

From Farm To Cup: How Tealet is Changing the World

Elyse Petersen never thought tea would change the food industry.

"It just kind of fell into my lap. Like most Americans, I didn't grow up with a tea culture. The whole Boston Tea Party thing kind of ruined that for us."

Elyse is a food scientist. Along with working at a few major food processors here in the US, she spent two years with the Peace Corps teaching processing techniques in Niger. Or, trying to.

While she thought she was teaching, Elyse ended up learning a lot.

"I connected with origin. I connected with a true essence of what food is. These cultures had no concept of funding or marketing. They produced what they needed, and did so as ethically and economically as possible"

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After the Peace Corps, she came back to her home state, Hawaii, where she took a job at another large processor.

That's where the tea came in.

"That's how I got introduced to it. Tea really was the first product that I'd worked with on a commercial scale that I felt was safe, and healthy. Though the industry is awful, the product is just improving people's lives versus making their lives worse. That's what drew me in."

But, there was a problem. The more Elyse researched, the more she realized that the tea industry needed help. It needed Tealet.

The Origin

Tea is a big deal.

"The business of tea is very large scale. Like large-scale commodity. It's consumed around the world for a variety of reasons. It's a cultural staple in many places."

But, as Elyse discovered, big industries mean big problems.

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Something needed to change. That's when Tealet began to take shape.

Tealet sources specialty tea from growers around the world and sells it wholesale and to individuals. A simple premise, with a global reach.

Elyse personally ensures the products are ethically sourced, and aren't connected to any larger organizations known for their poor treatment of labor.

"Ultimately, we don't go into business with anybody until we've been there ourselves. It's about building trust. If they aren't willing to share with us, that's a big red flag. They should know how many people they employ and what they pay them. If they're not transparent with that basic information, they aren't the type of farm we want to be in business with."

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Tealet is revolutionizing the tea industry, and avoiding the labor abuses pervading it.

"It's about creating a connection between the producer, their communities, their soil, and their resources to the final consumer. While the customer and supplier benefit, the entire process also promotes ethical consumption. That's the main mission."

But, there are many commodities that could use this treatment. Elyse's already looking ahead.

Creating Change

The world of food is full of industries ripe for disruption. For Elyse, tea is just the start.

"The ultimate goal is to offer the level of transparency in supply chain services for all of agriculture commodities. That's my vision. We want to be the Alibaba of the food industry."

By offering small farmers the chance to grow in spite of big corporate farms, Elyse hopes to cut down on the monopolies that foster an environment for large-scale abuse.

"We want to democratize this whole system. Large corporations have more-or-less monopolized entire food industries, making it harder for small farms to find the incentive to go it alone. By offering a wholesale option, Tealet gives the farmers the security they need without the trouble that big companies cause them."

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But, she has to start somewhere. Elyse is already looking to other commodities that need ethical, responsible production and sourcing.

"Turmeric is blowing up right now. Our customers have asked for it, and partnering with us makes them look bad-ass. They can say, 'hey look, we source directly from the farm.' Nobody offers transparency like that."

The more you hear about it, Elyse's business starts to sound more like a nonprofit. And, there's a reason for that.

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Elyse's goals are no easy feats. To keep Tealet profitable and change the world all at once requires a lot of time and resources. She can't do it alone.

"Right now, it's just me. As we grow, it's gonna be impossible for me to do it by myself."

Elyse was finding it harder and harder to keep Tealet running on her own.

"The hope is to work with as many ethical suppliers as possible. We're getting there, but we'll need help. I want so many suppliers that I won't be able to do it alone."

With Veem, her job got that much easier.

Small Business, Big Plans

As Tealet continues to grow, Elyse needs more and more help to keep things running.

It isn't just about sampling tea. Elyse also manages payments, making sure that both her customers and suppliers are happy.

"PayPal added an immense amount of convenience for us. But, they don't work in a couple of our biggest countries."

At one point, between 40 and 80% of all payments made to Tealet came in the form of cryptocurrencies like bitcoin and litecoin.

But, times have changed. "It's become obsolete now. And anyway, the transaction fees got really high, and nobody wants to pay them."

So, Elyse had to find a better way to pay and get paid.

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Elyse had to resort to old-fashioned methods.

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"We used bank wires and just hoped the money was in the recipient's account when everything was said and done."

But, their record wasn't great.

"We were often left wondering, where'd it all go? In some countries, there could be three layers of middlemen chopping bits off the top of your payment."

Elyse found a better way with Veem.

"The farmers are super happy with it, and so am I. These people know what it's like to lose money. So, when I tell them that they'll receive 100% of it, they're ecstatic."

Tealet is considering developing its own cryptocurrency as another way to pay. But, as Elyse says, it won't cover everything.

"We'll still need Veem. We're actually looking to build out our shopping cart using the new API. For B2B sales, it'll make transactions faster, cheaper, and safer."

Elyse does her own bookkeeping as well, and loves Veem's easy dashboard.

"It just saves me so much time. Automatic reconciliation, easy invoicing, and it's all right there on the payment."

Tealet is making real change in an industry that's easy to forget about.

From Elyse's view, we need to open ourselves up to new people in new places.

"Start communicating. Don't be afraid to say your ideas aloud. They're just thoughts. Share them."

Tealet strives to bridge the gaps between people and places with a cup of tea.

That's the power of ideas. That's the power of small business.

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