

# Case Study: Wildling Shoes

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*Sina Kehrwieder*

*Purpose:* “We want to transfer the regenerative effect that our shoes have on our well-being to our entire business. To achieve this, we rely on partnership-based production, innovative materials from regenerative cultivation and the promotion of re-naturation projects” (Wildling Shoes 2025a).

*Design Trait:* Network

*Innovative Practice:* Re:generative Network Design

## Key Facts

*Wildling Shoes* is a regenerative shoe producer that focuses on partnership-based production, innovative materials from regenerative cultivation like hemp and embraces the “restore, preserve, enhance” triad to translate the regenerative impact of their shoes to the entire way of doing business.

**Founded:** 2015

**Industry:** Fashion/Shoes

**Location:** Engelskirchen, Germany

**Founded by:** Anna and Ran Yona

**Ownership:** family-owned by Anna and Ran Yona, and a friendly associate partner

**Legal Form:** Limited Liability Company (GmbH)

**Employees:** 202 (2025)

**Webpage:** <https://www.wildling.shoes/en>

## Purpose, Business Model & Objectives

Purpose: “We want to transfer the regenerative effect that our shoes have on our well-being to our entire business. To achieve this, we rely on partnership-based production, innovative materials from regenerative cultivation and the promotion of renaturation projects.”

In 2015, Ran and Anna Yona were looking for adequate footwear for their children. When they couldn't find what they were looking for, they decided to create it themselves, founding *Wildling Shoes* in the process. The company designs minimalist footwear for children and adults with soles that are as light and flexible as possible, so as not to hinder the foot's natural range of motion. *Wildling Shoes* have been developed to support the body's natural musculoskeletal functions, helping to correct misalignments and promote overall health and well-being.

*Wildling Shoes* aims to transfer the principle of regeneration to all parts of their value chain, doing business based on the understanding of regeneration as “giving back more than you take” — Anna Yona

Therefore, they strive to create as many benefits as possible for their stakeholders and the general society, in order to restore, preserve and enhance (Wildling Shoes, 2025b).

Through innovative product design and the use of new regenerative materials such as Washi Paper or dog wool, which otherwise would be discarded as waste, *Wildling Shoes* promotes circular production. The company actively strives to optimise processes within a circular economy, emphasising the transformative power of regional supply chains that amplify positive impact along the value chain. For example, to minimise production waste, *Wildling Shoes* reuses fabric stocks from previous models to create new products called “Refoxed Models”. Moreover, to promote recycling, some designs are composed of only three elements – fleece, thread and sole – making them easier to disassemble and recycle at the end of their life cycle.

The added value *Wildling Shoes* generates extends well beyond the company itself. Since 2022, the company has been a certified member of the B Corporation network. In 2023, it co-founded the Unlearn Business Lab, a platform designed to foster exchange and collaboration in pursuit of a circular, regenerative economy.

**B Corporations:**

According to B Lab, a certified B Corporation™, or B Corp, pursues the vision of a better economic system in which businesses benefit people, communities, and the planet. It prioritises long-term investments over short-term profits and measures its success through the positive impact it creates (B Lab 2025).

## Insights into the Re:generative Network Design

*Wildling Shoes'* re:generative network design is an innovative practice aimed at building relationships across its value chain. It is characterised by several core aspects:

### A Broad Understanding of Stakeholders, Including Nature

At the heart of *Wildling Shoes'* re:generative network design lies the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders in the company's interactions and decision-making processes. This expansive understanding explicitly extends to

“nature, which comes into contact with us in any way or with which we come into contact, for example when fibres are grown and when we use chemicals, if we cannot recycle a product afterwards and so on, then of course this is also a very important stakeholder.”—Anna Yona

Anna Yona points out that it is increasingly difficult, and ultimately artificial, to separate ourselves as human beings from the environment, as we are all inherently interconnected.

