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## Jessica Bragdon Of Koala Eco: 5 Things You Need To Know To Create A Very Successful Lifestyle Brand



Our connection to nature is one of the most precious things we have, and we need to nurture that connection for our own physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing.

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**As** a part of our series called “5 Things You Need To Know To Create A Very Successful Lifestyle Brand”, I had the pleasure of interviewing Jessica Bragdon.

*Jessica Bragdon is the co-founder of [Koala Eco](#), an Australian company that creates plant-based cleaning products made with Australian essential oils.*

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**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a bit about your “childhood backstory”?**

**I** come from a family of three: I have a twin sister and a younger brother and we were raised in Boston and New Hampshire. We had a pretty ideal childhood, in New England, very healthy and active: horse-riding and skiing and being outdoors constantly.

Our grandmother was a huge influence. She would take my sister Adrienne and I on long hikes through the forests around her New England home, pointing out the flora and fauna along the way. She passed on her passion for natural things to our mother, who likewise was an avid plant and garden enthusiast (and is also an artist). Family outings invariably meant visits to historic gardens, plant nurseries and flower shows.

**Can you tell us the story of what led you to this particular career path?**

When we were just out of Northeastern university in Boston, Adrienne and I started up and ran a floral business. It was a natural step for us, we'd inherited a love of the natural world from our mother and grandmother, and they'd taught us so much about botanicals. So Adrienne and I hired some of our friends to work with us, and we designed and made arrangements for nightclubs and restaurants all over Boston. Then we sold the business, and moved to New York City to attend graduate school at Columbia University, and do a Masters in organizational psychology and business. While in NYC studying we also worked for the group who started the Maritime Hotel and The Bowery Hotel.

I spent a decade living in New York and this was where I met my Australian husband Paul. We moved to Australia, and settled for a while in Perth (Whadjuk land of the Noongar people), where we started a family. We'd always been passionate about living healthily and not harming the environment, so always tried to find natural solutions for cleaning etc. When our sons Emerson and Arthur came along, this need to live mindfully intensified for us. Arthur experienced a life-threatening health scare as a baby. While this wasn't linked to any environmental causes, it nonetheless strengthened our resolve to live as healthily and sustainably as possible. Paul and I were constantly on the hunt for safe, toxic-free cleaning products that not only could make our home smell (naturally) fabulous but also would actually work. We felt the boys and our pets shouldn't have to hold their breath in order to avoid absorbing nasty ingredients every time we cleaned the family home. But we couldn't find what we wanted, so ultimately we thought: why don't we make our own so we started development hiring a chemist and naturopath.

Australia is full of potent and distinctive flora with extraordinarily powerful medicinal and cleansing properties. We were already in one of the best places in the world to explore our ambition to create natural, non-toxic cleaning products.

When we relocated from Perth to Sydney (Gadigal Country of the Eora nation), the timing was perfect, and we were more than ready to focus on setting up our own enterprise. So we launched Koala Eco in 2017, to make household cleaners, soaps and laundry liquids that were safe, powerful, effective, yet non-toxic and plant-based. We always wanted to be locally made in both Australia and the USA for each country.

**Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?**

I cringe when I remember this, yet we only made this mistake once, thankfully. Once was certainly enough. Early on, we were so thrilled to break into the Chinese market, but we hadn't factored in all the things we needed to consider in terms of shipping and the specific conditions the shipment would undergo. As a result, a whole container of products froze en route to China — not good!

**Is there a particular book, podcast, or film that made a significant impact on you? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?**

*Stand By Me* (1986) really resonates with me. It's a kind of coming-of-age film about a quartet of boys who try to find the body of a missing boy. I think it appeals because it's so truthful and moving. Incredible acting too. For a book I would pick *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez which I reread every few years. The combination of Magical Realism with family generational narratives is brilliant. The book is filled with much tragedy but still feels hopeful. For podcasts, I love *How I Built This*, an NPR podcast with Guy Raz, who interviews the innovators and entrepreneurs behind some of the world's best-known companies. It's utterly addictive listening. I could choose any of them as a source of encouragement and inspiration.

**Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

Eleanor Roosevelt said "you should do one thing every day that scares you". I have used this wisdom throughout my life to try my best to face my fears, and force myself to do things outside of my comfort zone. Following this advice has been incredibly useful in my career and life.

**Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. For the benefit of our readers, let's define our terms. How do you define a Lifestyle Brand? How is a Lifestyle Brand different from a normal, typical brand?**

I'll try to answer this as simply as I can. First of all, you'd expect a lifestyle brand to involve something you'd use as part of daily life, that you constantly reach for in the home or wherever you are. Secondly, the purpose of that item would be to make something better or easier: to resolve a specific problem, say.

But then comes the important differentiation for a lifestyle brand as opposed to a conventional, utilitarian alternative.

The lifestyle brand is an extension of *you*, the customer. You choose something that aligns with your values, and your aspirations; that signals and embodies something about the way you choose to live your life, behaviorally, ethically and spiritually. Crucially, it's not just about the function the item performs, it's about the way it performs it. What the brand does, or importantly, what it doesn't do. So in the case of Koala Eco, in addition to the many practical and emotional needs our products do aim to fulfill, our customers also pay attention to what they are *not* doing: for example, they are not harming the planet, not depleting the world's resources, we package responsibly and our RPET and glass bottles are not causing new plastic to be produced.

I'd also add that what we are trying to do at Koala Eco is so much broader than making safe, powerful, plant-based products for a clean home, body and mind. We're also trying to influence people to bring more nature into their lives, every day. Our connection to nature is one of the most precious things we have, and we need to nurture that connection for our own physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing.

#### **What are the benefits of creating a lifestyle brand?**

It feels so satisfying to be engaged in the business of helping people feel good, in a way that's not at the expense of nature or the planet. It's also a constant and incredibly rewarding learning curve, as we grow and understand the brand. All of us at Koala Eco feel passionate about what we're doing, and we try as much as possible in our own lives to 'walk the walk' of our brand's purpose.

#### **In your opinion, what is an example of a company that has done a fantastic job building a believable and beloved Lifestyle Brand? What specifically impresses you? What can one do to replicate that?**

There's a small Western Australian skincare company called Mokosh. They market themselves as 'the world's cleanest skincare'. I've liked their products since first coming to live in Australia. Their products contain pure organic nutrients for the skin, are free from synthetic ingredients they are high performing and smell divine. As a company, they also try to build in extra value to what they offer, like generous tips about skincare. And they communicate so well with their customer base, their community. I don't think that this combination of top-quality products with value-add and strong communication is rocket-science; but I do think that getting the balance right so that it's stylish, consistent and authentic is much more challenging to replicate. Mokosh does it really well.

**Can you share your ideas about how to create a lifestyle brand that people really love and are 'crazy about'?**

That's a hard question to be objective about! So I'll give a couple of thoughts with my Koala Eco experience in mind. We're working with 100% pure essential oils that not only smell divine but work really hard with other plant based ingredients at their purpose of disinfecting and cleaning and are able to enhance mood and wellbeing because of their unique chemistries. So we are already in a space where we have to lift our game in terms of marketing, social media, communications in order to honor the stories of these ingredients and encourage people to try them. Some people are easy to persuade because our company practices and our products harmonize with their lifestyle choices. Others need to be coaxed a little, maybe because they can't quite believe natural is best. Our products however have been tested and proven. Once people try, they are convinced. Why would you go back to filling your home with the throat-scouring smell of ammonia or sodium hypochlorite, when you could be infusing it with crisp scent of Peppermint *{Mentha piperita}*, or a spritz of nature's happy oil Mandarin *{Citrus reticulata}*, a perfect pick-me-up? Why would you want your laundry to smell of synthetic lemon when it could smell of real, natural, Lemon Scented Eucalyptus *{Eucalyptus maculata citriodora}* and Rosemary *{Rosmarinus officinalis}*?

**What are the common mistakes you have seen people make when they start a lifestyle brand? What can be done to avoid those errors?**

To be honest, we've been so busy concentrating on what we do, that I'm not sure I can offer anything specific. Here are some general thoughts: start small, understand what you are trying to achieve at this point, while acknowledging you don't know everything yet, do lots of research, test, test, test, don't launch until you are super-sure you can defend and promote every aspect of your product. Don't be afraid to fail. And don't shut off the opportunity to learn and adjust as you go. Inevitably you will want to refine your brand as you understand better the relationships it is building between the market, your customers, and the overall brand purpose.

