



F R E U I D S

PLAN B | BUSINESS UNUSUAL PRESENTS

# RESCUE & REVALUE



# ELVIS & KRESSE



**KRESSE WESLING MBE**

Co-Founder of Elvis & Kresse

## AFTER A DISTINGUISHED CAREER FIGHTING FIRES, ALL FIRE-HOSES EVENTUALLY GET RETIRED.

Rather than going to landfill, myself and my partner proposed to rescue, revalue and reuse the material, transforming it into luxury bags, wallets and belts. We set up Elvis & Kresse in 2005 and, since then, more than 200 tonnes of material have been reclaimed, with no London fire-hoses going to landfill.

Our business is rare because we don't start with design, we start with an industrial waste problem. When we started, some parts of the industry thought that was at the fringe of what was possible. There was a lot of joking and wry comments from doubters – I'm sure that some thought we might be around for a year and then fall apart! Ultimately, it was our customers that kept us going.

There was always support for our products from people who thought it was intriguing enough as a concept, on top of the quality. When you couple that with our profit pledge – 50% goes back to the Fire Fighters Charity – it meant that we had a community of supporters behind the brand.

They understood what we did and wanted to tell the brand story on our behalf from day one. It's impossible to ignore the value of that because it's not just the 66,000 or so fire personnel supporting us, but also the enormous amount of people they touch directly or indirectly. We never thought of that as marketing – it was simply the truth.

The future that I want is where 'marketing' is the transparent truth, where companies compete to actually be the most wonderful, the most authentic. They don't compete on the breadth of their communication or the amount of celebrities or ads they have – they just have to actually be the best, to be the most giving. I want a world where the truth supersedes everything else.



When materials are simply destined for landfill or the incinerator, we lose their quality, narrative, and the opportunity to do something great. After fire-hoses, we began working with many other materials: parachute silks, printing blankets, coffee sacks, auction banners and leather. We started looking at the latter after someone who made beautiful saddles sent us a bag of all the leather waste he generated in a year. We immediately thought, 'if this operation is making that much, what is the wider industry producing?'.

A 2010 UN report estimated that leather off-cut waste was produced globally to the tune of 800,000 tonnes – that's an enormous amount going to waste, particularly when it's brand new material that has never been used. We also knew that the figure was an underestimate because a lot of companies under report the amount of waste they produce.

So, we designed a system which transforms these fragments into components which are then hand

woven into a new kind of hide, which is unrestricted by size or shape. We now have an open workshop and are half way through a 5-year partnership with the Burberry Foundation to transform their leather off-cuts into new luxury items.

We want to share our solution with anyone who produces leather – or any self-edging textile – around the world. Using the circular economy as a philosophy, we're not just trying to make sustainable products, but create systems for change.

For us, profit is simply the baseline for a business, it's WD-40, greasing the wheels. Money isn't the most important thing to consider and it certainly isn't something that you should be celebrating.

When you have the privilege of designing a brand-new vision from scratch, your plan has to be beneficial for people and for the environment, rather than yet another net extraction or exploitation.





## BRIGHT IDEA

*Profit is simply the baseline for a business, it's WD-40, greasing the wheels.*

People's automatic assumption around success is that it is related to growth and profit. We have to learn to attribute success to whether workers are happy, paid well, and whether that the enterprise has a net regenerative effect on the environment. Right now, the definition of success is catastrophic for the planet, and at the same time, entrenching inequality. When I talk to young entrepreneurs and they ask: 'what's your best advice for starting a business', I reply, 'if you are not addressing some of the SDGs with your business design, then what's the point?'. When you have the chance to do something spectacular, why wouldn't you choose creativity, empathy and humanity?

We've always been a certified social enterprise and very much a part of the wider movement, but we knew immediately that we would apply to become a B Corp. We wanted to participate in a movement of people all committed to changing the fundamental tenets of capitalism and putting planet and people on at least the same level as shareholders. We

also understood how important it is to be part of a growing, celebratory movement, one that's not shy to be working in this way and tackling the challenges that come with it.

I've met B Corp leaders everywhere from Canada to China and you always have something in common. It is truly wonderful to be a part of a community who work like us and see the world the way that we do: what the world could potentially be. Plus, the bigger the movement becomes, the more influence we're going to be able to have on government and company policies globally.

We could solve a lot of problems, right now in the UK, if the Companies Act gave businesses 10 years to end profit maximisation if it is at the expense of people or planet. Everyone needs to be encouraged to unleash their creativity in meeting our environmental and economic challenges – we need to be playing by the same rules.

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The current pandemic has exposed that need for change with stunning clarity. Business simply cannot go back to usual. Our luxury fashion industry, to give just one example, is going to be adversely affected because it was never structured for resilience. It was built to make profit, and supply chains will be the ones to suffer. Coronavirus, however, is a mere hiccup compared to climate change.

If we're going to survive that, we have to profoundly change people's relationship with the natural environment and how they consume. We have to see the economy as a subsidiary of the environment. We need to understand that the natural world is something we're very much a part of and have to participate in, rather than something we dominate, own and control.

Neither Coronavirus nor climate change has respect for international boundaries, and both crises are going to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable people in society.

## FACT BOX

**NAME** Elvis & Kresse

**BUSINESS** Luxury lifestyle accessories made from rescued raw materials

**MISSION** The future of luxury is sustainable, ethical, reclaimed, open, generous and kind. Create stunning life-style accessories by re-engineering seemingly useless wastes and combining them with traditional craftsmanship

**FOUNDED** 2005

**FOUNDER** Elvis and Kresse Wesling

**EMPLOYEES** 25

**TURNOVER** We turnover in excess of 20 tonnes of waste each year (the elimination of waste means more to us than £££)



Our business proves you can do good in an innovative, different way, but we know we can't solve all those structural problems at once. We can only be part of a much wider conversation, as with B Corps, that seeks to correct those issues, together. At some point we have to decide who we actually are. What value do we assign people and planet?

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