### Partner Selection Based on Shared Values and Personal Connection

For *Wildling Shoes*, long-term partnerships are essential for achieving their regenerative purpose. The company deliberately avoids the term “suppliers”, instead referring to “partners”—organisations and businesses with whom they collaborate closely. Rather than relying primarily on labels or certifications, which smaller partners often cannot afford, *Wildling Shoes* places greater importance on mutual insight and authentic alignment. The partner selection is based on the criteria of transparency, trust, personal connection and shared regenerative and distributive values. Especially transparency through open exchange and understanding of a partner's way of working and underlying values builds the foundation for a trusting relationship. As Anna Yona explains, the first test is always “Can we come round? Can we have a look?” – a question that reflects their commitment to personal connection and shared values. If these elements are not present, *Wildling Shoes* will not enter a partnership,

even if doing so would make economic sense. This shared value base also includes a mutual willingness to improve, for example, by working together to enhance working conditions, as Anna Yona further explains:

“So now, for example, at the production sites in Portugal, to say, okay, the basic atmosphere is right, the interaction with each other is right, the pay is right and now we can just look together, can we organise the workplaces even better or are there still safety facilities where we can have an influence or not? That's always really important to us.”

### Building Long-Term Partnerships for Developing Regenerative Materials in Regional Supply Chains

*Wildling Shoes* actively supports the development of regenerative materials by cultivating long-term partnerships with producers working within local supply chains. These collaborations aim to strengthen ecological resilience and promote circular economy practices. One example is *Wildling Shoes*' partnership with **Nordwolle**, a northern German wool producer that sources wool from the endangered Pomeranian sheep. Once on the brink of extinction, this breed had been sidelined in conventional wool production due to its coarser wool, which cannot be dyed in vibrant colours and is considered less marketable than Merino wool. As a result, Pomeranian wool was often treated as waste. However, this sheep breed is exceptionally well adapted to the rainy conditions of northern Germany: its dense, long fibres provide excellent water resistance. By using this wool in its shoes, *Wildling* not only repurposes a previously discarded material but also supports biodiversity and landscape conservation. Through this long-term partnership with Nordwolle, *Wildling Shoes* helps ensure the survival of the breed while also repurposing previously discarded wool for shoe production, making a valuable contribution to circular economy practices.

A second key partnership that *Wildling Shoes* maintains is with **VirgoCoop**, a French cooperative striving to transform the textile industry by establishing local and ethical supply chains for European hemp. Once widely cultivated, hemp textiles in Europe were largely replaced by cotton. Yet it is highly adaptable to different climates, requires significantly less water than cotton, and presents a more sustainable alternative for textile production. Through its partnership with VirgoCoop, *Wildling* contributes to revitalising this ecologically sound crop within European production networks.

Figure 1: European Hemp for Local Textile Production



Source: Wildling Shoes 2025f.

Nevertheless, traditional cultivation and processing techniques for hemp, along with the necessary infrastructure such as factories, have largely disappeared. As a result, both the knowledge and the corresponding value chains must be re-established from the ground up. *Wildling Shoes* considers itself an active partner in this revival, working closely with VirgoCoop to rebuild a regional and fair value chain for hemp in Europe, particularly for textile and footwear production. The cooperation goes beyond sourcing: *Wildling Shoes* not only purchases fabrics from VirgoCoop's weaving mill but is also financially invested in the cooperative. In 2022, *Wildling Shoes* became a co-shareholder of VirgoCoop, enabling the cooperative to invest in production facilities for hemp processing. This deep level of collaboration reflects a new kind of relationship, what *Wildling Shoes* refers to as “regenerative collective”, where partners work hand-in-hand to co-create resilient, equitable, and future-oriented production systems.

