

Transcript of the episode On The Way featuring Anne-Claire Lapie

BNP Paribas Personal Finance invites you to discover On the Way, the podcast that explores the paths to responsible consumption. Entrepreneurs, people from the world of business and researchers: On the Way gives a voice to those who, day after day, are helping to develop more sustainable consumption. Welcome, and I hope you enjoy listening!

Hi, I'm Anne-Claire Lapie, founder of Yuna, a company that recycles hotel linen. First, I'll tell you a bit about my background: I was born in Champagne, among the vineyards and fields, and my parents were farmers and winegrowers. I therefore have a natural affinity with the food sector and food in general.

I didn't go to engineering school, but I did go to business school. I worked in consultancy for many years, mainly on issues around food, innovation and new market development. And there was a time when I really enjoyed the strategic thinking required by consulting. But I wanted to get more involved with the operational side of my profession.

So, I joined Picard as head of new business development for the Group. While working there, I was given a blank slate: I identified and analysed development opportunities, I conducted trials and then I launched these operations. I was passionate about this role because I had lots of things to do all the time.

I met lots of different people and I was involved in everything. But, after six years, I started wondering whether my job and what I was doing really had meaning. I don't think I had a sudden environmental awakening, like some people. For me, it was more about a combination of factors.

At that time, I'd just had children, so I definitely think that played a role. I also started reading up on climate change and it really started to worry me, whereas before, I was aware of all that, but to a much lesser extent. Around that time, I also went to a "2 Tonnes" workshop, which I really enjoyed.

Some of you may have already heard about the 2 Tonnes workshops. The aim is to reduce our CO₂ emissions and greenhouse gas emissions in general, by two tonnes by 2050, in line with the Paris Agreement, and to limit global warming to two degrees between now and 2100. So, when viewed like that, it seems complicated, but I think we can do it.

And the impact of the food sector is what struck me the most. I saw what a huge impact it was having on global warming and that made me realise a lot of other things too. My diet was already fairly healthy, but I went a step further and started eating only seasonal, locally-sourced produce, and reducing my meat consumption, even though I didn't eat much to begin with so it's not a problem for me.

So, my ecological awakening really came about because of a combination of factors. I decided to leave Picard and start working as a freelance consultant on issues around food and the circular economy. At the time, I also began organising workshops to raise awareness about sustainable food habits. So, that was all good, but I'd always wanted to set up my own business and, suddenly, I was gripped by an urge to do so again.

I wanted to get more involved in the operational side, and do more than consulting. So, I thought, "Well, now's the time!" The right time had never come along before. I'd never taken that leap, and I thought, "Now's the time to go for it." So, I started looking into certain issues around food, because that was my main interest, and high-impact issues in particular.

I did some research into all that, but eventually I realised that the sector was quite competitive and capital-intensive. I couldn't find a specific issue that really inspired me. So, I decided to drop the idea of the food sector temporarily, and then I remembered that when I'd been looking for some good quality second-hand linen, I hadn't found anything that really inspired me, so I thought it could be an interesting avenue to explore. I started looking into it more and that's how the idea came about.

-- MUSICAL BREAK --

In the hotel business, hotels don't generally own their linen. Most of the time, in around 90% of cases, it's the laundries that own the linen. These laundries actually rent the linen to hotels. They generally enter into rental contracts of two or three years, for example.

When the contract reaches its term, the linen is often never used again. I started researching the market and, in particular, I began phoning around laundries and hotels to find out what happens to discarded linen and linen that has been taken out of circulation. After speaking to them and also going to see them, I realised that a massive amount of linen was no longer being used. It's on a par with what's happening now in the textile industry. The textile industry is one of the most highly polluting sectors in the world. It accounts for 8% of greenhouse gas emissions. And it's not just about CO₂ emissions, it also has a huge impact on the environment in general. It's a major cause of water pollution, because when clothes are produced, they are often dyed and this dye is discharged into watercourses. It's also a huge drain on water resources because it takes 10,000 litres of water to produce one kilo of cotton. So, to make a bed sheet which weighs about a kilo, it takes 10,000 litres of water.

