

Q&A

Designed for re-use, Kwik Lok bag closures are available in 7 colours.

Kwik Lok: Setting a Path Forward, Together

In 1954, Floyd Paxton invented **Kwik Lok** and it quickly became a preferred method for keeping bags of Washington State apples safe and fresh. Today, Kwik Lok has six factories, employs more than 330 people and its products have been used by billions of people throughout the world. Kwik Lok has been family-owned for three generations and is now led by three sisters, Floyd's granddaughters. *Sustainable Plastics* recently sat down and spoke with the sisters about their remarkable journey to focus the company on sustainability.

What is different today?

Kimberly Paxton: Kwik Lok's mission and purpose has always been to provide our customers with the best solutions. We have always focused in some way on how we make sure we are good citizens - that we are taking care of our employees and community. But in the past few years, our vision has evolved to be even bigger than what our grandfather and father thought of doing.

Our grandfather was similar to many businessmen of his time. Make a good product, sell it, people use it and they come back. Do that on repeat over and over again. Make it better as needed.

That changed when my sisters and I inherited the business. We didn't work in the organisation. We are also the first women in leadership roles for the company. We brought something different to the organisation at a time when the world decided to shake up everything about business.

We're dealing with a world that matches our hearts as owners - which is asking how can we work and do good while doing

well? How can we take care of this planet so the next generation is able to thrive? Unfortunately, for the first time, the next generation is not doing better than we are in so many ways.

What's it like working together as sisters?

Stephanie Jackson: Truly it's my dream. I was so worried when both our parents passed that I wouldn't see my sisters as much. This opportunity has been the "glue" that keeps us together. We weren't groomed for working in our family business. However, we were each out there learning skills and having experiences with other bosses and running our own things. That helped us. When we took over, we asked each other "why do we want to work together?"

Kimberly Paxton: We are fortunate in that we are not very far apart in our thinking oftentimes. But that doesn't mean your sister won't give you a truth that you don't want to hear. We help check each other. There are always moments when you're taking that deep breath and giving yourself pause so that you can

really listen to what's coming in and not feel like it's about you, rather than your idea.

Stephanie Jackson: For example, the other day Kim emailed me and said "I appreciate your opinion. But I think this, this and this." We always know the intent, so it's just working through how you say it. Those kinds of regular family things.

Kimberly Paxton: The main thing is, we absolutely know for certain is that we love each other, that family is more important than business, and that we have the best intentions.

How do you split the responsibilities of the company?

Stephanie Jackson: We all serve on the board and lead a couple of committees. Kim has most recently become Board Chair. CSR has been a passion of mine, and I started that focus at the company and have now transitioned to EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion). Melissa has now taken the lead on CSR.

How do you keep your business and family separate?

Kimberly Paxton: Our initial evaluations from the board

found that we were being too informal in our communications, so we created an Owner's Council. Today, we meet as owners and talk about issues at designated meetings and then report to the board. That's how we keep our business time separate instead of it always being a piece of the conversation whenever we talk to each other.

How was CSR received at the company when you joined?

Stephanie Jackson: Initially, I expected everybody to grab onto it with the same kind of passion as I did. But first, we had to educate people. You need to meet people where they are. Thankfully over the last six years, we have come a long way.

What were some of the challenges you faced in refocusing Kwik Lok so much on sustainability?

Stephanie Jackson: We are a global company. Although the U.S. was a little behind, we were already hearing from around the world that there were major changes down the pipeline on plastics. We knew we needed



Melissa Steiner, Kimberly Paxton-Hagner and Stephanie Jackson: the third generation of the Paxton family to lead the business

other solutions. But we had to help people see the value of this kind of work across our whole organisation and not just one area. This kind of work is about looking at all parts of what we do: who we partner with, how we treat our employees, is our product impacting the planet? It's about aligning our values within our whole business. Which is the protection of the planet, people and our communities.

Kimberly Paxton: Once we knew our customers were also seeing the need for CSR, Kwik Lok approached it in the way it always does. Find a good, reliable solution and continue to search for new solutions that are needed for the future. We would not just greenwash. We needed to follow the science and find solutions that match customer needs. But we are committed to going beyond customer needs to address the global climate crisis that's here with us.

Importantly, we knew we needed to make strides in sustainability as a company, beyond just our products. So, we looked inward as well as outward. It is why we set a goal to achieve zero waste and reduce our carbon footprint by 20 per-

cent by 2025.

