

SURI or the Elegant Revolution: An interview with Mark Rushmore and Gyve Safavi

Paul Ferretti spoke to Mark Rushmore and Gyve Safavi about the recent SURI event, revolutionising dental hygiene and building a better future.

Temps de lecture : minute

1 December 2023

On the 2nd of October 2023, Maddyness UK was invited to the SURI breakfast event.

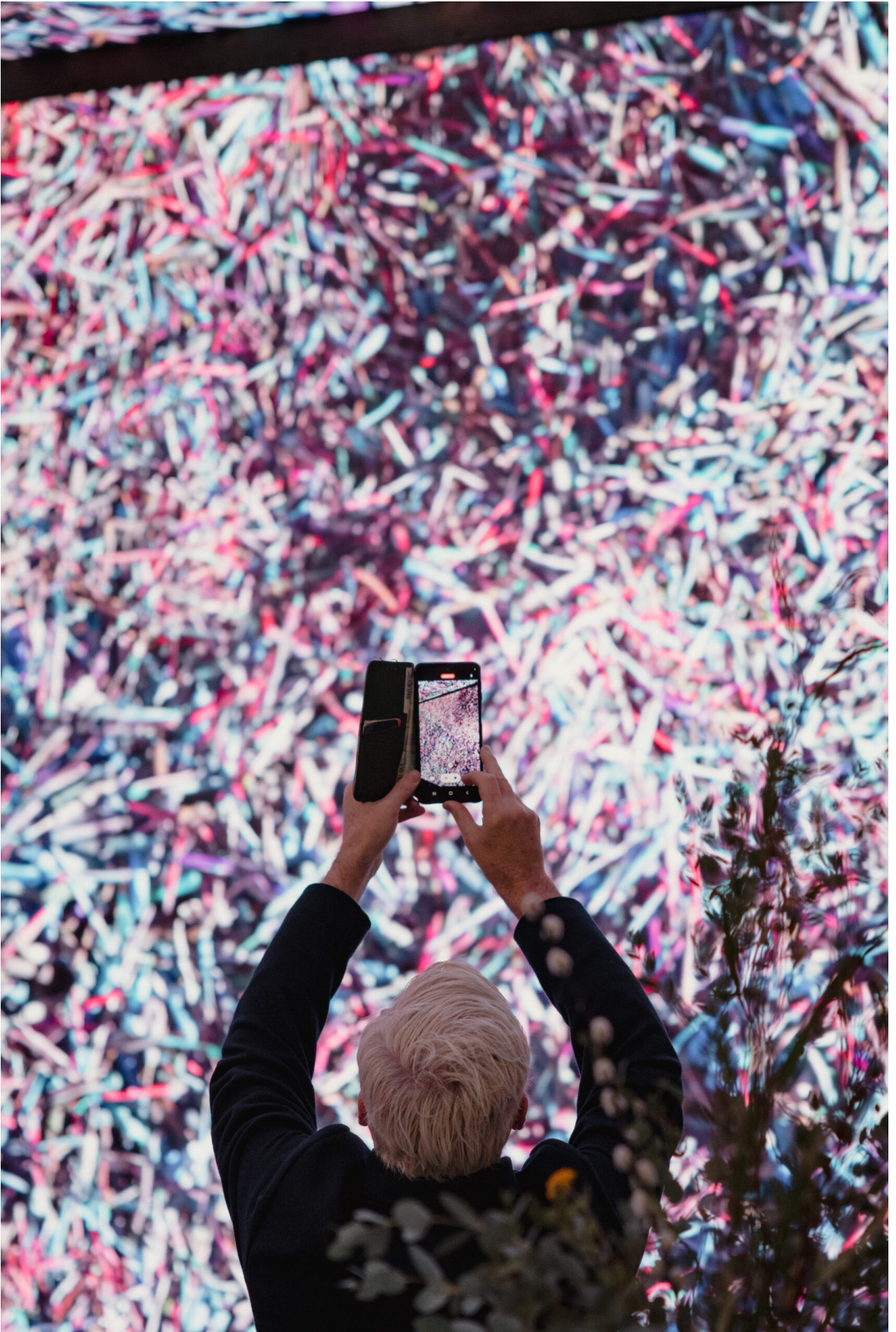
Hosted in the heart of London, in the elegant and high-tech Outernet venue, the SURI team has done a fantastic job in providing their guests with insightful information and a great time.

