into a workers collective at one time, which was a real learning experience around how to create democracy within a workforce. I was kind of the lead. I would describe myself as a manager because of my business background, but at the same time, I was also the one that was really pushing for this cooperative work environment, which was a big part of the values back then. It wasn't just about the food and just about the farmers. It was about how we interacted with one another, and that imprint really has made a difference in what happened after those days of retail.



Dan: Yeah.

Neil: In 1985, my wife and I pulled up roots from Montana and moved to Northern California. My wife's an artist and wanted to go back and get her degree. We needed that to separate our business lives. I stayed in the industry, spent four years working for a relatively new natural food distributor that serviced the Greater Bay Area, so I got a real taste of the distribution side of things. The company had a couple of brands, an old icon brand called Pure N Simple that I got a chance to do some rebranding on, and really enjoyed doing that work, and it led to my joining a relatively young company at the time, Spectrum, which was doing some very pioneering work in the oils and fats and related products category.

I was hired by the founder, Jethren Phillips as the Director of Sales and Marketing, and transformed the brand and quickly grew it to 12 million in 1994, and he asked me to take over running the company as the President and Chief Operating Officer. From then until the company was sold in January of '06 to Hain Celestial, I led it as the President, Chief Operating Officer up until 2000, and in 2000, became CEO of a public company. We acquired a smaller public company and did a reverse merger and had the incredible experience of running a public company in the natural product industry for six years until it was sold. That experience really was my, I would say MBA, learning on the job. We built a company to 60 million over 70 employees, employed a lot of the kind of work that I've done with companies since the sale of Spectrum where I



worked with a lot of companies on helping them build teams, empower people, create transparency within their workforce.

It's been one of my passions, along with a number of other things that are interrelated. Social finance is a big passion of mine. It has been transformative in helping companies keep from getting sold and seeing their values and mission change as a result. It's been a way for companies to be able to retain their soul. When Spectrum was sold in '06, I decided to commit the rest of my career to trying to retain the values of the industry. It was time to give back, so I've been doing a lot of nonprofit work.

Dan: Thank you.

Neil: I am on four nonprofit boards and I still do advisory work. I've got active advisory or actual board roles in six companies. One of which has been my main project for the last five years called 'Natural Habitats', and it is a interesting company. It's a Rotterdam, Holland-based founded by a Dutchman who's been a very successful entrepreneur, and his wife is Ecuadorian.

They started an organic fair trade supply chain for palm oil in Ecuador about nine years ago, and asked me to help them enter the U.S. market five years ago. I started doing some advising work after I visited their facility in Ecuador, and met farmers, and just became really passionate about what they were doing. One thing led to another, and I acted as their kind of U.S. Managing Director, and I invested in the company. I've been transitioning out of that role. We opened up an office in Boulder, Colorado a



year ago last January and have built a team, so my focus for them is now on more of the innovation work and going down to Ecuador and working with the farmers and doing the things that I'm really passionate about. That's been an exciting project, and a lot of the work that I do with companies here in the U.S. that are branded companies, I have active relationships with Lotus Foods, Euro USA, which has the Bionaturae and Jovial brands, Living Intentions.

I'm on the board at Nutiva, and I work with Organic Specialists, also known as Wolf, DiMatteo + Associates. They are a services group in the industry that helps companies create the infrastructure and culture to do organic products. Really important group. You don't hear about these groups very much because they're not brands, but they're really important for our industry. I act as their CEO for hire when they get a client that needs that kind of assistance. That's my background, and I don't know which of those passions you'd like to explore further, but that's where I came from and where I am today.

Dan: I appreciate you sharing that. You've got such an eclectic background, and I love the fact that you've bounced around, but always kept true to your mission. This show is about helping brands have the confidence or providing the confidence to a brand to stay true to their mission, to their value, so thank you for sharing that. Let's go back a little bit. Let's talk about your retail store. I love the fact that you're able to work on all the



different sides of the equation, the retailer side, and the brand side, and board, et cetera.

Point being is that you were able to immerse yourself into this culture and really understand what it means. People are always asking me, "What makes natural natural?", and I love the fact that you're talking about your relationship to your community, your employees. Can you talk a little bit more about that? Where I'm going with that, Neil is how did you see that ... You're talking about it a little bit, but as far as a transformative event in your life, how did you see that impacting you, and can you go back in time and even look back from today and see what changes that you made are still taking place?

Neil: I think there's a couple of key things that happened in my life that really came to the surface that really helped me forge where I wanted to spend my attention and focus. Some of it is just around my commitment to the lifestyle around the natural product industry, the commitment to organic farming, the commitment to living a healthier lifestyle through the food that we eat. 'Food is medicine' is a theme that is just absolutely important for us for my family, and we raised two children that way.

Dan: Yes.

Neil: We practice a lot of alternative health kinds of things like homeopathy using herbs. Trying to avoid the allopathic medicine is a big part of our lives, and it's been a big part of what our



industry has tried to do, is to give options to people. Probably, the other part of it is working with people to get the most from them and to help people evolve and develop as human beings, and doing that in a workplace environment to really creates that kind of environment where people can really prosper and grow. That has been one of the joys in my life is really helping create the kind of environment where people can really prosper and thrive, and really connect with where they work.

