

## Tide turns for Belu as ethical water goes global

Belu boss Karen Lynch has taken the social enterprise from losses of £1.9m to a fast-growing brand, which generates over £500,000 for WaterAid



"Why burn fossil fuels to transport water when ours is perfectly good?" asks Belu boss Karen Lynch



**By Rebecca Burn-Callander, Enterprise Editor**

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In 2009, ethical water firm Belu had accumulated debts of £1.9m, and was making charitable donations of just £30,000 a year. Today, the business has a turnover of £4.5m and is poised to launch internationally, having helped more than 38,000 people out of water poverty through a partnership with Water Aid.

Former Barclays executive Karen Lynch, who was parachuted in to lead the company in 2010, is behind the social enterprise's rapid turnaround: "It was a shambles when I first arrived," she said. "It was a campaigning brand so focused on its social cause that the business was an aside."

Over the past five years, Mrs Lynch has shifted the brand's focus from the consumer to the hotel and restaurant sector. Belu, which sells locally sourced bottled water to minimise its carbon footprint, has also developed the most ethical glass bottle on the market, which is being adopted by competitor brands.

“Our goal is to make the market better as a whole,” explained Mrs Lynch. “If we convince one brand to believe in the Belu model, we can influence the buying decisions of thousands.”

To conserve internal resources, Mrs Lynch decided to partner with WaterAid to meet its charity obligations. It has donated £581,604 of its profits to the charity since 2011, beating its £100,000 annual target.

Mrs Lynch is now poised to export the Belu model. “We’re looking at areas where water is a much higher proportion of consumer spend, like in Turkey, where the water isn’t palatable,” she said. “Once you know how this model works, you can do it anywhere, and WaterAid is a global charity.”

The company has just signed a contract with Intercontinental Hotels Groups to be its sole bottled-water supplier, which will help realise these international ambitions. “Going back a few years, you wouldn’t have imagined a social enterprise signing deals like this,” said Mrs Lynch. To tap into the corporate market, Belu is also supplying water coolers to the likes of Goldman Sachs, Sony Music and Saatchi & Saatchi. Further moves into water filtration and cooling products could follow.

The diversified model has helped grow the brand and educate a wider industry about water poverty. “Why burn fossil fuels to transport water when ours is perfectly good?” asked Mrs Lynch. The challenge now is to create a business model for the next 10 years, she admitted. “It’s complicated when your ultimate goal is to eradicate your own company. In an ideal world, everyone would have access to clean water, and bottled water would be unnecessary.”