SURI won the 'Impact Award' from Outernet and FuturePlus - worth £50,000 of screentime at Outernet, which enabled them to hold the event there. Winning this prize also enabled SURI to launch in Boots and drive awareness amongst consumers.

Besides the good organisation and the quality of the event, a shocking and informative short animated film, "*An Ocean of Toothbrushes*", was projected all around the baffled guests, highlighting the terrible impact toothbrushes have on our planet.

Mark, Gyve, and the whole SURI team's passion and trust in their product seduced the crowd. Beyond the great speeches, their product, the SURI toothbrush, is their most convincing argument. Meet SURI, cleaning your

mouth and the planet.



Are you happy about the latest SURI event?

Mark: We really are.

It was so nice, because there was such a variety of people there. A lot of the *Boots* team were there, including someone who's from their global trends team, who's really looking at what's the future for shoppers, what's the future for brands? We are glad that Boots see SURI as part of that.

We also had lots of great conversations with journalists, but also members of the public.

Gyve: There were also quite a few people who came to drop off their broken toothbrushes. There were so many during the first hour, we didn't believe it!

It feels surreal to meet people you've never met before, who tell you "I am following SURI on socials", "I've signed up to the emails", "I love what you guys are doing". To meet those people in person - because when you run an e-commerce company, sometimes you see the reviews or you see the orders coming through -, to actually physically meet someone who shares our mission is pretty special.

Could you tell our readers more about this event?

Mark: We wanted to really bring to life the scale of the issue surrounding toothbrushes, which is that over 4 billion every year get thrown away and end up in landfills and oceans, and that every brush you've ever owned probably still exists.

Because it's hard to think and to visualise the scale, the size, and the amount of waste, we made this short film recreating this ocean of

toothbrushes. We wanted to bring to life that level of waste that's created by this industry and to show that there can be an alternative.

SURI toothbrushes are designed to be much more sustainable than any other electric brush out there, by using things like plant based materials for the heads, making them thinner so we use less materials, offering recycling long lasting batteries which are repairable, aluminium handles, plastic free packaging. We want to show that we don't have to accept things as they are but that we can actually try and make them better.

Gyve: To inform people is the most important thing for them to share and drive awareness. It has to look nice obviously, it's not an advertising billboard.

Every day consumers vote with their wallets. The brands you support and what you buy are a choice you make

You can get other brands to do things differently by not buying them. We also wanted to raise awareness to get people to think differently, because ultimately it's a global problem that everybody needs to contribute towards.

How do SURI toothbrushes compare to other electric brushes?

Mark: We didn't want to make any compromise because, first and foremost, you want a brush that's going to give you a great clean. That's why we designed our brush with a former scientific adviser to the *British Dental Association, Professor Damien Warmsley*.

We also have clinical studies which show that our brush is over five times more effective than a manual brush. We didn't want people to think that because we made a product which was more sustainable, there should be

any compromise on performance. And so the toothbrush does give a world class clean, but it doesn't cost the planet.

From a design perspective, just because something's sustainable doesn't mean it shouldn't be desirable or it shouldn't be enjoyable to use. I think that by giving consumers something which performs really well, which looks great and is sustainable, you don't have to compromise for the sake of sustainability.

Gyve: Most dentists today will say "Use an electric toothbrush, they're better for cleaning your teeth". As a consumer, we felt that compromise first-hand, where we didn't want electric toothbrush.

We tried bamboo brushes, but we didn't get a good clean. And so we thought, this doesn't make sense. If we want to have the best oral hygiene, we have to use something that is pollutive and not good for the planet.

Mark mentioned design, performance and sustainability; that is our ethos. We want to innovate on all fronts, but ultimately, we want to bring joy to the products that people are using.

If you look at our reviews, people don't say, "It's a good product, it cleans my teeth". They say, "I love brushing my teeth", which is the craziest thing in the world.

It is strange, right? Because it's always been known as a chore, and not a moment of reflection or meditation. If you look at the other products, the enjoyment and the design are not factors that are taken into consideration. So we felt like that was something missing. Great products need to have more than just performance in them.

How do you explain SURI's quick growth?

Mark: I always say this, and it's sometimes a bit silly, but a lot of people brush their teeth.

It is an enormous market which hasn't had much meaningful innovation. Every year there's a new Bluetooth app that comes out with your toothbrush. But we found out that people just don't use them, and it means that often these brushes have poor battery life.

