

Life's too *Lush* for normal cosmetics, Q&A with co-founder Rowena Bird

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Here's a company that believes in true sustainability to the extent of turning shampoo into a bar and toothpaste into a tablet, thoughtfully designing out the need for packaging at the product creation stage.



“We believe that true sustainability should cover environmental, social and economic impacts,” says co-founder and product inventor Rowena Bird. “Our long-term vision is to create supply chains that are not only sustainable but regenerative, giving back more than they take in resources.”

A company that would rather spend its money on beautiful ingredients like real jasmine, rose and sandalwood absolutes and oils than on expensive packaging and advertising.

“By keeping these things simple we are able to invest in the things that really matter to us – not only top quality ingredients but also the SLush (Sustainable Lush Fund) projects around the world and charitable giving.”

For a combination of [#InnovationMonth](#) and [#SustainabilityMonth](#), I interviewed Rowena and South Africa MD Nic Malan on this global beauty supply store (currently 928 stores in 49 countries) that's as serious about fighting animal testing as it is about creativity and innovation, changing what people think is 'normal' about cosmetics.

■ You have some unusual products, like fizzing bath bombs, shower jellies and solid shampoo bars. Why is innovation important in today's business landscape?

Rowena: It keeps us fresh and our customers excited. It also allows us to invent products without the need for packaging or excessive preservative – so better for the environment. Innovation allows us to use new ingredients from around the world to help grassroots organisations and permaculture projects in a regenerative business model. It also means we can buy and use ingredients that are not tested on animals, and discover new scientific alternatives that are safer and more reliable. Innovation is also a part of who we are, it is what makes Lush exciting for us as inventors, ideas seem to pop out of the brickwork so it is great to have an avenue to showcase them.

■ And ethics... Lush fights tirelessly against animal testing and operates an Ethical Buying Department, supporting fair trade and community trade initiatives. What are some the ways Lush has tried to raise awareness of animal testing cosmetics?

Rowena: Yes, ethical buying is central to our business. We build personal relationships with our suppliers and move beyond simply purchasing fairly traded ingredients, to developing supportive partnerships with the communities that produce them. Years of hard work accumulated with the introduction of the Sustainable Lush Fund ([SLush Fund](#)) six years ago. Lush donates 2% of the amount spent on raw materials and packaging to the Fund, the money is then used to start sustainable farming and regenerative community projects. To date, the fund has distributed over £2.5m to permaculture projects worldwide. We have also purchased over £1m in materials that will go on to help establish these projects as financially independent.

We continue to fight the fight against animal testing. For the whole of Lush's existence we have built our testing strategy on using traditional ingredients that have been in safe use for many years. We only buy those ingredients from suppliers who do not test on animals. Then, when we turn those ingredients into a product, we test the finished product on our panel of human volunteers. We think that this is a far safer way to test products than to test them on animals. When our products go onto the market we know how those products behave on people - not just the effects they have on rabbits or rats!

Our passion for taking animals out of testing has led to us starting the Lush Prize four years ago. The Lush Prize is a partnership between Lush and Ethical Consumer to support animal-free toxicology and is designed to reward groups or individuals working in the field of cruelty-free scientific research, awareness-raising and lobbying to help bring an end to animal testing. The £250,000 annual prize fund – the biggest prize in the non-animal testing sector – seeks to focus pressure on safety testing for consumer products in a way which complements projects already addressing the animal testing of medicines.

Lush Prize has already awarded £1.2m to previous projects to end animal testing and we're excited this year to add two new categories, for young researchers in Asia and the Americas. These new awards allow us to reach scientists who want to work in non-animal testing but face obstacles such as lack of funding or few opportunities for training and support.

We are also a campaigning company and think nothing of dressing people in Orangutan outfits, strapping them to a wheel and spinning them around whilst someone throws knives at them or hanging people from hooks in the shop window to raise

awareness of barbaric shark finning. One of our most well-known campaigning activities was when we did human testing in one of our shop windows - it was hard to see, but that is the reality faced by millions of animals in safety testing. We want to open our customer's eyes on certain issues and arm them with as much information as possible so they can make informed decisions.

