

# THE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

Interview with Anna Gillings  
Managing Director, Gillings Planning



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.

# Why happiness helps develop a more sustainable approach

“What we are trying to demonstrate is that it is possible to run a business on the concept of happiness.”

Obviously Anna Gillings accompanies that statement with a smile. She’s the managing director of Gillings Planning, one of the largest independent planning consultancies on the south coast, whose approach, she explains, is anchored in a commitment to sustainable development’.

“Six years after we had established our values, which I had set out from day one as the founder of the business, we tweaked them because we had reached a point in our journey where we needed to really come together as a team,” she says.

“Our first value – happiness – stayed the same. Happy team means happy clients, resulting in a happy business because it’s successful.

“I know what you’re going to ask. Is there a quantifiable matrix for that? Our staff turnover is really low, but really you shouldn’t



*Anna Gillings*

need to be looking for ways to KPI your values. That misses the point. Values aren't an optional extra, an add-on. They're endemic in the business. And when the chips are down, the team will look to its leader to see if they react in a way which is true to the company's values.

“Another of our values is honesty. When we are asked to look at a piece of land, we are ruthlessly honest about its prospects. We don't take the view that we should try to tell the client what they want to hear. Also the right thing for us to say is whether a proposed development would result in environmental damage, although it's not our call whether our advice is accepted.

“How easy is it to turn away from values when a company is under pressure? Pretty easy I’d say. What then will keep you on the right path? I’d suggest a collective body of behaviour, with everyone keeping each other on track. A very simple for instance as to how that can work. Every lunchtime you could say you’re going to go for a walk, but after a week that might begin to slip. But if you’ve got a colleague also doing it, you’ll carry on.”

But Gillings isn’t naively suggesting that happiness and other values will deliver a sustainable business. “That requires the combination of ‘people, planet, profit,” she asserts. “Without people, a service company is nothing; we have to be responsible for the planet on which we live and work, and we need to make enough money.

“A company needs all three to be sustainable, and increasingly, businesses have publicly to be seen to be doing the right thing. Yet my faith tells me that doing the right thing isn’t about being seen and praised by the world at large for doing it. But the difference here is that telling people comes from wanting other businesses to be motivated to do it, not for praise.

“In our world, it’s about people at one company engaging with those at another; it’s all about relationships. Clients come to us because they know what we’re capable of, or they’ve looked us up on the internet and they believe they are aligned with our thinking.



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“So you can’t just make up some values and stick them up on the wall. For values to have any purpose, if they are to underpin the sustainability of a company, they have to be evident in everything you do.”

“A sustainable business has a consistency of approach and a culture which means its people are comfortable if they need to call a team member out,” adds Gillings. “A sustainable business is built on embedded values with everyone having the authority to check they are being applied.

“You don’t have to imagine the impact of someone behaving counter-culturally within the team or externally when it’s not called out – worse if it’s a behaviour of the boss and they aren’t challenged.

“On one hand, while it’s our people who will provide us with a competitive advantage, equally if our fees are too expensive, clients won’t be using our services. You can’t be the nicest people in the world following a set of values if you’ve priced yourself out of the market.

“And a sustainable business has to maintain momentum. It can be that new business might well just happen, but we take a business development action every day to constantly get our message out.

“That means as a company you have to be okay with how you present yourself. You can drive yourself mad making comparisons with competitors, and you can’t build a sustainable business that way. You have to believe in what you do.”

[gillingsplanning.co.uk](http://gillingsplanning.co.uk)

## About Brevity Marketing



***Kaia Vincent***

The interview with Anna Gillings 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](http://www.decisionmagazine.co.uk)  
[mail@decisionmagazine.co.uk](mailto:mail@decisionmagazine.co.uk)  
07737 308371