



Aisle

Madeleine Shaw

Co-Founder

Vancouver, BC

Founded 1993

periodaisle.com

Radically comfortable period products that actually work — for people and the planet

Background Information

In 1993, Aisle was one of the first companies to bring modern reusable period products to consumers and has been innovating ever since. These are high performance products with absorbency properties far superior to disposable options.

The next frontier is tackling period poverty from a sustainability lens and pursuing menstrual equity—universal access to safe menstrual products, bathroom facilities, education and a shame-free attitude towards menstruation. People do not go to the bathroom and expect to pay for toilet paper, or soap, or paper towels because they are hygiene necessities—the same holds true for menstrual products. Aisle has led and participated in dozens of menstrual health and equity programs in 17 Global South nations, in addition to closer to home in Canada, focusing on the needs of marginalized populations.

Aisle is an award-winning company, having received recognition from:

- 2021 Winner – Social Enterprise funding | Trico
- 2021 Clean50 Top Projects | Clean50
- 2019 Best For The World: Overall | B Corp
- 2018 Best For The World: Overall | B Corp
- 2017 Best For The World: Changemakers | B Corp
- 2017 Best For The World: Overall | B Corp
- 2016 Best For The World: Environment | B Corp
- 2015 Selected for Venture funding | Coralus (formerly SheEO)
- 2012 Certification | B Corp

Entrepreneurial Story

Madeleine Shaw is the co-founder and Director of Partnerships & Impact at Aisle. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Women's Studies from Queen's University in 1989¹. As a child, Madeleine Shaw considered starting her period as a rite of passage into womanhood; she was deflated when she found out the friction between her ideas and the dominant cultural narratives around menstruation. In her early 20s, she began experiencing allergic reactions to disposable tampons and pads.²

Shaw started to sew and use her own washable menstrual pads to address her needs. This not only alleviated painful symptoms, but also gave her a deeper appreciation for her cycle and body.³ She started selling the products in 1993 as a grassroots activist initiative to change the narrative around periods.⁴

Challenges facing SMEs Implementing Sustainability

Shaw spoke about the necessity of educating consumers about sustainability. She noted that consumers want their products to be made sustainably by people who are paid a living wage but at a low, big box price point. Green SMEs face the challenge of educating their consumers to help their customers understand both the supply chain and the difficulties of making products sustainably.

Another challenge facing green SMEs are the pressures in the current entrepreneurship ecosystem. There is little room for entrepreneurs who want to pursue slower growth that is more measured and more sustainable for people and the planet. A new framework, set of supports, and evaluation mechanisms are required for sustainable businesses, who wish to pursue something other than the scale-driven status quo. The current entrepreneurship ecosystem is geared towards rapid growth, not the measured and sustainable type of growth that sustainable entrepreneurs are pursuing.

Throughout her decades of experience, Shaw saw the prioritization of the ecosystem on mentorship, networking, and education, which were not necessarily as helpful to her as an experienced entrepreneur and businesswoman. Having already written business plans and pitches and cultivated a deep network, her venture needed capital, not more education. This is changing now, with organizations like Coralus (formerly SheEO) providing innovative, interest-free loans to women and non-binary entrepreneurs.

¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ohmadeleine/>

² <https://mytoastlife.com/how-this-entrepreneurs-company-is-reimagining-the-period-aisle/>

³ Survey response from Madeleine Shaw

⁴ <https://mytoastlife.com/how-this-entrepreneurs-company-is-reimagining-the-period-aisle/>

Contribution to Net-Zero Goals

Every one of Aisle's products prevent the purchasing of disposable items made with plastic elements, cotton and/or synthetic fibers and also prevent biowaste created by disposable products, and associated GHG impacts. Aisle has done a full life cycle analysis to understand exactly how much waste is diverted, how much greenhouse gases are avoided, and how much energy is saved by people with periods using their products. For example, in the Aisle 2021 Impact Report, Aisle measured the environmental impact of their customers' choice to purchase Aisle period underwear and cloth pads:⁵

- Waste diverted - 97,867 kg / 215,759 lbs
- CO₂ EMISSIONS avoided - 290,138 kg / 639,644 lbs
- Energy conserved - 5,457,075.1 kWh
- Post-consumer waste used in underwear with recycled polyester yarn - 2,124 kg / 4,683 lb
- Textile waste diverted - 861 kg / 1,900.80 lb

Aisle is also devoted to sustainability in its internal business operations. The company measures everything, from waste, shipping, even how employees get to work, so as to understand the impact of the organization on people and the planet. Supply chain, shipping, logistics, and sourcing are all challenges to do well environmentally and socially while being mindful of what the market will bear as an end price to the consumer.