### Temporary Partnerships as a Platform for Raising Awareness for Shared Values

Temporary partnerships at *Wildling Shoes* often take the form of limited-edition products—collaboratively designed shoes that serve as platforms for raising awareness and celebrating shared values. An example of this strategy is the “Nkwo x *Wildling*” collaboration, curated by Beatrice Oola, the initiator of Fashion Africa Now. Nkwo is an African sustainable fashion brand dedicated to reducing textile waste by creating its own fabric from repurposed textile remnants. The name of the

collaboratively designed shoe, **ONU**, means “**together**” and symbolises this new, equitable approach to cooperation. As Anna Yona explains:

“With NKWO, the Onu shoe, it was very much about systemic racism, about colonial relationships, about how we can truly take the first steps towards doing things differently—both in the way we collaborate and in how we make things like innovation and creativity visible. It’s about ensuring that it’s not just a case of taking something and selling it as one’s own, but rather fostering a different kind of co-operation”.

## Initiating a Broader Regenerative Network

As one of the co-founders of the Unlearn Business Lab, *Wildling Shoes* seeks to engage with a broader network of social entrepreneurs, individuals, and progressive businesses to transform economic system design towards greater circularity (UBL 2025). This transformation is supported through the creation of a community space that fosters dialogue and exchange, as well as the development of new formats and collaborative concepts aimed at enabling systemic change.

## How the Re:generative Network Design Enables Regenerative and Distributive Dynamics

*Wildling Shoes*’ specific re:generative network design enables both regenerative and distributive dynamics in multiple areas of the business:

### Direct Distribution Channels Provide Quality Service

One key example is the company’s focus on direct sales, primarily through its website and three curated showrooms in Germany (Cologne, Berlin and Engelskirchen). This direct-to-customer approach allows *Wildling Shoes* to maintain strong relationships with its customers, offering a level of service and connection that competitors relying on intermediaries often cannot match. This approach also enables *Wildling Shoes* to offer services such as product repairs through its dedicated Repair Centre. Smaller repairs (such as fixing eyelets) are carried out onsite in Engelskirchen, whereas more complex repairs are carried out by a partner in Portugal.

“Four to six people are involved in a repair at *Wildling*: The Customer Service team receives the repair request and initiates further processing, one person carries out the repair, and the logistics team registers the returned pair (and, of course, sends it back once the work is done). And none of this would be possible without the IT department, which manages the entire process” (*Wildling Shoes* 2024).

Figure 2: Repair Centre



Source: Kaufmann 2022.

*Wildling Shoes'* direct distribution channels make this service possible in the first place, while also conserving resources and reducing waste.

### Efficient Use of Resources and a Loyal Community

*Wildling Shoes* promotes efficient resource use by repurposing materials from previous production cycles. Rather than disposing of surplus stock, these materials are reused under the label "Refoxed" or offered at reduced prices as B-stock. This strategy reduces production-related waste and is warmly embraced by *Wildling Shoes'* customer community.

The company also uses drop marketing strategies (announcing a launch date on social media to create excitement for new products). Customers' purchasing behaviour then serves as a real-time feedback mechanism, guiding production volumes and helping to prevent overproduction and minimise storage space. This approach depends on a strong, interactive relationship with *Wildling Shoes'* online community. Creating unique stories for each product enhances emotional attachment and sets it apart from mass-produced alternatives.

Since the company was founded, *Wildling Shoes* has been supported by a highly engaged customer base. For example, in *Wildling Shoes*' Facebook group, enthusiastic fans of the brand swap or resell their used shoes, prolonging the lifespan of the products even further. The group was initially created during the company's crowdfunding phase, when the first products were offered as a bundle of several shoes, and buyers pooled together online to share the packages. The group has since grown to over 19,000 members. This engagement is actively encouraged by *Wildling Shoes*. It aligns with the company's goal of maximising the efficiency and sustainability of material use, while minimising waste. Crowdfunding remains a cornerstone of Wildling's founding narrative and its close-knit, value-driven community.

