

Planting Hope, sesame milk company led by all-female executive, goes public



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Julia Stamberger, CEO, co-founder and chairman of the board of Planting Hope, in the company's new Chicago office on Nov. 13.

KRISTAN LIEB/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A plant-based food company with its own brand of sesame milk is set to go public this week in a \$9-million deal, and it will surely spark chatter in corporate governance circles because of its all-female board and executive suite.

Planting Hope Co. Inc., N/A based in Chicago with an office in Vancouver, is selling 22.5 million shares in an oversubscribed initial public offering on the TSX Venture Exchange. The offering gives the company a value of about \$30-million.

Planting Hope is cashing in on the plant-based milk craze with its Hope & Sesame brand, sold mostly in U.S. grocery stores, with some Canadian outlets offering it. Plans include increasing the brand's presence in Canada after the stock listing.

The benefits of sesame milk, it says, are better nutrition and less environmental impact than dairy products and competing plant-based beverages, such as almond and oat milk, whose raw materials take more water to produce.

Planting Hope, backed by investors brought together by Canaccord Genuity, also markets brands of vegetable chips and snack cups.

How the company approaches the gender issue provides a lot to chew on. Its decision to populate its five-member board and senior executive ranks with women looks at first like a backlash to a corporate world that still very much favours men in leadership roles.



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Co-founder and chief executive officer Julia Stamberger said that is not the case. Rather, the corporate leadership reflects the demographics the company serves. It's a sizable market: Industrywide sales of plant-based milk hit US\$2.5-billion in the United States last year, representing 35 per cent of the total plant-based foods market.

"The reality is the customer that is eating our products and bringing them into the home is primarily female," Ms. Stamberger said. "Ninety per cent of the shopping and adoption of new brands is done by women, and frankly in the plant-based space is done by younger women – women who are 18 to mid-30s who are bringing them into the home and introducing the products to their families."

Many companies in the food and beverage industry, in the United States anyway, are founded by women, but senior leadership and board positions often are filled by men, she said. That is often because they are funded by private-equity and venture capital firms that tend to be male-dominated.

"Our thought over all was, there are characteristics that we've seen in how women approach fast-growing startup situations. It's a broad skill set and way of thinking that's aligned with how we're delivering to the end consumer," she said. In addition, Planting Hope believed focusing on female candidates would garner it talent that would potentially have been overlooked, she said.

Ms. Stamberger is joined by Susan Walters-Flood as chief operating officer, Kohmela Grier as chief financial officer and Mara Ebert as chief sales officer.

Okay, we've all heard it. Some of us have said it. The refrain goes like this: "I don't care what gender the director or executive is, as long as they choose the best person."

Meritocracy is the goal, of course. But as things stand in the corporate world, long-established networks have a way of skewing opportunities in the boardroom and executive suite to men. The best person may be a woman, but if she isn't in a company's Rolodex, then she won't get the call. There are organizations, such as Women Get On Board, who advocate for more female participation.

Statistics have shown corporate boards are still mostly made up of men. In the first half of this year, only 25 per cent of directors at newly listed companies were women. This, even though an IPO often serves as a first impression for investors, many of whom are increasingly focused on environmental, social and governance, or ESG, performance. Inclusion fits squarely in the G category.

So, too, does diversity, seen as key to corporate decisions benefiting from being vetted through a number of lenses – from experience to background to gender and race. Does filling the board and executive ranks solely with women result in decisions that lack that variety of viewpoints?

Ms. Stamberger said no. It's not as if the directors and executives have not worked in other industries with colleagues from all backgrounds and genders. The corporate values and culture have also prompted women to seek out positions within her team. Part of the strategy includes building a company that can inspire other women to lead their own organizations.

“These are all women who have had very successful business relationships with all genders, but we didn't realize until we had gotten into this what a kind of unicorn this was,” she said. “We had no idea that there weren't a lot of women-led boards in other industries. We knew that these were unique in the food and beverage industry.”

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