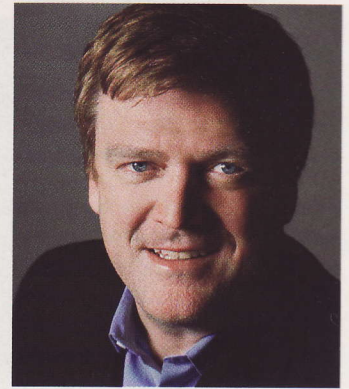


Fur: Out of Stock for Good

Each year, more than 75 million animals—from domestic dogs and cats to raccoon dogs and foxes—are killed in the name of fashion. Most spend their lives confined in horrendous conditions before facing death by gassing, electrocution, neck-breaking, or live-skinning. Through its investigations and outreach, The HSUS's Fur-Free Campaign has helped scores of retailers and designers take a stand against these cruelties. In this interview, Overstock.com chairman and CEO Patrick Byrne explains why his company eagerly became the 100th to commit to adopting a fur-free policy—a move that sets a new standard of compassion for the industry.



Q Overstock is the first major online retailer to take a stand against fur. What led to this?

I already understood that animals are not just objects. Someone could sit in a business meeting and take out a knife and a block of wood and start whittling; it would seem odd but would not be morally objectionable. If, however, someone took out a knife and a live rabbit and started whittling, that would be both strange and morally objectionable. Hence, animals are not objects. I knew that much already. But The HSUS sent [Fur-Free Campaign director] Kristin Leppert to see me, and as she was discussing the fur industry, I began to understand that it really does treat animals simply as objects. Decorative objects, but objects nonetheless. So I realized we should stop having any part of it.

Q What impact will this have?

Gandhi said of all social movements: "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win." I think the adoption of a fur-free policy by a number of major brands has shifted the fight into the third phase.

Q What made you so outspoken?

I think a lot of corporate guys try to have things both ways. They generally oppose government's role in society, but when faced with various social ills about which they could do something, they say, "It's not my job," and

mumble things about duties to shareholders. They cannot have it both ways. If you agree that something is wrong—and don't want government to fix everything—then you better roll up your own sleeves.

Q Some retailers balk at adopting anti-fur policies, claiming they'll lose designer accounts. What advice would you offer them?

They could be right. It would be a lie for me to assure them that this will be a profit-maximizing strategy for them. Time will tell. In the end, however, you do the right thing not because of how it will affect next quarter's earnings. You do the right thing because you are the guy who does the right thing. My experience is that the universe is generally benevolent, and doing the right thing usually works out.

Not always, though, and I'm curious to see if it will here.

Q What do you hope to achieve through your Worldstock division, which sells socially responsible, sustainable goods?

I consider it the single best idea of my life. About 6,000 artisans from around the world supply us handmade crafts produced in ways that sustain the producers, their culture, and the environment. We put minimum markup on these goods in an attempt simply to grow the program while breaking even. My dream is to

see tens of thousands of people, and maybe someday even more, raising themselves out of poverty through Worldstock.

Q How have Overstock employees reacted to the fur phaseout?

I expected pushback from the apparel buying group when I told them of my decision. Instead, they were relieved and eagerly told me how happy they were. Then over the next few days, as news spread around the company, I was amazed at how many folks I would never have expected to care—software developers, mathematicians, network engineers—stopped me to tell me how much they supported the decision.

Q Can you describe your relationship to animals?

I don't claim any special relationship to animals; I'm sure that to them I'm just another biped. But when I am around them, they make sense in a way humans don't. Being around animals is incredibly healing. My great dream is to retire to a good piece of land somewhere and just have a few horses, dogs, and goats. (I'm big on goats. I think it was the author Tom Robbins who compared them to Zen masters: A goat knows the score just by looking at you. Plus, horses and goats are natural allies.) That, plus a few hundred acres so I can see humans coming from any direction, and I'll be set. ♦

► *Learn more at humansociety.org/furfreeshopping.*