"Yes, I believe it was a very meaningful decision both in terms of brand development and product innovation. It allowed us to engage in a highly effective exchange right from the start and quickly adapt to the actual needs of the market and our customers. It was also about bringing the product to market together creating a strong sense of identification among those who supported us. Naturally, this fosters a deeper connection to the company." — Anna Yona

## A Loyal Customer Community as a Base of a Resilient Company

*Wildling Shoes*' re:generative network design contributes to the company's resilience by preserving its sensitivity to external shifts and heightening its awareness of the need to change, ultimately enabling greater adaptability over time.

What may seem like a bonus in stable times becomes essential during economic downturns. Strong, robust networks of deeply engaged customers and long-term partnerships with suppliers offer a powerful competitive advantage that cannot easily be replicated. As Anna Yona puts it,

"a network is also a source of security", which is especially important if the going ever gets tough. She further adds: "Where you have strong partnerships and work together as equals, you can of course talk to each other in a completely different way, even in times of crisis. And in some way, we can find out each other's needs."

## Creative Freedom and Leeway

The necessity of finding new ways to enable the use and processing of regenerative materials in circular and regional supply chains fosters greater creativity and ingenuity in developing innovative solutions (such as using yarn made from dog fur or materials like washi tape). For example, minimising material usage in the final shoe led to a distinctive product, while the search for a waterproof regenerative material resulted in the partnership with Nordwolle and the creative co-development on how

to use this specific type of wool for shoes. This flexibility is rooted in the company's original intent to disrupt the status quo, strive for continuous improvement, and develop new pathways.

Being less constrained by traditional investors or standardised industry processes provides greater freedom to explore unconventional approaches. Financial independence is, therefore, crucial to enabling these decisions to be made freely.

"Also, in the sense of [a more creative pricing model]: How can we offer different price points? For example, can we make B-grade goods available? That way, we don't have to dispose of them on the one hand, and on the other hand, we can offer a better price." — Anna Yona

## Pursuing Knowledge as a Shared Public Resource

Ideally, re:generative network design enables regenerative and distributive dynamics across industries. Anna Yona (2023) highlights the need to explore ways to

"join forces with other brands, for example, to support such resource systems and suppliers from different directions? How can we collaborate with food manufacturers on the one hand, who also need agricultural land, and on the other hand, precisely, with other fashion companies?"

*Wildling Shoes* actively promotes the establishment of European supply chains and the use of regional materials wherever possible, while also recognising that efficient resource management requires cross-industry collaboration to drive sustainable change. However, this proves challenging, as different collaboration partners often pursue different goals and priorities. To overcome this challenge, emerging knowledge must be treated as a common good, ensuring that society as a whole, and not just individual companies, benefits.

Reciprocity plays a key role, as reciprocal relationships within the network provide mutual benefits. For example, partners gain access to wider audiences and exchange valuable information. In the long term, the goal is to move closer to achieving broader circularity within the economy. "We want to take steps forward on the path to circularity. We want [a] circular shoe as our goal" (Anna Yona).

## Challenges Arising from Designing Networks around Re:generation

However, the re:generative network design also brings specific challenges that *Wildling Shoes* has had and continues to face:

## Trade-Off Between Customers' Product Expectations and Available Re:generative Solutions

The case study reveals that *Wildling Shoes* must navigate a constant balancing act between customer expectations regarding product characteristics and the regenerative values the company upholds. For example, customers typically expect a “super durable, totally waterproof and at the same time sustainably produced product” (Anna Yona).

Yet research into re:generative materials and processes that deliver all these characteristics simultaneously is still at an early stage. In contrast, conventional chemical solutions, such as Teflon, have benefited from decades of research and development. Teflon belongs to a group of synthetic chemicals known as PFAS, often called “forever chemicals” because they do not break down in the environment and accumulate over time. PFAS are harmful to both human health and the environment (EEA 2025). For these very reasons, *Wildling Shoes* deliberately does not use such chemicals, even though they would easily meet customer expectations for waterproofing. Instead, the company has to find ways to meet customer needs within the boundaries of its regenerative values. Similar challenges arise when it comes to issues such as which colour they want to use for their shoes.

