

WUKA, empowering women and improving health with sustainable period proof underwear

As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Ruby Raut, founder and CEO of WUKA about period proof underwear, empowering women and challenging the status quo.

Temps de lecture : minute

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What was the catalyst for launching WUKA?

It all started after my graduation from Open University in Environmental Science. I was very passionate about the subject and was determined to get a job in that field. Whilst in the process I joined a few charities tackling menstrual education and women empowerment.

Whilst coordinating an "environmenstrual" project at a high school in St Albans, I discovered many of the girls were not aware of reusable menstrual products. All they knew was what family and friends used and in the UK, at that time, this consisted largely of shiny, plastic pads and tampons purchased from the supermarket.

My experience growing up in Nepal was very different. My mother gave me and my sisters her sari rags to use as menstrual products. These were reusable and super "sustainable", however, they were also uncomfortable and didn't always do the job. I would miss school like millions of other girls during my period which further perpetuated the shame and

embarrassment surrounding periods.

I told my story to school girls and while doing so, I had a eureka moment... Why not create pants that absorb flow AND are super comfortable? And why not create a brand that gives a positive message about periods? Hence WUKA (Wake Up Kick Ass) wear was born.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

WUKA stands for Wake Up Kick Ass. Speaking up and challenging the status quo is what we do. We've never been discreet when it comes to women's health. We speak the bloody truth and, in doing so, have helped millions of women and girls manage various stages of life. We are a female-led company that designs and sells absorbent apparel for people from their first period to the last period and beyond. Our products can be purchased online and in retail stores such as Morrisons, Superdrug and Urban Outfitters.

We also work with education authorities, national and local sports clubs, and workplaces to help them become period positive. We are changemakers, fighting laws and championing gender equality- take our current government petition to remove the VAT on period pants for example. To date we have gained 30K signatures and the support of celebrities and government figures who are backing our campaign to make period underwear- the most eco-friendly and inclusive period products- accessible to all.

Community has been the DNA of WUKA since the beginning of the brand. Every product we sell gives back and we are proud to have supported many charities since our inception- including Endometriosis UK, Choose

Love, The Kujuwa Initiative & The Wave Project to name a few.

As a proud B Corp and winner of *the Queen's Award For Sustainable Development in Business*, we are committed to creating planet-friendly products that don't cost the earth - from product to packaging to operations.

How do we reach customers?

Word of Mouth & Referrals: At WUKA we absolutely value the community we have created. Satisfied customers to share their positive experiences with friends and family generates valuable word-of-mouth referrals. When women trust and love our product, they become enthusiastic advocates, expanding our reach organically.

Head-Turning Media Activations: Leveraging media platforms such as TV and OOH. We won the *Sky Zero Footprint Fund* last year which gave us the opportunity to create our first ever TV ad and to showcase it on Sky TV. Never one to shy away from making a point, we did it on our inimitable taboo-busting style showing the reality of periods for women- including blood clots!- which resulted in over 300+ ASA complaints but we stood firm in our belief that periods needed to be depicted accurately and the ad continues to air today. More recently, the Desi Period Stories campaign has been running in Westfield Malls in London during South Asian Heritage Month featuring a roster of influential South Asian talent and celebrating South Asian Culture, Dress and unique period stories. We believe by sharing stories and insights, we foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity while spreading awareness about our product's benefits.

Meaning Social Media Collaborations: From the start, WUKA has led the charge on influencer marketing with purpose. Fostering authentic relationships with influential individuals such as *Nadiya Hussain* and *Venetia La Manna* - renowned in their fields- has enabled us to have

credibility and expand our reach to build a strong platform on which to promote our product.

Educational Content: Period Pants may be the best thing ever but the reality is the world doesn't know it yet. 95% of consumers still purchase period products from the grocery store aisles and continue to use single use products. Our job therefore is not to sell but to educate - providing helpful content that explains the benefits of period pants, environmental impact, and cost savings in an easy to understand way. This approach empowers them to make informed decisions, emphasizing the value of our brand first, product second. We're a brand that is here for you throughout every stage of your life- from first periods to the last (and beyond!) so we aim to deliver content we like to our weekly Kick Ass chat, bringing influential experts to help us navigate women's health.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

WUKA is the UK's leading period wear brand and since launch we have had many 'firsts':