Key Organizations at the Macro-Level

- Coralus (formerly SheEO)
 - Coralus is a community of women and nonbinary leaders who contribute to a Perpetual Capital Fund that loans capital to Ventures at 0% interest. The capital is then cycled back to support another cohort of companies making progress on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.
- Hollyhock - Social Venture Institute
 - "We host gatherings that help change-makers advance their businesses through experiential learning, skill sharing and powerful conversation. Be part of a big-hearted, socially-minded ecosystem of people who are using business as a source for good in the world. Anyone who has ever done something meaningful will tell you the hardest part is evolving yourself to meet the demands of your vision. SVI helps you grow as a person so you can advance your enterprise and make meaningful change."⁶
- B Corp
 - "B Corp Certification is a designation that a business is meeting high standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency on

⁵ <https://periodaisle.ca/blogs/all/aisle-s-2021-social-and-environmental-impact-report>

⁶ <https://hollyhock.ca/hollyhock-leadership/svi-hollyhock/>

factors from employee benefits and charitable giving to supply chain practices and input materials.”⁷

- BC Period Poverty Task Force
 - “A new task force backed by \$750,000 in provincial funding will support the Province’s goal to end period poverty and remove the stigma associated with menstruation.”⁸
 - Government attention on ending period poverty has brought more attention to the issues that Aisle is focused on.

Recommendations for Implementing Sustainability

Ventures who want to implement sustainability need to spend time and resources on consumer education to address the concerns of consumers, who want an environmental solution with fair trade living wages and at a lower price. It is often expensive to do the right thing. For example, Aisle could improve the environmental performance of its products, and it would increase costs for consumers, but consumers would balk at this.⁹

One obvious way to implement sustainability is to look at product durability and product testing. Aisle does full life cycle testing and analysis to examine product longevity, including chemical analysis to test fabric safety for people and water. Companies who want to implement sustainability should analyze the lifecycle and measure their product longevity.

Attributes to Succeed as a Green Business

- **Deep transparency:** be willing to dive in to measure the impact that the company and its products have on people and on the environment, then be clear about that with customers and suppliers to avoid greenwashing.
- **Storytelling:** a lot of time and money goes into educating consumers about the costs and work that go into creating truly environmentally friendly solutions
- **Research Capacity:** Aisle does research to determine the environmental impact of fabrics and its supply chains to make its products sustainably.

Skills to Succeed As a Green Entrepreneur

- **Relationship building:** Shaw uses her ability to build strong relationships with suppliers, other entrepreneurs, and networks of other businesses pursuing environmental and social missions
- **Dedication:** the willpower to stay committed to sustainability when it is faster, easier, and often cheaper not to. Sustainability is a habit that requires constant effort.

⁷ <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/certification>

⁸ <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022SDPR0033-000830>

⁹ Interview with Shaw

Key Quotes

- “We very much use our platform to educate people about environmental issues, about reproductive health...and we also use the company to champion menstrual equity, which is the access for everyone who menstruates to adequate safe menstrual products.”
- “In being more sustainable, your products cost more to make. So in our case, choosing super sustainable textiles to make our period underwear and pads out of, and even the cost of being a B Corp, the cost of paying employees fairly... it's expensive to do the right thing.”
- “We track all our waste, we track how people get to work, we track all of our shipping, all of the carbon footprint from all those things. It's just so obvious, don't create waste if you don't have to, spend the time, spend the money, make sure your products are durable, and test them properly.”
- “One of my concerns, if I just look big picture at everything right now, is that it feels like people are trying to find ways to accelerate green business, or scale sustainability - in other words, we're trying to feed social entrepreneurship through the same hyper-growth hockey stick model. I think we need to think beyond those business models, and holding them up as the holy grail of entrepreneurship. We need to not accelerate things, we need to slow them down. The whole hustle culture is responsible for environmental degradation, and I just don't think it's necessary...It's personally unsustainable, it's unsustainable for families, and I just think it's really unhealthy. I don't want to disrupt anything, I want to heal things.”