So when we did our innovation, we we just listened to what people said.

What do you want? "We want a long battery life."

What do you hate? "I hate that sludge at the bottom of toothbrush holders".

So we created the Mirror Mount.

I can hear my partner talk to me when I'm brushing my teeth. So we we tested our sound as supposed to be below a certain level so that it wasn't so loud that you couldn't hear what's happening around you. Even your thoughts. Also to this day, one of my favourite ones, because I've never done this myself. This was 100% Eve, but this guy over here brushes his teeth in the shower, so we made sure it was IPX seven rated.

Gyve: We tested the sound decibels to be below a certain level, so that it wasn't so loud that you couldn't hear what's happening around you. Even your thoughts. I can hear my partner talk to me when I'm brushing my teeth!

Mark: Also Gyve brushes his teeth in the shower, so we made sure it was IPX 7 rated. I think brushing your teeth and showering at the same time really is the height of efficiency.



In 3500 to 3000 BC, the Egyptians and Babylonians made toothbrushes by flaying the ends of twigs. Using castor beans to make the bristles and cornstarch for the head, it seems as if the idea for SURI stems in the very origins of dental hygiene. Where does this desire to combine tradition and technology come from?

Gyve: Indeed, the Miswak brush is the ancient twig that you would bite on and then became a toothbrush.

When we started, we really didn't want to have petroleum based materials in our heads. We talked to so many people about this issue, and they all said that it was not possible, that whatever we'd make it out of, it would break in people's mouths and not work.

We therefore started looking at other materials. The alternative that was shared was an ancient brush that was using boar hair, which people used to use when they graduated from Miswak. But we found out that boar hairs were way too stiff for your gums, and would erode them.

Then we found that with castor oil, when blended into a nylon-like property, you can get a very similar bristle dynamic and not be dependent on oil, which was a go for us. Today, mainstream recycling takes oil based plastics, but it's very specific in what it takes. Most of it is not recyclable, because it's multiple materials welded together. But also it doesn't handle the nylon. It doesn't handle other components.

And so we said we're going to use new materials, even though they're not recycled at home. And we're going to provide people with pre-paid

recycling methods because whatever step we can get them to recycle and just make it painless where they can collect them and drop them off down the street, we will do that. We're innovating in that space.

Mark: Indeed, we wanted to combine more natural materials.

But I must say, it's down to Gyve, because we were told no so many times. I think on the 20th time we were told no, I said maybe it's not possible. And he replied, "No Mark, we're going to make it possible." And so I must say, like it's really down to Gyve's stubbornness and determination, I think, to use those materials.

Gyve: Mark says that sometimes, and he doesn't realise that he was the motivating force behind it because I was just saying "We're going to do it.", But if he answered, "No, I'm quitting", then I would probably never have made that step.

It was only because Mark was like, "All right, well, let's try it. If you really feel so confident."

I had this idea it could be possible because I'd seen other compounds. And so I knew that if we tried, we could eventually make it happen. Most of the factories told us no because they had never worked with the compound, so they were assuming it was impossible.

Mark: I think it's possible to use more sustainable practices. And listen, we're far from perfect. We don't claim to say that our product is going to save the world on its own. It's not going to reverse climate change in itself. However, we're constantly striving to make it as sustainable as possible and to make improvements where we can.

SURI stands for Sustainable Rituals. It's our mission to see if things can be done in a better way and how we can keep improving our product.

On the innovation side, we mentioned that electric brushes perform far better than manual ones. And so by combining some of the features that we have, along with the electric sonic technology, we're able to give both a great clean with a lesser impact on the planet versus our competitors.

How does your carbon footprint compare with other competitors?

Gyve: We offset our carbon footprint, we are doing things differently and you can see what our emissions are. But the major competitors in the industry don't share that information. And obviously if they did, we could say, "Wow, they do something better than us here. How can we improve ourselves?", but they don't.

In an ideal world, this information would be public for every company. Ideally, governments would require companies to share this information in their reports on every front. But right now, it isn't. If that was possible, that would be the best case for us to improve it, because as Mark said, we're not perfect, but because we value sustainability as a core innovation pillar - not just as something that comes after we design the product, and we're going to make the packaging in paper instead of plastic -, our innovation is not just something slightly new and different, but it also is more sustainable, as a criteria.