■ **Lush runs public awareness campaigns about over-packaging and develops products that can be sold 'naked' to the consumer without any packaging. When I shop at Lush, I love being able to hand-pick the products. There's something nostalgic about being able to touch and feel them before purchase. But that's just me. What is the general consumer's response; and from an industry perspective, have you noticed a reduction in packaging since?**

Rowena: Our customers seem to love it too! From a packaging perspective, we strive for true sustainability which for us, means using innovation to design out the need for packaging at the product creation stage. Where products need packaging, we look to keep it to a minimum and create it from locally sourced, recycled materials that are easy for customers to reuse, recycle locally or feed back into one of our closed loop systems. We believe that true sustainability should cover environmental, social and economic impacts. Our long-term vision is to create supply chains that are not only sustainable but regenerative, giving back more than they take in resources. We are definitely seeing success here in our packaging reduction, for example, by using one of our shampoo bars you are saving three bottles of shampoo heading to landfill and with our Toothy Tabs you get solid toothpaste tabs that replace aluminium tubes. Innovation is important for us here. Sadly we haven't really noticed the industry following our lead.

■ **Lush only uses natural ingredients, such as fruit and vegetables.**

- **Does this present any barriers or limitations to what you can produce?**

Rowena: Not at all ... nature has all you could ever need to create the most effective products. It also means we don't ever need to test anything on animals, because ingredients like plants, fruits, vegetables, herbs, butters and clays have long histories of safe use and don't make any miracle claims, so no need for any safety testing. Instead we test products on ourselves and a panel of human volunteers. We do use some safe synthetics, shampoo bases, etc. but the fresh content does outweigh the safe synthetic elements.

- **Does this affect the shelf life of your products?**

It is the lower level of preservative that affects our shelf life but that only goes to make the product so much nicer to use. We much prefer for you to use your cosmetics quicker while they are at their most effective. This is why we will never offer discounts or special 'buy one get one free' offers ... because this simply encourages stock-piling which will inevitably result in the throwing away of things you've grown bored of or forgotten you had. We would prefer you come in regularly for your fresh cosmetics in the same way you'd go to a delicatessen for your fresh groceries.

- **Lush even uses real jasmine absolute perfume (more expensive than gold) in affordable objects to throw in the bath. Why is quality important?**

Why wouldn't you do this if you could? We prefer to spend our money on beautiful ingredients like real jasmine, rose and sandalwood absolutes and oils than on expensive packaging and advertising. By keeping these things simple we are able to invest in the things that really matter to us – not only like top quality ingredients but also the SLush projects around the world and charitable giving.

■ **Lush believes words like fresh and organic have honest meaning beyond marketing. What is your definition of these?**

Rowena: We make our products using fresh ingredients like fruit and vegetables and set ourselves the target of getting those products out to our shops quickly. We run our cosmetics company like a bakery - with batches made by hand in small quantities. This means we can manage our costs in order to spend extra on staff, rather than machines, making our products and for top quality ingredients and fair trade projects with our growers, because we save money by not indulging in expensive packaging or expensive advertising and marketing campaigns and by not having huge storage warehouses to hold our products.

We believe in fresh cosmetics being better for your skin, in the same way that fresh food is better for your body. When you use our cosmetics as soon as they are made, you get the benefit of the fruits vitamins and enzymes at their most potent and effective, so you get better results.

■ **It says on the website, "Products may be different shapes in different countries because individuals mould them in their own style. They may be different colours; the oranges available in Italy are different from the ones used in Japan; Australia uses different grapes from the UK. Nevertheless,**

you will always recognise Lush by the quality of the ingredients, the freshness and the unmistakable scent of hundreds of essential oils.”

