

THE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

Interview with Beverley Gower-Jones,
Managing Partner, Clean Growth Fund



Extract from book commissioned by
Brevity Marketing

Introduction

A relatively new addition to the business vocabulary, but mission-critical if a company is going to be looking long-term.

But what does 'sustainable' really mean?

With 'sustainability' it has become locked in the crosshairs of the pursuit of environmental best practice, which arguably is the commercial equivalent of cart before horse.

The very *modus operandi* of a sustainable business means that one of the outputs will be environmental responsibility, though a company delivering environmental sustainability won't necessarily be a sustainable business.

Arguably 'sustainable' is kind of a business definition of holistic, with everything it does interconnected by its culture.

In other words its about sense of purpose, values, behaviours, active brand, internal/external engagement with all of the stakeholders, relationship optimisation, consistency, resilience, a mindset which sees challenges as opportunities, a desire to develop a circular economy, all of which combines to deliver sustainability, all rooted in responsible practices that will serve to preserve our planet.

For a series of papers and subsequent book commissioned by Brevity Marketing and to be published by DECISION magazine, business owners and directors from across generations and market sectors share their thoughts about how they would define the characteristics of a sustainable business, and what the journey might hold.

This is one of the interviews to be included.

Having the strength to make it happen

There's something unsettling about the home page of the Clean Growth Fund website, although disturbing would describe it better.

Prominent is a digital clock counting down in years, days, hours, minutes, and to the second, the time left to limit global warming to one-and-a-half degrees, above which extreme weather events and rising sea levels threaten the continued existence of life on this planet.

"Global warming is the greatest threat that mankind has ever faced," says Beverley Gower-Jones, who received an OBE for services to net zero innovation.

Appropriate that she should have established the Clean Growth Fund to provide initial investment, typically up to £11million, to companies with products and processes which will demonstrably move the emissions dial and improve the efficient use of resources to help address the climate crisis.

She conjoins sustainability – initiatives to protect the planet – and sustainable – as in a business which is strong enough to



Beverley Gower-Jones

consistently bring those initiatives to bear. “Being a sustainable business is about being able to stay the course, building something which could last or have a positive impact for generations to come,” she suggests.

“I think about a sustainable business in terms of responsibility, so, for example, it’s not just about ESG initiatives and Scope emission reporting but doing the right thing across everything the business touches, and that has to be embedded in its the consciousness. Otherwise it’s just an expression which is banded about.

“It has been quoted that eighty per cent of FTSE100 businesses have declared a commitment to becoming net zero, but only five per cent have publicly disclosed an action plan to achieve it.

“There is evidence that companies with strong sustainability awareness are achieving greater exit values, but how do we demonstrate that an investor gets more value from a sustainable business when there is no definitive metric? I would say the mood music should be enough to suggest that this is now the direction of travel.

“Rightly, and logically, there is an argument that more competitive advantage is gained by doing the right thing, and being seen to do the right thing, and that applies to both companies and their investors.

“The basis for that to happen comes from building a platform which makes a business sustainable. That is why we also look at a company’s fair labour policies because legislation, such as the minimum wage, delivers only a minimum standard.

“We see community engagement is climbing the ladder because there is a realisation that a company can’t stand in splendid isolation within its location. And it has to happen at a micro level. We’ve engaged with a local soup kitchen with volunteering and donating.”

Diversity is another prime consideration. “But,” says Gower-Jones, “we’ve got to make sure the pendulum doesn’t swing

too far in a particular direction, otherwise there is the risk that positive discrimination can result in us ending up with a generation of other sections of society who feel excluded.

“I still remember earlier in my career, someone saying to me, ‘oh you’re a woman, you’ll get promoted anyway’.

“So while diversity is a really important factor in building a sustainable business, at the end of the recruitment process it always has to be about taking on the best candidate for the job, regardless of anything else, otherwise you won’t have a sustainable business.”

“With some of this,” muses Gower-Jones, “I have to say the impact can seem quite intangible, if you try to quantify benefit purely in financial terms. But really, it can be distilled down to doing the right thing, looking at all the stakeholders and understanding things from their perspective to define how are you can best serve them – knowing that the end result will deliver financial benefit, and future proof businesses.

“That won’t come about by intermittent initiatives. This has to be completely integrated in thoughts and action.

“Defining mission and vision is critical to build a sustainable business, and leadership has to demonstrate both by walking the talk, because that’s what people actually will see and which will influence their behaviours.