Other areas of focus included reducing water use and minimizing negative impacts on water habitats at all our facilities worldwide.

This goes beyond Kwik Lok. All manufacturers need to look at their equipment and processes. For example, our facility in Japan was able to repurpose more than 80 tons of scrap material. We decreased energy use by 12 percent in our Yakima and Indiana facilities. We also looked at improving our machines and on some, we have reduced power consumption by 50 percent.

What advice do you have for others trying to broaden minds?

Kimberly Paxton: Don't just sell to the person that runs the bakery line. Communicate with their customer who is choosing to buy their bread on the shelf versus another bread. Show how consumers are supporting products from companies that think about their impact on the world. Position your company as helping others move forward faster in their sustainability journey.

You also have to prepare your sales team and give them what they need to address different

concerns and highlight how you can help customers achieve their goals – from plastic to carbon reduction to composting. Don't push your clients in a direction, just give them the information they need to understand the impact of their choices.

How did you make the business case that this would help Kwik Lok grow to the next level?

Stephanie Jackson: We did not try to reinvent the wheel, but rather linked arms with people who already have been thinking about this. When you meet skepticism, ask "Do you want to be at the front of the pack or be at the end of the pack? Because it is happening." No one wants to be the last one to get this.

Kimberly Paxton: We all need to innovate for a new tomorrow. We gave employees permission to try and fail. As our CEO says, "Fail fast. Figure out what didn't work and let's build off that and get up and do it again."

Were there any major missteps?

Kimberly Paxton: No major misstep comes to mind, but I think it would have been a misstep if we held onto the idea the Eco-Lok, or any solution, was

the end-all-be-all.


We knew that Eco-Lok was going to be an important solution and a great step forward for the company and the industry. It is made with renewable plant-based resin and uses up to 20 percent less petroleum-based materials when produced. It's an important step forward.

But we also knew that every solution is going to have a life cycle. Businesses always have to be creating and looking for the next solution and we need to be making everything we do better over time.

There was a point in time where we thought Eco-Lok was going to be the magic bullet for everybody. But the fact of the matter is that closures need to accomplish a lot of different tasks under a lot of different environments with a lot of different customer requirements.

That is why we introduced Fibre-Lok in European markets this year, a home and commercially compostable cardboard solution for bag closures for those that have plastic elimination as their top priority.

And beyond that, there's also the environmental side of it. How are we going to solve the

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 problem of trash as well as the impact of not only the things we're producing but also the production process?

What were the most significant challenges?

Kimberly Paxton: Initially it was the cost. A sustainable Lok was more expensive and nobody wanted to pay for it. Over the past few years, the tide has turned on that and people will pay more for a product that does less harm to the environment. They will also force their countries to change the rules to make it mandatory if need be.

What has intrigued suppliers, partners, customers the most about your sustainability journey?

Stephanie Jackson: I think in our industry, we have been at the forefront.

The new 910A Automatic Bag Closing Machine developed by Kwik Lok.

It doesn't mean we know all the answers but we're learning, we're talking, we're growing, and we're trying to find new solutions.

Kimberly Paxton: I remember being at IBIE two years ago. Before the show, we approached a couple of plastic bag companies. And we said to them, "We want to partner up with you and show off your sustainable bag alongside our sustainable Eco-Lok at this next show." We had several people pass on it. A few weeks later they're walking around the trade show there in Las Vegas and they see somebody else's name on that sustainable bag next to our sustainable closure and they realized, whoa, we don't want to be at the back of the pack.

We invite partnerships. If opportunities aren't a match today, in a few months we're still there with open arms. Together we all need to find solutions for the future. And we're ready to step in with anybody else who wants to take that journey with us.

What global challenges do you see?

There's a lot of solutions that are being called for globally that aren't necessarily the best solution for the big problems that we have. I think that over time, we're going to come together as a world and really focus in on what is going to move the needle on the big problems. We need to define and agree on what our goals for the health of this planet are and what we can do to best meet those goals.

What's next?

Kimberly Paxton: We want to make sure that the fourth generation in this family business has a lot of opportunity available to them as human beings as well as business owners. We need to continue to build partnerships, because it's really about doing this together. That is why we joined the U.S. Plastics Pact last year. As we prepare the next generation to step in and do their best in this journey, we want them to experience the joy of collaborating with like-minded people and companies. It's a lot more fun when you do it that way.

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