- Because Lush products are handmade, when you expand you employ more people, not machines. How do you stay true to your original aims of keeping ‘the feel’ small, yet growing as a business?

Rowena: It doesn't feel small to us, we love people and because we would much rather be in our kitchens surrounded by people than by machines this comes easily to us, we just move into bigger kitchens!

- Products are imported to SA with the fresh cleanser and facemask range being made locally. Why is this?

Nic: With anywhere between 350 to 450 unique products in store at any one time, we simply don't have the scale locally to set up production for the whole range. We do however believe in making the fresh cleansers and fresh face masks locally, as these products in particular require the freshest ingredients, and producing locally allows us to have these products on a chilled ice-display in store within hours of production.

- What are some of the challenges to running a global brand locally?

Nic: Well, besides the obvious currency challenges. I think in the case of Lush, there are a number of very important values and principles that are at the core of the brand, things such as the product freshness policies, the environmental and ethical policies, not to mention the global customer experience standards. In a developing country such as South Africa, it is sometimes a challenge to live up to these global standards as the local environment can be quite different to that of Europe for example.

- What advice can you give to our readers in this regard?

Nic: If you are going to run a global brand here, I think you have to truly believe in that brand, and do everything you can to make sure you do not compromise on what the brand stands for. You also need to have a strong relationship with the international team, with lots of mutual respect, so as to be able to agree on how to tell the brand's stories within the local context.

- Will you be bringing the Lush spa to SA anytime soon? Is it an in-store experience or a stand-alone? Or any other plans for Lush South Africa in the near future?

Rowena: We have no plans to open anymore spas for the next year, however please do check to see if there's one in the next city you visit as you should definitely book yourself in for a treatment if so!

Our spas are very unique in that they are English spas offering our guests a slice of English tranquillity amongst the hustle and bustle of busy cities around the world. We want our guests to feel comfortable, just like in their own home. And give you the gift of time and space. Always situated next to a Lush shop, once you enter the serenity of the Lush Spa you will be taken on a journey where all your senses merge and your subconscious is tapped into and your mind is nurtured to effect behaviour in some way.

More than simply treatments to ‘fix’ an ache or pain; all these experiences are designed to prevent the pain happening in the first place. We believe in looking after yourself, having regular treatments and creating a little time for clearing your mind.

What you can expect is more creativity and innovation, changing what people think is 'normal' about cosmetics, continuing to campaign and bring awareness to the masses.

Nic: With regards local expansion, we are super excited to be opening up two new stores before Christmas, the first being in the Cresta Shopping Centre in Johannesburg in October, and then our first store in Pretoria at Menlyn Park at the end of November. These two new stores will take the brand to a total of eight stores in South Africa. There are also plans for further stores in 2017.

- Just for fun, what is your favourite Lush product and why (or some of your favourites if, like me, you can't only choose one)?

Rowena: The products that send me into a panic if I run out are, *Ultrablend*, my skin would never forgive me, *Gorgeous* moisturiser, same. I love our facial scrubs, *Dark Angels* or *Angels on Bare Skin*, as we use only natural gentle scrubby bits like charcoal or ground almonds, not nasty micro plastics. Our soap, especially *Sandstone* for smooth body skin and *Karma* soap to leave skin scented, I love knowing there is no animal fat in them or palm oil which cannot be always guaranteed with other soaps. I have bleached hair so our hair treatments are essential to

keep it in good condition and *Dream Cream* or *Ro's Argan Body Conditioner* for all over body moisture. Then there's *Magical Moringa Moisturiser* to stop my face getting all shiny in the hot weather and my make-up stay on longer and I can't be without *Glamorous* lip colour, in fact I just can't do without Lush!

■ And lastly, why South Africa?

Rowena: South Africa was the country I was most excited to open Lush in, we waited a long time till economically the time was right and the perfect partners were found. It is a place of inspiration for me. I am still trying to invent a product that is as good as a lime milkshake from Mugg & Bean!

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com

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