Dan: Cool.

Neil: We spend the majority of our time working as human beings, and so many people are there just to punch the clock. There's so much more if a company can create the kind of environment where they really feel connected to the mission and values of the company, this is a lot of the work that I've done with a lot of the companies that I've been involved with. I've had past relationships with a number of iconic brands that the entrepreneurs kind of get to this company to a certain point, and they need the help and mentorship to take it to the next level. A lot of that is around building the kind of internal systems around performance management and really spending the time defining who they are and what those values are that drive their success. That kind of foundational work really helps get companies to that next level, and really push it to the edge, and really do the kind of transformative work that they're capable of doing.

Dan: I appreciate you saying that. I think one of my biggest frustrations about mainstream business as a whole is that they



spend more time trying to eliminate candidates than identifying talent. That's critically important because what you're saying is that you're encouraging or challenging the people around you, if I understand correctly to become more than they currently are and to really become involved in it, and as you said, if you create an atmosphere where people are empowered and embolden, they're going to bend over backwards for you. Then, it's like you said, it's not about punching a time clock. You're there because you want to be there, because you want to contribute and because you are a part of that family like you said.

This is where we spend most of our time. Any other thoughts you want to share around that?

Neil: Sure. I think that some of the work that I've done, the companies that I've provided these kinds of mentorship services for, it's about getting a very transparent working environment, there's a sharing of financial information, and it doesn't have to be down to the nitty-gritty detail, but enough information to really get people connected to what it is that creates success in the organization, and connecting their own success as a part of that through incentive plans, through employee development programs that really give people the opportunity to grow, giving them access to tools and educational opportunities to better their skills, really engaging them in a way that really creates a vibrant workforce, and to be able to create the kind of environment within, especially I would say the senior team as the company grows where there's just a very strong, trusting environment, in an



environment where people can deal with disagreements and other challenges that they inevitably face. Now, the toughest part is always to get the founder entrepreneurs to let go of control. To create that kind of environment is a real challenge for them. My own experience is that the more the founder entrepreneurs can let go and really allow people to participate to create success, the more successful they are, and the happier that they are.

Dan: Yes.

Neil: It's a challenge. I've been working with entrepreneurs. I consider myself an entrepreneur because I've started companies, but I've also been more of an intrapreneur. It's a word you won't see in the dictionary. I made it up, but it's what I feel like I've always been, which is being able to go into an organization and work with an entrepreneur to create the kind of structure that's needed to provide the kind of environment that really allows them to prosper and grow.

There's an element of regeneration in this philosophy of trying to create that kind of environment. Regenerative agriculture is a buzz word now, but there's also an element of this in regenerative business modeling, where you're really creating this kind of regenerative environment that allows companies to really prosper and elevate them almost spiritually to become real significant contributors to society, and to really transform what is needed in our society these days, that there's so much need for work to be done to counter what's going on in the big business world, and a lot of the destructive things that are done in that



environment. It's really been rewarding to watch some of the big brands have some of that transformative experience from buying and acquiring natural food companies that have that kind of culture. The most successful ones I think have been able to impact the larger organization by the values that they bring, and that's been pretty rewarding to see even though it's changed a lot of iconic brands in our industry. I think it's actually helped change.

You're seeing some of the big companies take organic values into their larger company, getting rid of GMOs by General Mills. I mean, that's huge. There's been that kind of transformative work that I've seen from the early days in the late '60s and early '70s to where it has come today. I have a great story I like to tell people back in the late '70s. I got very involved in the Pacific Northwest co-op network called 'Provender Alliance'.

I was on their board, and we had these intense debates around, "What are we going to do about our future?" There was an element of the industry back then and the people involved that wanted to keep it small, compact, and just the people who were 'Feeling enlightened'. Then, there was the other side of the debate, which is where I fell, where I really felt like the need to take what we were doing into the larger world as quickly as we could to transform society, and ultimately, that's really what's happened. We've opened up this industry to mainstream. It's an international business platform, and certainly, it's changed over the years.