If you buy a second-hand sheet instead, you save 10,000 litres of water. Obviously, this sector is also having an impact on biodiversity. So, I realised that the textile industry is a major issue, with a huge impact. There's a bit less data available on the hotel industry, and it's a bit harder to find this information.

However, we do know that hotels use a lot of linen every day. Each hotel needs between 5 and 7 sets of linen per room. So, that's quite a lot, even for a basic hotel with 50 rooms. Because, there always needs to be one set of bed linen, including sheets, a fitted sheet,

a duvet cover, towels, etc., in the room. At the same time, another set of linen is on its way to the laundry, another set is in the laundry, yet another is on its way back from the laundry, and the hotel keeps a spare set just in case... So, that's an awful lot of linen being used. In hotels, particularly four- and five-star hotels, the linen must be very high quality and totally flawless. If it has the slightest flaw, hole or stain, the hotel will discard the linen, they won't keep it.

And it's often very, very good quality linen. Generally, hotels use very high-quality linen. One criterion used to measure quality is the thread count per square centimetre. At around 120 threads per square centimetre, it's already very, very good quality linen. This means that the hotel industry is discarding linen which is potentially in good condition.

Or it becomes waste. It's not thrown away, but "recycled", so to speak. It may be linen that's still very high quality, but if it has a small hole or stain, it's treated in the same way. It becomes waste because hotels don't know what to do with it. Or the linen is discarded because the contract has come to an end. If a hotel is being renovated, it may not know what to do with its linen, or it may decide to change its entire range.

That's one of the reasons why hotels change their linen. If we think about these customers a bit more, during my market research, I also called a lot of holiday cottages, bed and breakfasts, campsites and Airbnb concierge services. They're also looking for white linen because they're still in the hotel business after all.

And white linen is still the norm in the hotel industry, because you can see whether it's stained or not, unlike coloured linen; and I realised after making these calls that there was definitely a need. They're often looking for good quality linen, which is also relatively cheap, because unlike five-star hotels, they don't have a huge budget to spend on linen. So, second-hand linen could appeal to them too.

It's not necessarily the deciding factor, because that's usually the price. But they could well be interested in high-quality, white linen at an affordable price. So, after considering all these factors, I realised that Yuna had real potential.

-- MUSICAL BREAK --

After that, I started thinking about a business model and asked myself: "What would a business model for second-hand hotel linen look like?" But I didn't spend too much time on that because, from my experience as a consultant, I knew that people often spend a lot of time thinking about business models, and it was more important for me to test the concept, launch it and then replicate it.

So, at Yuna, there are three key areas that have either already been developed or that we plan to develop. We sell second-hand hotel linen. As I said earlier, this is linen from hotels or laundries that we sort, wash and refurbish, and then sell on as second-hand linen.

We also stock new linen bought from clearance sales. Reuse is always the main aim. Manufacturers may sometimes have linen with defects, because a customer may place

an order and then decide that they no longer need the linen, so the manufacturer then ends up with a lot of linen that they don't know what to do with.

So, they need to get rid of this stock. The third area that we want to develop is upcycling. When I went to visit laundries, I saw they had high-quality linen that was in good condition, but that maybe had small holes or stains. And, I believe that, there are better ways of reusing this linen than simply turning it into rags.

So, these are the three main areas we're working on. We really want to promote reuse. But we also want to adopt a really inclusive, social and fair approach. That's why we're working with supported employment centres to sort and launder linen. And I'd really like us to develop these different partnerships, and maybe, further down the line, we'll run professional reintegration workshops on sewing, for example.

So, I hope that we can develop this work in the future.

-- MUSICAL BREAK --

Finding my first linen collection was a major rush. I thought, I've hit the jackpot here. I came across a hotel with some linen that wasn't being used, so it was all fairly easy. They told me that they really wanted to get rid of the linen, and they wanted it to be used for something.