## Trade-Off Between Customers' Price Expectations and the Real Costs of Regenerative Circular Products

*Wildling Shoes* would like to offer their shoes at a much more affordable price to meet customer demands. However, the company's commitment to fair partnerships, ensuring living wages, and its use of regenerative materials lead to significantly higher production costs under the current economic conditions.

While these reasons are valid and aligned with *Wildling Shoes'* purpose, the resulting higher prices remain a barrier for customers with lower incomes. *Wildling Shoes* is attempting to address this challenge by extending the lifespan of its products through services such as repairs and by introducing a more flexible pricing policy in selected areas, such as offering discounted seconds.

## Requirement of Time for Compromises and the Development of Alternative Strategies

As explained, the differing expectations between customers regarding product features and prices, and *Wildling Shoes'* values, require significant time to find compromises and develop alternative ways to fulfil customer expectations while staying true to their principles. According to Anna Yona, compromises are inevitable in some areas. The complexity and, in some cases, simple incompatibility of these demands

require a considerable amount of additional energy and resources. This discrepancy between the performance of different (non-)sustainable materials is partly rooted in outdated incentive structures (e.g. insufficient support in the area of materials research). Flawed incentives in research, especially those overlooking sustainability, intensify competition with conventional products in terms of price and performance. As a result, companies such as *Wildling Shoes* often face conflicts of interest and difficult trade-off decisions. A strong ethical foundation, while admirable, can therefore complicate decision-making, occasionally turning the very values that guide the business into limiting factors for operational flexibility.

### **Flat Hierarchies Depend on High Competencies in Self-Responsibility and Empowerment of Employees**

*Wildling Shoes* is organised in flat hierarchies, which necessitate a strong focus on internal capability and competency development. A less hierarchical structure demands a high degree of individual self-responsibility, requiring that employees be appropriately empowered before they can operate effectively within this framework. This experience prompted *Wildling Shoes* to concentrate on internal processes, with the aim of better understanding and refining its organisational structures.

Today, the company operates approximately 15 teams, each comprising up to eight members, in order to maintain efficient workflows. Flat hierarchies are supported by the implementation of team leads, whose roles become particularly significant during periods of dynamic growth: they consolidate information, set priorities, and manage open positions. However, leadership at *Wildling Shoes* is conceived as a service function rather than a position of authority.

## **Interactions with Other Design Traits**

### **Governance Design**

The importance of regenerative structures and working conditions runs through the entire company: *Wildling Shoes* fosters a holistic approach to its general work culture, placing particular emphasis on New Work concepts such as promoting remote work and enabling meaningful work. Collaboration instead of competition is emphasised across all areas of the company.

Great importance is attached to the compatibility of work, leisure time and family life. The focus is always on creating genuine value, whether this is through providing greater flexibility and leisure time for employees, offering high-quality and health-promoting products, or ensuring resource-saving material cultivation and a commitment to regional supply chains. For the most part, work takes place re-

ardless of location, wherever possible, with remote work being the standard. This requires communication, trust, and reliability. These so-called New Work concepts are intended to foster greater equality within the working environment.

“We try to apply this regenerative effect to everything. So how can we work in such a way that it has a regenerative effect? Or what does that even mean?” — Anna Yona

The company is organised in focus-based teams, known as ‘circles’, each dedicated to specific strategic priorities. Numerous points of intersection between the circles make internal communication essential for effective teamwork. Ideas that emerge within the circles are carried upwards through an interplay between bottom-up and top-down processes.