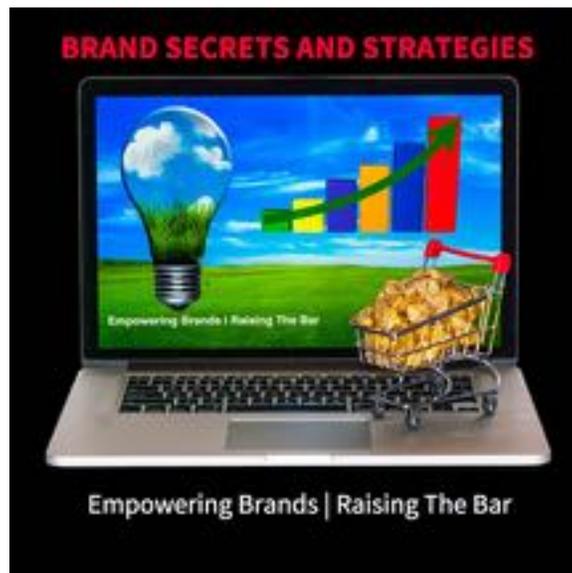


There's a lot of things that have been lost. A lot of people think we've lost our soul. There has been some loss as a result of companies getting sold, and people getting wealthy, and coming in and just making a lot of money off of what has grown to be a very vibrant business model and opportunity to create wealth for people. But at the same time, we still retained I think the core of what started this industry and what continues to drive it and the impact that we can have in organizations like Organic Sustainable Community and the Climate Collaborative, and the work that was done several years ago to drive GMOs out of our industry. I can name more and more of them. I'm very involved in a nonprofit called the 'Rudolf Steiner Foundation' for social finance based in San Francisco, and it does some incredible work in providing access to capital for mission-driven companies.

Dan: Yeah. Really? Cool.

Neil: That kind of work still continues, and it's still the core of what drives us.

Dan: That's so important in going back to what makes natural natural. I've defined natural. We're going to try to explain it to people that it is just like a religion, and of course, I don't really mean preachy, but the point being is that as you said, it's almost spiritual because of the way that we give back. I love again the idea that you said, regenerative business because that's such a powerful term. We create better citizens.



Not only do we create better citizens, but we create a better workforce by empowering people, and that whole idea of educating and bringing people into this light, and in helping people understand what makes natural natural, and why this matters. The mentoring, all the give backs, et cetera, it's so empowering. I remember being on the other side of the fence where I was a number, and I didn't actually have to punch a time clock, but you felt like you did. You felt like your worth was, kind of distilled down to your last biggest mistake or whatever. You weren't celebrated in terms of what you brought to the table, and I hear that that's what you're saying, so thank you for sharing that. You were talking about food is medicine, and I am a firm believer that that's one of the key drivers about natural.

By the way, to back up a little bit. Natural organic products are driving sales across every category and across every channel, so this regenerative business model, and then with food as medicine being sort of the mantra, I think that's at the core of this. Where I'm going with this is that to your point, a lot of the big brands are standing up and taking notice, and when they're beginning to acquire these small natural brands and still trying to make them a carbon copy of themselves or what they once were, they're starting to adapt and becoming more human, may I say.

Neil: Yeah. I completely agree. Now, I think some of the things that we're seeing on the larger food scene in adopting a lot of what drives our industry, the whole movement toward eliminating a lot of adjunct ingredients and fillers and things like that, making



labels more simple and easy to understand. Consumers are demanding it, and there is a rush I believe in a high percentage of the large CPG companies in the food industry to reformulate their products to simplify them, to reduce the sugar content, to look at how they can fortify them with natural ingredients. That's the kind of impact that we've had. It's transforming the larger food scene.

Dan: Yes.

Neil: Now, it's still at its very beginning. We are still a relatively small percentage of the U.S. population that are really committed to food is medicine, but it's growing. That concept is growing more and more. You're seeing medical care practitioners talking about it now. You're seeing healthcare education programs starting to adopt it.

That's the kind of work that started 40 some years ago that's now starting to really impact the larger mainstream community. It's really gratifying to see and wonderful to experience that, and seeing the next generation, the millennials, and the next generation beyond them starting to speak up and make those kinds of demands and looking for companies that really have those values, so it's driven by economics. It's driven by demand. That's really what transforms these larger companies, but I think at the same time, it also creates change internally within those organizations. When they see the results and success of adopting some of the things that have been the core of our industry, it's going to start to transform them, and that's I think to my earlier



expression around how we can have an impact on the larger community. It really has the potential.

Dan: Absolutely, and this is actually what I was talking to Gary Hirshberg about a couple days ago. The point being is that it's this regenerative business. It's bringing everything back to where it was. So okay, he threw this out, and I've always said this and I agree that organic isn't something new. This is what our grandparents ate, what you ate, what I ate as a child. The point being is that it isn't some new trend that just all of a sudden popped up overnight.

We ate this way because this is the way we're brought up. We didn't have better living through chemistry back then, although I do remember when that became such a big deal, and excuse me, trying to read the labels are on a package, and not being able to understand what it said. That was always an interesting thing. We're learning new words, and they weren't good words if you know what I mean, so it wasn't where we needed it to be.

Neil: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

Dan: The whole idea that organic was what we grew up with, and now we're coming back to that full circle and to your point, now that others are starting to pay attention and not getting to go back into that business formulation, what's driving businesses. I think that's the key, and I think long-term, that's going to really make a tremendous difference. I have been talking with a lot of people...Gary Hirshberg, John Foraker, Seth Goldman, et cetera.



We talk about how, like you said, food is medicine. We're all commenting about ... We're kind of the same age roughly, that we don't remember people being as sick.

We don't remember so many food allergies and obesity and so many other issues that we see today.

Neil: Yes. Right. Yeah.

Dan: Other thoughts around that?

