

## The Sustainable Small Business

Supposing you've made the decision to live more sustainably and are leaving the Rat Race in order to set up in self-employment, doesn't it make sense to incorporate sustainability into the new business plan? That way your business will be run in alignment with your interests and values and working in it will ultimately lead to a higher level of enjoyment, fulfilment and meaning.

So, what is a "sustainable business"? One official definition goes something like this:

*"A Sustainable Business is a constituted organisation that takes full account of its triple bottom line – i.e. managing and contributing to social, environmental and economic improvements in its business practices."*

Simply put, a business's "triple bottom line" can be expressed in terms of the three Ps – People, Planet, Profit, and, most importantly, **in equal priority**. So now, rather than taking the conventional view and running our business primarily for profit, we are running our business for the welfare of society and of the environment with the same emphasis on these aims as on earning a profit.

Let's face it, for most of us there are a host of different ways in which we are capable of earning money, even if some of those ways we believe wouldn't generate "enough" income for our current needs. When we set up our own businesses, hopefully there are reasons other than money and capability that prompt us to do so. These reasons form our Business Purpose and they stem from our Business Values. They are what's most important to us in our business lives: the non-negotiable parts. Examples of business purposes might be "providing enjoyable education programmes for adults", "helping others to improve their health", "enhancing the lives of children/the elderly/new parents", "making marketing ethical and easy".

Let's look at the elements of the triple bottom line in more detail:

### **People**

Think about all of the people who are involved with your business. Even if you don't directly employ anyone else at present, who else do your actions affect? Who else does your business depend on? Your answer might well include your suppliers, your clients, your associates

and colleagues. A sustainable business treats all of these people in a way that's in keeping with its business purpose and sustainability, for example, by employing staff who live locally and sourcing from local suppliers. You could reduce your clients' needs to travel by providing your products and services local to them rather than centralised wherever possible.

## **Planet**

Many of you will be familiar with the term "Reduce, Re-Use, Re-cycle". Maybe you are not aware that those instructions are stated in order of priority. That is, it is more important for us to **reduce** our consumption than it is to **re-use** items and **re-using** items is more important than **re-cycling** our waste. So, uppermost in the sustainable business owner's mind will be minimising the negative impact on the planet of running that business by reducing consumption of energy, fuel, water and toxic substances.

## **Profit**

Just because profit has now been relegated to one of three in the business's bottom line does not make it any less important as a concept. For a business to be sustainable in the sense of growing and surviving long term it will need to generate a profit (unless it was set up as a not-for-profit organisation.) What the triple bottom line does is to remind us to keep profit generation in perspective with the other elements. With our business accounts as with our personal finances, if we keep our costs to a minimum and minimise our consumption, the income we need to generate to cover our costs and pay ourselves is reduced.

To help you in your business planning, I've produced a "Sustainable Business Checklist" which you can view and download from here ([www.sallylever.co.uk/documents/SustainableBusinessChecklist.pdf](http://www.sallylever.co.uk/documents/SustainableBusinessChecklist.pdf)).

## **Communicating your Sustainability**

Once you have incorporated sustainable business practices into your everyday business operations, it is worth considering how you can use that information to communicate your sustainable approach with the outside world. For example, on promotional leaflets you could include the words "printed on recycled paper". If you are providing refreshments for visitors to your business, you could let them know,

for example, that the food they are eating is organic and locally sourced wherever possible.

How will this benefit you? Other people who are endeavouring to lead sustainable lives and run sustainable businesses will be attracted to doing business with you if they believe doing so will make a positive contribution to their triple bottom line. They will feel more comfortable in your company and better able to establish a relationship of trust with you. In short, it will strengthen your business connections with similarly minded people and contribute to your business not only being a financial success, but inwardly rewarding and meaningful for you too.

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Sally Lever is a Sustainable Living Coach who specialises in inspiring and supporting those who are downshifting or otherwise moving towards a more sustainable way of life and business. She offers one-to-one coaching, teleclasses on how to run a sustainable small business and a free email newsletter.