I also had to figure out how to transport it. Next, the linen needed to be sorted. I did a lot of this work myself in the beginning because I felt it was important for me to understand any potential issues that could arise with the linen. The linen was still very high quality, so most of it was suitable for reuse. And then it was washed and refurbished by a supported employment centre.

So, that's the story behind the first linen I found. And then there's the website. I set up my own website, a freelancer helped me for a few hours, but I did the website on my own. At the start, I didn't know anything about creating a website. I put everything online.

You have to upload photos, product descriptions, etc. And that's just for starters. Because you then have to work on search engine optimisation and that's something I'm still doing at the moment. Because it's nice to have a website with beautiful products, but customers need to know about it. People can struggle to find you on Google. You need to promote the business in other ways, but Google and the internet are a big part of it. That's where most of the traffic comes from, so you need to rank highly on search engines. It's worth mentioning that, at first, I wanted to talk a lot about the environmental impact on the website. Because that was my initial motivation and reason for launching the company.

So, that's what I did in the beginning and we're still doing that. However, it's also important to talk about quality and price, because that's what attracts customers and makes them buy our products. It's not just about selling quality second-hand goods, it's also about quality products at an affordable price: That's what people who visit our website are most

interested in. I also want the website to highlight the general impact, which is something we haven't done yet, but we'd really like to mention people who are doing similar things to us in our blog articles. We'd like to talk about the overall impact of the textile industry, ecology, good models to adopt, good second-hand companies, etc.

Anyway, we'd like to do more than just talk about selling high-quality second-hand products. We'd also like to talk more about impact. For example, there are certain questions that people should ask themselves when buying a sheet. They should ask themselves: "Is it for personal use, B2B, a holiday cottage or a bed and breakfast that needs professional linen?"

Because it makes a big difference. Professional linen is often made to be washed in industrial laundries, so it can withstand, not a battering as such, but it's washed over and over at high temperatures, so it's not quite the same quality. So, you need to know whether the linen is for professional or personal use.

You can buy professional linen for personal use, that's not a problem. You should also think about what materials the linen is made of. It could be made out of a lot of different materials, like cotton percale, or polyester cotton. As I mentioned before, you can look at the thread count if you have that information.

We don't always have that information, which is a bit of a problem for us, because the linen is second hand, we can't always get certain information, like the technical data sheets. When you buy new linen as a private customer, you know where it comes from, maybe not always, but you're going to know the type of fabric it's made from, possibly the grams per square metre, the thread count per centimetre, etc.

We don't always have this information. But sometimes we do have it, like when we have specific brands of linen that are good, well-known brands, we highlight this information to let customers know that the linen is really high quality. So that's what we're currently doing, and we try to get as much information as possible.

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Currently, our main focus is second-hand linen, which comes from hotels or laundries. We are facing numerous challenges in 2025, such as raising the profile of our business, whether that's among laundries, hotels or linen manufacturers who want to get rid of their stock. And that's about sourcing, which is key for us and takes up a lot of time.

We also need to better promote our organisation to customers and improve our search engine ranking. Because we're still quite a new company, and the linen market is generally quite competitive. As I said before, we need to improve our ranking and list more new products. At the moment, we mainly sell second-hand linen, but to keep people coming back, we need both second-hand and new products, and, more importantly, a varied and diverse range, in large volumes.

We currently have around fifteen different products on the website, so it varies. We have fairly high quantities of each item. But we need to source more products than we have at the moment. We have a lot of work to do on upcycling because, as I said before, there's a lot of good quality linen around that is slightly damaged or has small defects.

The challenge is finding items that can be used to create new avenues and find better ways of reusing this linen, and, mainly, to source beautiful, stand-out items, that people will pay a certain price for because, by its nature, upcycling is not something that many people know about.