Neil: I think that you really hit the nail on the head there. Looking back at our cultural roots, when people my age, your age grew up, we didn't have a lot of the kinds of degenerative disease states that we had, and I travel the world a lot.

Dan: No.

Neil: Did sourcing for Spectrum for years and got the opportunity to travel to every olive oil producing place in the world, which was wonderful, and did some other work with farmers. Since the Spectrum days, I've been doing international travel on the sourcing side for other clients that I've had and still do that with the Natural Habitats group. When you travel around the world and see a connection with cultural diets that people still have, where they haven't been what I call 'Westernized' or 'Americanized', where they've lost those connections, that's where you start to really see a shift in people's health.

Dan: Yes.



Neil: You don't see the obesity and the severe disease states in a lot of those parts of the world because they still eat what their great-grandparents ate.

Dan: Yes.

Neil: If you go to Italy, food is such an integral part of what they do and how they live, and they haven't lost that connection, and it still has a lot of the same ingredients and phytonutrients that existed 500 years ago in their food supply. I think that there's a lesson there for us around reconnecting with those cultural roots. When I grew up, it was a Scandinavian environment, South Dakota. It was full of Scandinavians that settled there in the late 1800's, early 1900's, and we had a huge garden. My grandparents who lived right next to us were very much a part of our food life between gardening.

My grandfather raised rabbits. We had four boys in the family, and we were hunters and fishermen, and about half or more of our protein came from wild game, and we had still the family farm that my uncle farmed. If we had to harvest an animal for the family, it came from that farm. I mean, those are incredible roots that people don't connect with anymore.

Dan: No.

Neil: I think that we've created a model in the organic industry where it's as close to that as we can get in how livestock is raised and where the dairy products come from. I mean, the animals are



treated well and fed the right kind of ingredients to create a healthy product. The availability of food from all over the world now is just incredible, what choices are out there, and how we as a consuming country can positively impact underdeveloped parts of the world to help farmers and help bring some of these indigenous foods into our country. We've got so many examples of that from chia seed to quinoa that never existed before because they came from parts of the world that weren't distributing those products outside of their countries, so we have an incredible opportunity now with international commerce to be able to adopt some of these indigenous superfoods into our diet.

Dan: I want to go back a little bit. I'm going to call this 'Community'. What I mean by that is we used to eat together. We used to have all our meals together, at least certainly dinner at the very least, and I don't think people do that nowadays. That is such an important part of our culture.

At least it was. The idea being that we came together for a short time, we talked, we communicated, we shared, we immersed ourselves in that community, even if it was just our family. I don't think people do that much today. I was having a long conversation with Robbie Vitrano about this in one of the episodes, and the point being is that it unites us. Food is the common language that we all share, and so to be able to break bread in a community setting is I think what connects people together.



It brings us all into that same ... It helps us regenerate those bonds. You're talking about how as you're building a family type relationship with the people you work with, and I'm sure that's a big part of it. Can you go into talk a little bit about some of the things you're saying in terms of the social finance?

Neil: Sure. There has been I think a growing number of organizations that are very focused on providing financing alternatives for mission-driven organizations, whether they're for-profit or not-for-profit. The organization that I've been on the board of now for 10 years is RSF Social Finance, which is a nonprofit. It acts like a bank that provides loans, grants, and even connects people with equity capital from donor advisors that are high-net-worth people who want to put their money to use in organizations that can really be transformative. Their focus is on food and agriculture, and education in the arts and the environment.

They're a 501c3. They've been around since the early '60s, and they're quietly doing this incredible work, offering alternatives to a typical bank. They provide loans just like a bank would to organizations for doing infrastructure work, and they provide lines of credit to a lot of companies in the natural product industry, just like a bank would that's backed up by inventory and receivables.

Dan: Really?

Neil: They go beyond what a normal bank does by offering a way for organizations to connect with values that are part of what RSF is. RSF stands for the Rudolf Steiner Foundation, and Rudolf Steiner



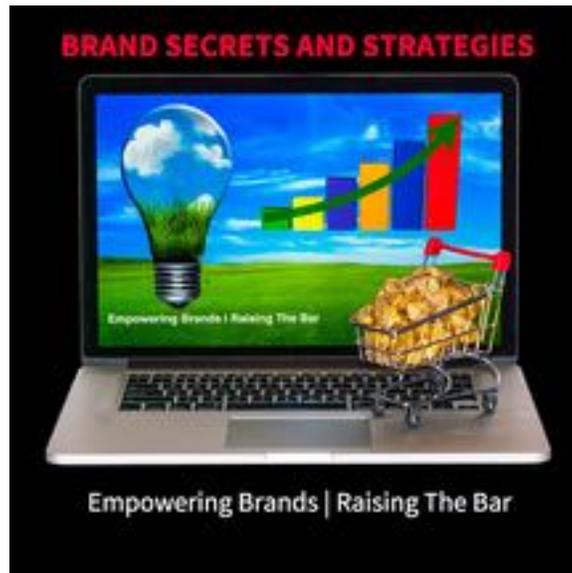
was a turn of the century philosopher out of Austria that created a whole platform for transformation. He's the father of Waldorf education and biodynamic, and he had economic theories around how many can be used for good that RSF has modeled itself around, and there's a number of other groups.