“It boils down to clarity of mission and consistency of message over a long period of time, and knowing how to tailor the message to the language of specific audiences.

“I remember a painful lesson learnt at a conference about net zero and the investor ,where I was giving a talk as a fund manager advocating that more money should be invested in net zero entrepreneurs. After my presentation, one of the VCs in the audience took me to one side, and said ‘we don’t invest funds, we allocate’.

‘So you need to know the same basic language that those who you are trying to influence use on a daily basis.’”

There will be more of a move to business seeing ‘sustainable’ as a commercial imperative because of customer pressure, Gower-Jones believes. “Nothing hurts more than losing market

share, and companies are seeing a change in the importance customers place on issues relating to sustainability. A survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers revealed eighty-five per cent of consumers now take sustainability into account when making a purchasing decision.

“In terms of recruitment and employment, there is the risk of greater churn with the younger generation, which doesn’t prioritise gaining wealth and position over quality of life and environmental considerations.

“They want to work with companies aligned to their values, and that is a huge piece if a business is to be able to attract and retain staff.

“In a large company,” Gower-Jones points out, “there can be an internal mis-alignment by the very nature of having separate departments for sustainability and for governance, because that then makes it more difficult for everyone to be on the same path.

“The point I’m making is that in the same way that health and safety cannot be the sole responsibility of a health and safety officer or department, it would make sense for sustainability to be part of the appraisal for all of a company’s senior people.

“Sustainability needs that prominence, and more forward-thinking companies will include carbon footprint improvement, community engagement for example to get away from a silo’d approach.”

But while a company can set a course for developing a sustainable platform, it isn't working in a commercial vacuum.

"One of the biggest challenges in building a sustainable business is coping with external macro pressures," Gower Jones points out. "Global economics, energy, security, and a pandemic to name but four. Business wants a stable environment because then it feels it can influence change. Otherwise the focus is on the struggle to maintain financial viability and to meet commercial targets.

"Yes, a company in that position still believes in its long-term mission but right now, it's fighting fires. If there is a cost involved in an initiative which will deliver long-term sustainability, such as a replacing gas with electricity scenario, it can be continually deferred."

Marketing has a significant role, something which hasn't escaped the attention of Gower-Jones. "What a company's website looks like, what it is saying, when it was last updated, the tone and purpose of the company's social media, all of which to a degree give you an indication of its culture," she says.

"That is something which we would have looked at before going into our first meeting with a company looking for investment or seeing a pitch deck."

As part of their evaluation process, Clean Growth Fund have an independent assessment of a company's potential impact both in

terms of return on investment and addressing climate change or 'return on carbon'.

And their definition of 'sustainable' is not exclusively about environmental and financial viability. Annual surveys of each company which have received investment also address social factors such as community involvement, employee engagement.

"The management teams we back," explains Gower-Jones, "are passionate about their business, its sense of purpose and engagement with all of its stakeholders - and that it is aligned with making achieving net zero more mainstream."

www.cleangrowthfund.com

About Brevity Marketing



Kaia Vincent

The interview with Beverley Gower-Jones was undertaken with Brevity Marketing founder and managing director Kaia Vincent FCIM.

Brevity Marketing is on a mission to empower business leaders and teams to succeed in today's competitive market while at the same time considering their impact on people and planet, providing tailored strategic and tactical marketing that tell a company's story and drive results – helping business to be seen, heard, and chosen above the noise.

Brevity achieved B Corporation status in 2023.

Kaia Vincent began her career in the beverage industry as an editor at Canadean (now Global Data), a leading analysis firm in that sector. After earning a master's in marketing (CIM Level 7 Diploma), she transitioned into the corporate marketing department and was responsible for leading high-profile events across Europe for c-suite executives.

Seeking new challenges, Kaia left Canadean to pursue a career in the fast-paced tech sector as marketing manager for a Novell and VMWare platinum partner. Then following a stint in the agency world, she founded her own consultancy, Brevity Marketing in 2010. With over twenty-five years of experience and a chartered marketer and marketing fellow designations, Kaia has worked with more than one hundred SME leaders throughout her career. She practices continuous professional development (CPD) including more recent studies in artificial intelligence and neuroscience.

Contact information

brevity.marketing
01256 536000
hello@brevity.marketing

About DECISION magazine

First published in 1988, DECISION magazine reflects the business lifestyle, the trials and tribulations, the hopes and aspirations of business owners and directors responsible for businesses with a turnover of £5million and above.

www.decisionmagazine.co.uk
mail@decisionmagazine.co.uk
07737 308371