However, upcycling is quite expensive because it involves transforming an item into a new product. We do this work in France, producing items "made in France", so our labour costs are higher than on the other side of the world. People need to be aware that these items cost a lot of money, so they have to be sold at a higher price. They can't really be treated as second-hand products.

And then the last issue, which ties in with all that, is that we need to work on and rework our business model and make sure that it's the right fit for these key areas, so that we can ensure the company's long-term future. I'm absolutely convinced that there's a lot of potential in linen recycling, so I'm sure we'll find the right approach.

And that's really what drives me every day. We're fortunate to be in a fast-growing sector. The second-hand market is worth €7 billion in France. That's huge. And it's still growing. In 2021, three in four French people bought second-hand goods.

So, by 2024, I think this figure will be even higher. These are the positive aspects. However, we still need to overcome certain issues and challenges. It's a competitive sector in general, even before the second-hand aspect. The linen sector, particularly professional linen, is pretty competitive.

There's a lot of competition. In terms of second-hand goods, there are the platforms that everyone has heard of, like Leboncoin, Vinted, and other, similar websites. However, businesses don't necessarily source their linen from these websites. One of our key issues is that we have a broad range and the quantities that go along with that.

If we were a new brand, I'd be able to go to my manufacturer and say "I want this specific quantity of such and such product" and it would be as simple as that. But we have to take what we are given or what we can buy. So, these issues are highly complex, and it's not always ideal for the customers who visit our website.

That's why we also need to supplement our range with new products from clearance sales. I also think that we need to work on educating our consumers. Because consumers tend to think that second-hand goods are always cheaper. Obviously, they are less expensive, and that's the aim, but there is still a certain cost involved.

Firstly, there are the costs associated with running a business, whether it's operating in the circular or traditional economy. Secondly, with refurbished or second-hand items,

there are costs relating to quality control, as well as sorting and washing the linen, for example. And the costs associated with upcycling are even higher, because these products need to be transformed.

And lastly, when you buy a product that's made on the other side of the world, the cost of the actual materials and manufacturing process is relatively low. Making a product on the other side of the world is not particularly expensive. We incur certain costs associated with upcycling and making products in France.

So, we really need to work on educating our consumers.

-- MUSICAL BREAK --

I'd like to talk about a film I watched recently called "Une Année Difficile" (A Difficult Year) by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache. It's a story about two men who are a bit lost and in debt, who get caught up with a group of ecological militants, somewhat reluctantly. At the same time, they are being coached by an organisation on how to avoid so-called easy consumption.

It's quite funny, because their coach is actually addicted to gambling. And he teaches them a phrase, well three phases in fact, to help them consume less. He says: "You should ask yourself these questions: Do I need it? Do I really need it? Do I really need it now?" And that made me think about us and our lives, and about the questions we should ask ourselves when we buy something. And I now ask myself that question whenever I buy something.

I wasn't in the habit of doing that before. But now I ask myself this question. I think to myself "Do I need it? Am I going to use it for a long time? And could I buy this product second-hand or does it need to be brand new? So, I don't only buy second-hand products, I still buy new things and treat myself sometimes.

But when buying new products, I try to be better informed. I look at where the item came from and what it's made out of, and I find out about the company and its values. I think that buying second hand is quite easy. What's more, second-hand products are often in really good condition or have been refurbished.

So, I think it's easy for some products. For example, children's products, particularly clothes, and also furniture. Nowadays, there's a lot of online marketplaces that sell refurbished or second-hand products. You can buy some great refurbished electrical appliances these days. So, it doesn't have to be stressful.

But I think that, step by step, you can get into the habit of thinking "I can try this or that website if I can't find what I'm looking for." And, step by step, I think we can get there. Although it might take a bit longer at first, because you have to shop around, which takes time, you can take a certain amount of pride in thinking that "I've reused something that already existed, or something new didn't need to be produced."

And that's a good thing. It's good for the planet, and usually it's cheaper, which also helps.

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