Dan: Great.

Neil: Social Venture Network is one of them. There's now half a dozen organizations, and there's even banks that are sprouting up. New Resource Bank that started about nine years ago in San Francisco has a branch in Boulder. They have been a model for how banking can become so much more connected to community, and connected to its clients to share mission and values. I think these are vivid examples of how money can be put to use in a way that's transformative and regenerative, so the social finance growth in that movement is quietly doing its work.

You don't see a lot of it in the media, and it's the people that are involved in it, they're not standing up, shouting out, "We're doing all this work." They're just doing it in the kind of relationships that they have, and putting money to work in a way that's so much more effective in creating community.

Dan: I appreciate you mentioning that. You've also mentioned some of the other great resources. If you could please when we're finished today, send me links to some of those important resources. I'd like to put them in the show notes and in this podcast webpage.



Neil: I'll do that.

Dan: Thank you. I really appreciate that, because it's about us all helping each other. I mentor a lot of brands, Neil, and I have the privilege and the opportunity to work with some that are pre-revenue, some that are just getting up and running, even the large companies. The point being is that every brand is looking for resources. Not just necessarily money, but strategies and people to help them in various areas, along their growth, and so to be able to have that is great.

In fact actually, I attended a Naturally Boulder meeting just last week, where I talked with John Grubb and Gary Hirshberg, and I don't remember the lady's name off top of my head. I've got her business card, but she represented an organization like one of the ones you're talking about, and it's fascinating. I didn't know those existed, so I'd like to include that on the show notes, so thank you for that.

Neil: Absolutely. Yeah.

Dan: You were talking about how you rent yourself out as a CEO for hire. I think it's invaluable that brands think about the fact that if they can't afford to hire someone full-time, some of us, if you were to hire us full-time would be out of reach for most companies, but yet, to be able to tap into that brilliance and be able to leverage someone with your skill set, even on a part-time or interim basis is so valuable. Can you talk about that? I assume



this is extremely rewarding for you, so can you share some stories around that as well?

Neil: Sure. It's definitely been one of the things that's really been fulfilling in the work I've done in the last 10 years. When I left Spectrum, I spent a year with Hain Celestial helping them through a transition to make it smooth for them to try to help retain as many employees as possible. I was an independent contractor consultant to them.

During that first year, which was 2006, I had a couple of pretty significant offers to go back to work for other companies as CEO. At age 55, I decided I wanted to keep life as simple as possible and see where the wind blew me to try to stay independent and do this work that I've been doing around helping retain the values of the industry. Within a matter of weeks after my consulting relationship with Hain Celestial, I started doing some work with Living Harvest, which is one of the original brands in the hemp industry back in those days, and came in and worked with the current president and kind of functioned as a CEO for hire for a period of several months, that then led to being on their board and providing advisor work up until they were sold. There always seems to be kind of this, without even going looking another opportunity that came up based on networking that provides those kinds of opportunities to meet people and find out what their needs are, and so Numi Tea was the next company that I got involved with.

Dan: Yeah. Great company.



Neil: Started doing some advisory work, which led to a three-year stint as an interim President, Chief Operating Officer, and really doing the kind of work that was needed to help them get over that edge that was there. The founders are incredibly mission-driven people and so committed to what they do, but they really needed that intrapreneurial work to create the kind of structure, and transparency, and programs to help create real performers within your organization, and for them to let go.

Dan: Yeah.

Neil: It was a part-time position that essentially grew to the point where they're ready for a full-time person to step into that position, which they did, so I moved on to their board. That's kind of a typical example of how that works. It's interesting because within a matter of a few months after that shift going from that part-time position, the founder at Nutiva, John Roulac who had been after me for a long time to try to do some of the work I was doing at Numi for him, it transformed into a similar relationship at Nutiva. Nutiva is an interesting business model because they're also incredibly mission-driven, and John Roulac is one of the most visionary and mission-driven entrepreneurs in our industry. So dedicated to the values that the Nutiva brand stands for, but he's a classic entrepreneur, and the organization was in such need of building the kind of foundational work to help them get to that next level.

Dan: Absolutely.



Neil: It's not something that he likes to do or really could do, so it was an incredibly rewarding experience working with John and the team there to really do the work to put some of those foundational elements in place. We have I think an incredibly creative, innovative industry that's driven by entrepreneurs, and there's qualities that I've seen that are so consistent within so many of the entrepreneurs that have made successful brands in our company. They're incredibly visionary. They often are dysfunctional in other ways. They're usually people that can't work for somebody else, and they're brave. They're willing to take incredible risk, but they also need some of the other elements that make them successful over the long term.

It's one thing to take a company from startup to five million, and then to ten and beyond, and each of those steps requires a lot of work to create foundational components that make them successful over time, and that's where I've been able to really step in and provide that kind of contribution. It's been just incredibly rewarding to do that and watch the transformation that occurs within an organization and to watch the people develop and grow. That's probably the thing that's been the most rewarding about the work I've done in the last 10 years.