“And this is our group of people who come together to make strategic decisions, [they] are these Circle Leads together with two Company Leads that we have. This is where we define the roadmap, what we think the important strategic priorities will be in the next two years.” — Anna Yona

## Finance Design

For *Wildling Shoes*, the interaction between finance design and network design is rooted in their start-up funding. They founded their business with the help of a crowdfunding campaign based on a community of people who support their purpose. Crowdfunding allowed *Wildling Shoes* to maintain their independence and minimise risks and costs when entering the market. The prefinance model, based on pre-sales, allowed *Wildling Shoes* to generate revenue before having to pay all their production invoices. This approach to finance design allows *Wildling Shoes* to remain financially independent from external capital and to align their decision-making solely with their values and purpose.

Profits are reinvested into the business and used to pay salaries. In their decision-making, it is crucial for *Wildling Shoes* to align every business decision with their purpose:

“So, we don't operate in such a way that we somehow always look for the cheapest way, but we look for the best way. And if it's more expensive, then that's a very meaningful investment that happens during the year, so to speak.” — Anna Yona

## Recommendations for Adopting a Re:generative Network Design

### 1) Re:generative Network Design is Based on a Re:generative Product

For *Wildling Shoes*, adopting a re:generative network design is rooted in offering a meaningful and regenerative product:

“It really is a meaningful, necessary product, because otherwise all the raw materials that go into it are wasted and all the energy is wasted.” — Anna Yona

Therefore, adopting a re:generative network design requires an honest reflection on whether the specific product is truly necessary.

### 2) Driven by Intrinsic Conviction – What About Your Intrinsic Conviction?

The pursuit of a regenerative purpose is the primary driver for *Wildling Shoes* in their relationship with their stakeholders, while financial goals are of secondary relevance:

“We don't run the company according to financial targets. So of course, we have a financial plan, and we know how the structure has to work so that we can manage our expenses and costs financially. But we don't have financial targets in the sense that we want to somehow, I don't know, have a 15% increase in turnover.” — Anna Yona

This intrinsic motivation is woven into every aspect of the company, from the founding vision to inspiring customers to buy and empowering employees to find purpose in their work. Nothing is done for its own sake; ideally, everything is connected to the purpose of the business.

“We could produce a much cheaper shoe if we didn't produce it on an equal footing with our partners, as we are currently trying to do.” — Anna Yona

### 3) Enabling Authentic Connections

*Wildling Shoes* goes beyond typical footwear. Its direct channels (e.g. online size consultations, showrooms) make an authentic connection possible in the first place, thereby enhancing the quality of every interaction. Through partner selection based on shared values and personal connections, the company has built truly meaningful relationships, striving together to develop the use and processing of regenerative materials in regional supply chains.

## Inspiring Redesign Beyond the Business

*Wildling Shoes* prioritises being a role model for collaboration and deep partnerships, offering an alternative to more commodified, short-term, and competition-focused approaches. Anna Yona emphasises that the interaction between all design traits – governance, ownership, finance and network – is crucial. All traits are deeply intertwined in the inner transformation of a business. However, network design holds special importance, as it shapes *Wildling Shoes*' direct relationships with internal and external stakeholders. It also reflects their commitment to being part of a broader ecosystem of businesses, policymakers, activists, individuals, and scientists working together to transform the economic system towards regeneration.

“Well, we also want this change from within, the transformation from within, of the economic system and this ‘Who can we move all this together with?’ Well, that would be my big dream somehow; to say we are really doing this very, very much in collaboration with many other actors in society.” — Anna Yona

As a medium-sized company, *Wildling Shoes* still faces the challenge of maintaining its position on the market. They therefore highlight the need for stronger support within a broader network and deeper collaboration, such as lobbying for regulations that would level the playing field. This includes efforts to prevent circular products from being at a price disadvantage by driving consumer pressure to change the practices of less sustainable competitors or advocating for investment in models like *Wildling Shoes*. As one of the initiators of the Unlearn Business Lab, *Wildling Shoes* actively engages in creating and strengthening such alliances for systemic economic change.

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