We're also working on new products now, new heads, that will be more sustainable, in ways that have never been done before.

Here's an example: water powered batteries, which exist for big labs, are now being made in smaller versions. We would consider using that. Whereas maybe other companies would say, forget about that. That's a challenge because it makes it ten times harder to do anything.

Mark: Honestly, we would be super delighted if other people also decided

to reduce their products, use less plastic and so on.

Given that toothbrushes, especially electric ones, are still relatively new, do you think that this novelty leaves much margin for progress, and that the toothbrushes mass-produced today are just a work in progress, and not the result of an accomplished product?

Gyve: It's interesting because if you look at the toothbrush from 1939, from a shape point of view and size, it looks quite similar to one of the new ones today. Maybe the polymer is slightly different, the bristle pattern is slightly different, but that's it.

We really wanted to make a slim high powered brush and we were like, why is nobody changing the shape to be slimmer? Evolution often means smaller and better, whether it's for computers, laptops, etc. But this device has remained big and bulky. So we were really wondering why they hadn't evolved. We 100% believe in innovation and evolution.

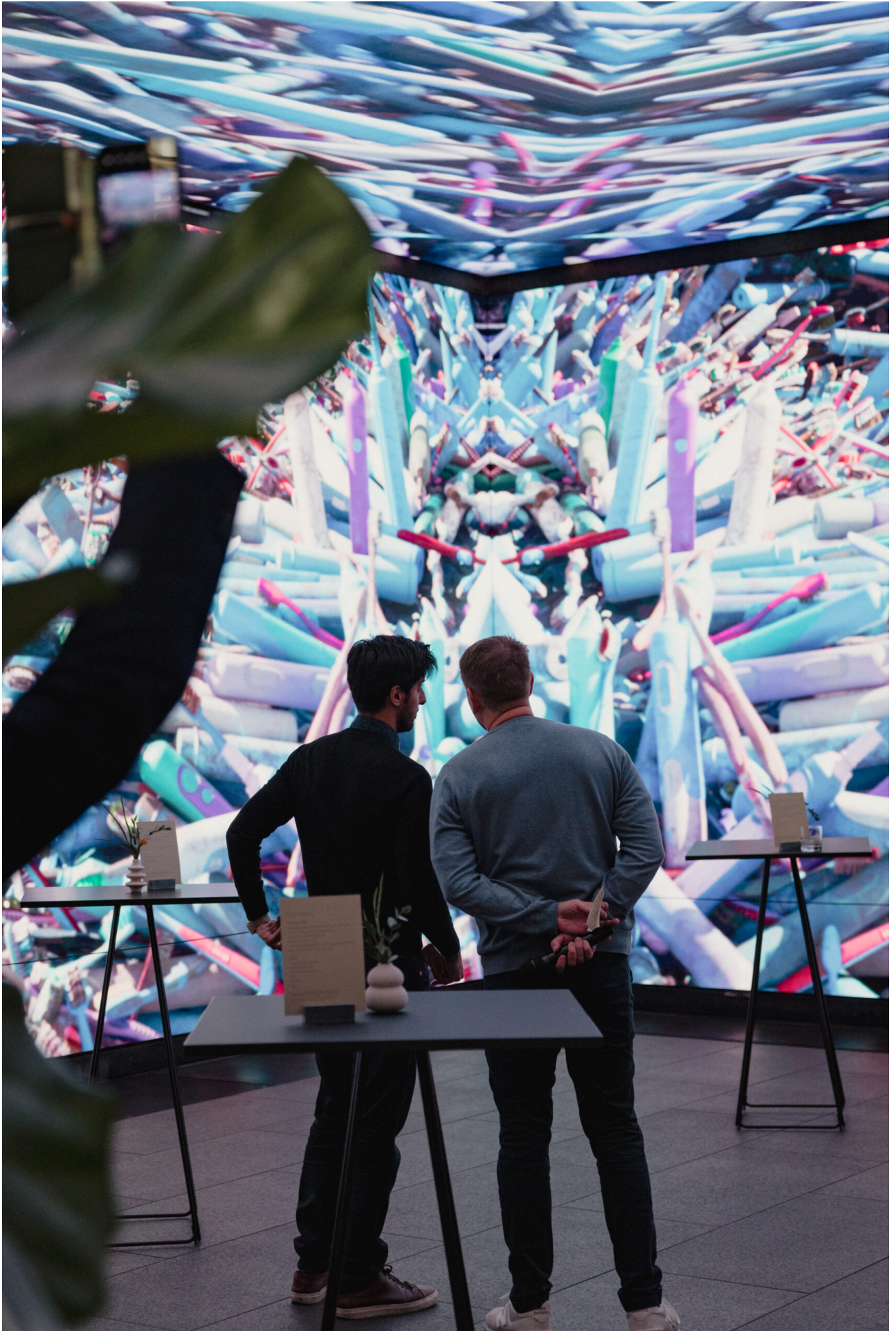
Because we don't have an app doesn't mean we don't believe in technology. I think it's just technology for tech's sake. If we started to think it would add value to the product, only then would we look into it. But if it's an app that smiles at me and says, thanks for brushing 2 minutes, I don't really need an app to tell me that or to give me loyalty points for brushing my teeth every day, I'm going to do it anyway. It just feels gamified unnecessarily.