Dan: Also, the people that you're able to work with. I had the privilege of interviewing Lara Dickinson, it's one of the podcast episodes, I think session 37. I had the opportunity to actually meet her at one of the OSC2 meetings, which of course they're tied to the Climate Collaborative. Actually, they started it.



I had the privilege of meeting Ahmed Rahim, and I've done work for John Roulac a few years, so I'm looking forward to having both of those guys on the podcast at some point, but to your point, it's this community that is really driving change. It's going back to what you said earlier, Neil, where you're able to foster those beliefs and encourage people to be more than they are. You're really able to help to mold them and give them the courage to support and be mission-driven, and do those things that are in true alignment with what their passions and their goals are, and so thank you for all that you do in supporting that. I know that you were a part of the Climate Collaborative as well. Can you talk a little bit about that?

I'm hoping to having Nancy Hirshberg on the podcast too. I met Katherine DiMatteo and many really great leaders in that space. Can you share a little bit about it for anyone who doesn't know? I think this is such an important mission, and I would encourage other brands, other people in this industry to get involved.

Neil: Yeah. I completely agree. I think that it is a vivid example of how our industry still has this incredibly vibrant desire to transform.

Dan: Yeah.

Neil: The Climate Collaborative idea hatched out of two organizations, Organic Sustainable Community, OSC2, which Lara is the Executive Director for. When that organization was started ... I guess, it's been about five years ago or so. Not too long after it was started, several of the founding members asked me to come



on as an advisor, and I'm on their board, so I'm very involved because I don't have a company. I'm not a member so to speak, but I would say I'm a Senior Advisor to several of the companies that have been clients of mine, so there's very close relationships there.

At the same time, the Sustainable Food Trade group was also thinking about the same kind of need in our industry around climate change, and when OSC2 took the concept to really getting serious about taking it into the industry and doing what's been done to define itself and reach out to community in our industry to fund it and so on, the connection with the Sustainable Food Trade, and Katherine DiMatteo, and Nancy all happened almost magically. Now, you've got two organizations that came together initially and still are today. Lara Dickinson very much involved as the driver. The first gathering that occurred a year ago, last March at the first, or at Expo West in Anaheim, it was an amazing coming together with out a lot of fanfare and promotion. New Hope did a lot to really help sponsor it, help get the word out, and people showed up.

There has been this gathering of our community to really support a really important cause. We have in our industry supply chains that are managed oftentimes by co-packers and brokers who are buying the ingredients, and there has been a gap even in mission-driven companies between the products that they sell and the ingredients that go into it, and so much of what is needed now is for companies to go past that and connect



themselves all the way from the farm and through the supply chain to know where it comes from, what it's doing for the local community, where those products come from, and to understand all of the elements that are behind those ingredients.

Dan: Agreed.

Neil: We've been an industry that has been doing this for close to 50 years, and we have had the kind of close connection in our supply chains that we need. To me, I think that's some of the most important work that we can do, and the commitment within companies to work on their supply chains and work with their ingredient brokers, and the farmers that produce the ingredients to truly have an impact, positive impact on climate change, even to the extent of providing tools so that farmers and organizations can even monitor how much carbon they're putting into the environment or how much carbon they're able to sequester through the work that they're doing.

Dan: Agreed.

Neil: This effort is creating a whole toolkit for companies to tap into, to really look at how we can positively impact climate change. I think we've all as an industry reached the point where we can't rely on the government or big businesses to do that work. We have to do it for ourselves. We have to show that it can be done, there's a model for this, and just like we've been able to impact a larger food world, I think the work we're doing can impact larger organizations like Unilever, and General Mills, and Pillsbury, and



whomever they're in that large CPG food side to have them look at how they can impact climate change in a positive way. We're at the real beginning, at the cusp of what I think is going to be another way our industry can really impact the world.

Dan: Absolutely. In fact, and thank you for saying that, one of the things that I told Gary, and I talked about that too, voting with our dollars. The reason this show, this podcast exists, it's about you, and for you. Meaning, the brands and the retailers that are listening to, the quickest, easiest way that we can affect change is by driving our decisions at shelf. Meaning, that if we are able to better communicate to customers and shoppers the true value behind these product choices that they're making so that they understand that it's not just a matter of it's a red box or a blue box or a green box or whatever, but more importantly, what's behind that, and customers want to feel good about what they're buying.

They can't necessarily go volunteer some place or take time off work to be able to contribute, but yet, if they can feel good about knowing that they're doing something positive for their community, something positive for the environment, something positive to give back, to educate, to become bigger than they currently are, I think that is the core of the mission. That's what I'm trying to do, is to make our healthy way of life more accessible by helping healthy, natural brands, get onto more retailer's shelves, and into the hands of more shoppers. So thank you for bringing that up because again, I think like you said, we



need to vote with our dollars. As you were talking earlier, I was thinking about the fact that all these groups are coming together, the 'If you build it, they will come' idea, the point behind is that people want to be involved. People want something better than what we've currently got, and if you're not necessarily able to make change in Washington or some place else, this is a really easy place to get started and get involved and dip your toes in the water and start really understanding, "What makes natural natural?" Getting back to that natural sort of a religion, it's that understanding what brings this community together, so thank you for sharing all of that.