**Let's imagine that someone reading this interview has an idea for a lifestyle brand that they would like to develop. What are the first few steps that you would recommend that they take?**

I think that I'd repeat some of the points I mentioned in the previous answer. And I'd add, whatever the brand idea, unless it fits seamlessly from the get-go with your values and lifestyle preferences, then you'll have a massive struggle. So you have to examine your own motives and know yourself pretty well. And be prepared for some very hard but worthwhile work.

**Ok. Thank you for all that. Here is the main question of our discussion. What are your "5 Things You Need To Know To Create A Very Successful Lifestyle Brand" and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)**

1. Choose something you love, and that's been important to you all your life, but that's also practically achievable:

I developed an enduring curiosity and love for botanicals as a child. Fortunately, I also live in a country where the healing power of plants and botanicals has been (and still is) understood and celebrated by Australia's First Nations people for many millennia. These native plants grow all over this amazing continent.

2. Be prepared to take your time in getting your products right:

It took us about two years to get to a point where we were ready to launch. Paul and I did a lot of research and started working carefully with a local chemist and lab to test and create our products. We found local suppliers who could guarantee the essential oils to be 100% pure and organic. Developing the formulas took the most amount of time. Unless we are totally happy with the product right through its development, then it won't go into production. If our ingredients can't be sourced from native Australian plants, then we won't use them.

3. Make your brand attractive and appealing:

Just because we're ethically responsible, it doesn't mean we have to look dull and worthy. We love our online and product marketing collateral: the overall 'look' of our brand, the labels and so on. Botanical art began in China in 4000 BCE, as a means of forever capturing and recording the beauty of flowers. In the western world, from the 15th century onwards, scientists relied on meticulously detailed, botanically correct drawings for species identification. It is this tradition of botanical art and its faithfulness to detail that inspires the Koala Eco brand 'look'. Created especially for us, these illustrations are not only exquisite, but they also invite trust. As scientifically realistic as possible, the depictions of (for example) Eucalyptus, Peppermint, and Lemon Myrtle on the outside of the bottle will speak directly to the ingredients within. It's crucial to think about the face your brand presents to the world.

4. Communicate, communicate, communicate:

Connected to the above point. How you talk to existing and potential customers, stockists and partners has to be thoughtfully and attentively managed. Get a really good team around you who understand and can build on the messages you want your brand to embody and convey.

5. Think about credentials:

It's incredibly important at Koala Eco that we stay true to our ethos. For example we don't create any new plastic we only use 100% recycled and recyclable. We give back to 1% for the Planet for worldwide environmental conservation with every bottle sold. We sponsor WWF Australia, Port Stephens Koalas and are about to launch our purpose work connecting people to nature. We are a member of Cicon — circular concierge program for environmentally safe products. Certifications include Safe Cosmetics Australia, Australian Certified Toxic free, Made Safe, Allergy Certified, Vegan, Cruelty Free. Koala Eco is a member of the American Sustainable Business

Council & Social Venture. The Eco on the name (and dot-eco domain for our website) represents the goals and values of a passionately committed environmental community on an international and multicultural scale. We're proud to be part of all the above. So is there some sort of third-party endorsement that will support what *your* brand is about?

**Super. We are nearly done. Here are our final questions. You are an inspiration to a great many people. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.**

I would just persevere with what we are trying to do at Koala Eco: to create public awareness of the beneficial affects of exposure to nature and its connection to mental wellbeing. Ultimately, we hope that Koala Eco's initiatives and products will help people bring more nature into their *everyday* lives.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.**

I am reading Yvon Chouinard's book, *Let my people go surfing*. From the first day we launched we have been part of his non-profit One Per Cent for the Planet. This environmental group is committed to protecting land, forests, rivers and oceans, and encourages sustainable methods of energy. We donate a percentage of each sale to this charity. I admire his company and his vision that combines business but with a bigger environmental picture. Like Yvon I grew up in the northeast of the USA with a very New England upbringing. I like how he combines the authentic sensibility of the northeast and the innovation of California in his outlook.

**Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.**