My point is that toothbrushes should continue to evolve. We will continue to evolve. Innovation will keep happening.

We did talk about culture a lot, but values underpin culture also. And for us design is a value, along with performance. Some companies have not been valuing design as much. Design has always been secondary and if you don't value design, you don't hire good designers, you don't staff in that area, you don't actually think it's important for your product to look different than the last generation and evolve in shape.

Mark: I know we keep talking about competitors, but there's a lot of great companies who've done other things. We're just trying to fill a gap and do things a little bit better.

I guess there's lots of other examples of different companies across different sectors who are sort of doing a similar thing at the moment, whether that's companies like *WILD deodorant* and so on. I truly think there's a new wave of companies with more sustainable purposes.



In order to bolster toothbrushes' evolution, would you ever collaborate with another brand?

Mark: It's so early on in our mission, we just started shipping last May. It's incredible to think how far we've already come. At the moment it's hard to see in the short term. But as we look into the future, it's always important to keep our options open and see what's possible.

SURI is B Corp Certified. What does this mean for you?

Mark: We wanted to be B Corp certified before we even made the product, but we were not B Corp certified until we were selling. We wrote a list of things that we really wanted to achieve with that company, and at the top of that list was to become eco certified.

Sometimes people will ask "What does it mean to be B Corp certified?". What's missed is actually the process of doing the B Corp certification itself and what value that brings.

We knew that we wanted to be the most sustainable electric brush available. Therefore we already had some ideas as to how we would do that from the design of the product. But going through the whole process was really educational in terms of what we needed to consider, whether it was our supply chain, our policies, and so on. It actually really helped guide and shape a lot of our internal policies, a lot of our procedures, and helped us really see areas where we could improve. It's helped guide us to become a better business from an environmental and social responsibility perspective.

88 is our official score. However, we actually have a much, much higher

score because we've made some significant improvements and and got some certification. So we will be in the triple digits next time.

Can you tell us more about your partnership with ClimatePartner?

Mark: *ClimatePartner* have this great tool which enables us to measure literally to a fraction of a gram the different types of materials that go into our brush, whether it's the aluminium, the corn starch, the castor oil. It helps us keep track of where we source it from, what sort of heat energy consumption does our factory use, what sort of method of transportation there is, what happens at the end of life, etc.

We get to assess where everything sits and where our biggest emissions are. That enables us to understand what our impact is to begin with. The second step is to make reductions. To understand how we can improve it from a material perspective and from a logistics perspective. Also to know what are our opportunity areas, which is just really useful to understand.

I think the first step to making an improvement is to see where you are. It's a bit like having a map, right? If you have a map, but you don't know where you're starting, it is pretty hard to use it. It gave us an idea of where we were at and where we needed to get to, and then we started plotting the path.

We also invest in carbon offsets through ClimatePartner. I want to be super clear: carbon offsets is not a solution to climate change. We know that it's far from perfect. However, we invest in the removal of plastics from the ocean and we invest in water wells in Sierra Leone.

You mention on your website that you continually push the boundaries of what is possible. What's next?

Mark: We believe that we have some genuinely world changing innovation. Some things globally that have never been done before, and I am so excited. It's on the way. It's on the cusp of what's possible and what's impossible. Or at least that's my perspective. If it works, it's different leagues of what we've done so far. And so fingers crossed it does.

Mark Rushmore and Gyve Safavi are the founders of *SURI*

Article by Paul Ferretti