One of the things I wanted to talk with you about is your work with Palm Done Right. Palm's getting a bad name recently. I think it's just the lack of education around it. We were talking about this when we spoke earlier. Can you share the pros and the cons, what are people saying about it, and how are you involved in cleaning that messaging up so that people can understand the benefit of palm?

Neil: Yeah. Let me start by giving just a little bit more information about how I got involved with Natural Habitats and how the Palm Done Right education platform evolved. When I was running Spectrum, we introduced the first organic palm oil from Colombia in about 2002. Because we were very focused at Spectrum on how to take the healthiest possible fats into the marketplace both for the ingredient business and for our brands, we still had hydrogenated oils and fats as part of our ingredient profile in our



industry. Hydrogenated fats are one of the most destructive foods that you can put into your body.

It's no longer food. It transforms fat into plastic, and I think one of the leading things that it has been a cause for serious health problems in this country has been around poor quality fat.

Dan: Yeah.

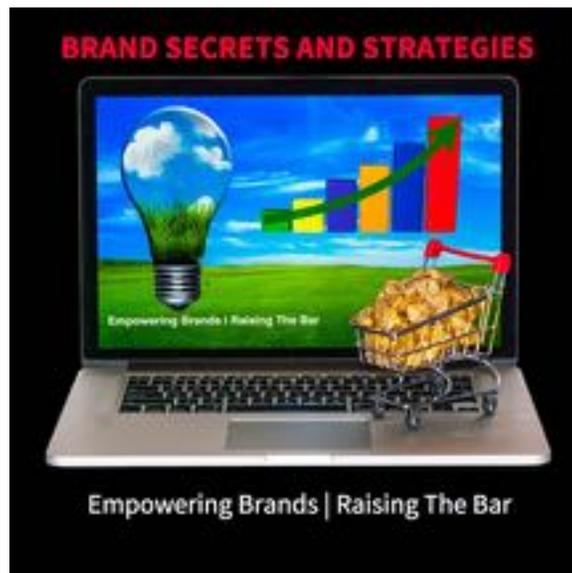
Neil: My learning in those years at Spectrum really taught me that even something like saturated fat had a place in your diet if it was processed properly, so I went to the farms in Colombia and saw how the product was harvested and grown, and how it was processed, and saw this beautiful, red oil coming out of this press that just fascinated me, so I studied as much as I could possibly find around palm oil and its historic roots. Palm oil has been used by people that lived close to the equator for thousands of years. It's been their principle fat source, and yet, palm oil got demonized in the United States food system, principally driven by the powers that be around hydrogenated fat and taking soybeans, which you can grow in this country. You can't grow palm oil in United States, so you can take soybeans though and turn it into a hard fat through hydrogenation. It's that better food through chemistry that created this 'solution' to having to use tropical oils in our food system for the use of hard fat, and hard fat has a real place in our food culture.

If you're going to bake or fry, there's no better fat in the world than the non-hydrogenated palm oil. I learned all this, and we



launched at Spectrum the first alternative to hydrogenated shortening for baking in the home. Product still exists. It still is distributed throughout the retail system out there under the Spectrum brand. It's a great product. It's produced by the supplier to Spectrum that I got closely connected with back in those days.

Five years ago, the founder at Natural Habitats approached me based on my background in the oil and fats industry and asked if I could help him. Went to Ecuador where their supply chain had gotten started, and fell in love with the organization, the people, the farmer base. This is an opportunity for me to take a lot of the ideas that still were up in my head around how to take tropical oils into the mainstream here in the U.S.. Spectrum was sold before I could really take it to the next level, so I still carried both the ideas and the compassion for the supply chain and the small farmers that were connected to it and so on. As I got involved and started integrating myself into what had happened since my Spectrum days and seeing all of the negative publicity around what's going on in Asia with Conflict Palm oil, and the NGOs are doing some incredible work at bringing these problems to light and getting consumers to understand them that what it's done is it's created this concept in everybody's head that all palm oil is bad, so anything with palm has got to have a problem, even if it's organic and fair trade. If you do palm right, and that's why we came up with this name, Palm Done Right, it's so simple, and created a whole educational platform around it, was to try to



change that conversation, because if it is done right, it's the exact opposite.

It's 180 degrees different from what happens in Conflict Palm. It nourishes communities if it's done properly in the supply chains that exist now in South America, in Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. The three organizations that are behind palm oil being produced right are nourishing those communities, creating opportunities for small farmers. They get paid a premium. They get transformative farms that go from conventional farms, where they're spraying chemicals to organic farms, and watching the transformation that occurs in their lives as a result of that, and the fair trade dollars that go back to help the communities. The deforestation policies of all of these organizations are preventing any more rainforests from being destroyed like it is in other parts of the world, so there's a need to change how people think about palm.