- The first period underwear designed to completely replace disposables, globally - 2017
- The first period pants in a major UK supermarket - 2020
- The first to feature a real (blemishes included) woman on the packaging in the 'feminine hygiene' aisle of major UK supermarket - 2020
- The first period pants brand to scientifically prove the carbon footprint reduction achieved from switching from disposable pads and tampons - 2021
- The first menstrual product to feature diverse women on their retail packaging - 2020
- The world's first multi-size period underwear reducing the 8 sizes

down to 2 styles, improving manufacturing, storage and distribution efficiency as well as reducing 'wrong size' returns and improving customer satisfaction - 2022

- The first period product to make reusable period pads out of the offcuts of period pants - 2022
- The first period pants to win the Queens Award - 2022
- B Corp certified with incredible score of 111.4 - 2023

Tell us about the working culture at WUKA

I am a firm believer of open door policy and creating a collaborative environment for all team members. We're a small team but one in which all voices are heard and valued. Collaboration is at our core, where diverse perspectives come together to drive innovation and it's thanks to this approach that some of our best-selling product ideas have come to fruition.

We champion freedom of expression, empowering every team member to share ideas and contribute to our collective success. Our latest award-winning campaign "Desi Period Stories" is one example of this- a member of my team asked if she could pitch this idea and it ended up being the recipient of a £100K advertising fund! Additionally, we maintain a steadfast focus on goals, aligning efforts to achieve our mission effectively. This culture promotes a dynamic, inclusive, and driven work environment that empowers individuals and fuels our collective progress.

How are you funded?

We are a bootstrapped business, so we don't have any external funding. Currently customers are our investors who in buying our products help keep us afloat and all our incredible team members whose hard work fuels our growth and makes WUKA stronger every day.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Launching WUKA has not been without its challenges. Firstly, altering ingrained habits was daunting; convincing women to shift from traditional products to period pants required extensive education and outreach. Secondly, introducing innovative products was met with scepticism, necessitating rigorous testing and transparent communication about their effectiveness. Most significantly, breaking taboos surrounding menstruation is never easy; we have employed awareness campaigns, fostering open dialogues, and partnering with influencers to destigmatize the topic. Overcoming these hurdles has required persistence, empathy, and a commitment to challenging societal norms. Today, we're making strides, slowly but surely transforming how menstruation is perceived and providing women with eco-friendly and comfortable alternatives.

Not forgetting 200,000 tonnes of pads, tampons and pantyliners end up in landfill. Since starting WUKA, people who have switched to WUKA have saved over 2 billions of these disposables going to landfill.

How does WUKA answer an unmet need?

WUKA period pants meet a crucial unmet need for women by offering choice, accessibility, and affordability. With savings exceeding 40% in just two years, WUKA provides economic relief at a time when people need it most. Furthermore, it tackles period poverty sustainably, empowering women of all backgrounds in particular those who cannot or do not wish to use insertable products. By promoting reusable, eco-friendly solutions, WUKA installs sustainable habits in the next generation. Additionally, WUKA's inclusive size range fosters a culture of inclusivity, ensuring every woman can access comfortable and environmentally friendly period

products, making menstruation more equitable for all.

What's in store for the future?

- A world where landfill waste reduces from 200,000 tonnes to 500 tonnes.
- A supermarket where all period product aisle is 90% reusable.
- A world where single-use disposable products are a thing of the past.
- A world where period poverty doesn't exist and no girls have to make a choice not to go school because they don't have period products.
- A world where WUKA are accessible and affordable for everyone to choose.
- A world where women can make more informed choices about their health.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

I strongly believe in "The Power of Now"; its help shaped the way I think and operate every day. So many entrepreneurs miss opportunities by putting things off until tomorrow.

For starting any business, Be Lean: Build, Test, Learn

Network, make connections. This is so important because there are so many people who are willing to help and give advice to you at no cost but you have to get out there to find them and ask!

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living

by at the moment?

Drink a glass of water every morning before tea or coffee.

If the weather's good I walk my two dogs - Mochi and Pythagoras - to work in the morning and back. We have to walk through miles of corn fields to get to the office and in the summer months, it's an incredible sight. Wash your face and use vitamin serum every evening, I am in love with Maui Rituals Vitamin Serum at the moment (another female founded business).

Before I started WUKA, I used to run supper clubs in my local area and was even offered a chance to set up my own restaurant. I love cooking, so evenings usually consist of a home-made meal. I love making traditional Nepali food -it's a reminder of home.

Ruby Raut is the founder and CEO of WUKA.

Article écrit par Ruby Raut