The idea sprouted. It took a couple trips to Ecuador, and bringing people there to really start to have things click around how we can change this, and it then transformed into Natural Habitats, sponsoring the Palm Done Right movement, which if everything goes the way we've been discussing it, it probably will transform into its own NGO, non-government organization nonprofit that can provide the kind of cooperation among all of the organic suppliers to really drive that concept and create the shift that is needed in people's minds around palm oil and where it fits. That has been both fun, rewarding and sometimes frustrating work



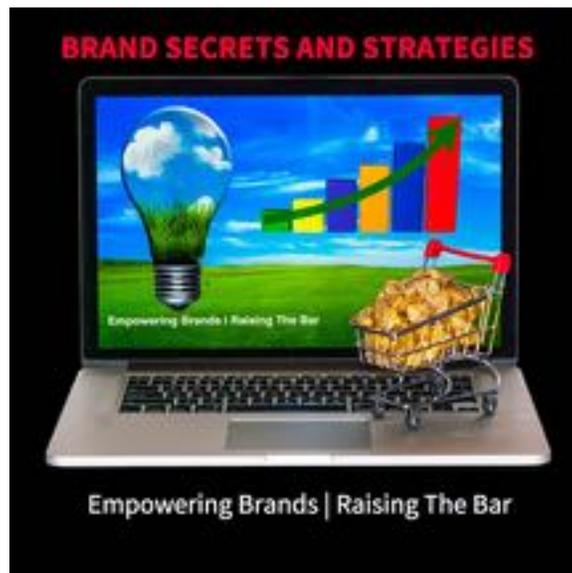
because it's hard to transform people in how they create the concept in their minds around what palm oil is.

Dan: I appreciate you saying that. I don't think a lot of people realize that we need healthy fats, and there's a big difference between a healthy fat and a non-healthy fat like you said. I remember when I was younger where we would use different fats for different purposes, and my mom always said that fat is what makes food taste good, part of that ingredient that gives food sometimes a lot of its flavor. I guess one of the challenges is like you said, that there's so much miscommunication, and now, the big diet push, and people are trying to avoid fats, and news flash, you need fats in your body. You need the right fats. The right fats will help you metabolize faster, and yeah, like you said that the bad fats don't.

Neil: Right. That's right.

Dan: Thank you for sharing that, and that it's so important. To go back to where we first started this conversation, you've brought those same methodologies, that same regenerative business practice to this part of what you're doing in your life. I see this as a common theme, and again, it's what makes natural natural. It helps keep this community alive and vibrant. It welcomes other people, and without being preachy or judgmental, people want to be involved.

They want to be encouraged to participate in some of these programs like OSC2, Climate Collaborative, and some of these other organizations you're talking about, so thank you for sharing



all of that. Is there anything else that we've left out that you would like to share?

Neil: Gosh, we covered a lot of ground here, Daniel.

Dan: Yeah.

Neil: You're very good at making sure that all of the points get addressed.

Dan: Thank you, and I try hard.

Neil: I'm sitting here, thinking if there's anything missing, and we've even touched on what to me has been the most rewarding and transformative. For me, it's my own spiritual growth. Doing what I've been doing is part of who I am as a spiritual person.

Dan: Yeah.

Neil: I have a firm belief that if you allow yourself to look at what you put into your body, food is medicine, that provides the necessary elements for you to transform as a human being, and to connect more with your spirit and the spirit world.

Dan: Yes.

Neil: I think that we've brought that to light here, and I'm really happy to know that we've been able to do it for your audience.



Dan: Thank you. It's so important. I mean, if we're all interconnected, I always say that if we are what we eat, then what we eat is important. Meaning that it's what you put into your body.

If you provide your body with the right nutrients, you can excel in other ways. As you've stated, better brain health, better physical health, better energy, better ability to communicate and articulate, and more of a connection to what we're trying to do here, so thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate your time, and thank you for coming on, and I look forward to our next conversation.

Neil: Thank you for the opportunity, Daniel.

Dan: Thank you.

Neil: Much appreciated. Yeah.

Dan: Anytime. Thank you.

Neil: Okay.

Dan: I want to thank Neil for coming on today and for sharing his valuable insights. What a tremendous resource. I learned a lot about the industry and the beginnings of regenerative agriculture, and now regenerative business, two important things that we really need to pay attention to. It's all about making a sustainable way of life more accessible by providing more entrepreneurs, people that are ready and able to step up and take the reins of a



company, the future thought leaders. Neil recommended a lot of great resources.

I'll be sure to put them in the show notes and on this podcast webpage. You can download the show notes at brandsecretsandstrategies.com/session47. Today's freebie is my eBook, 'Strategic Solutions To Grow Your Brand'. It'll help provide the foundation to help you build a healthy foundation. You can download the guide instantly by texting Strategic Solutions to "44222", or in the show notes or on this podcast webpage.

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I appreciate all the positive feedback. Keep your suggestions coming.

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