

THE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

Interview with Charles Robinson
Director, Jones Robinson



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.

Establishing three essential pillars

Whether it's a description which would be perfect for a business textbook or a fireside chat podcast, Charles Robinson is clear about how he would define the characteristics of a sustainable company.

Says the director of the multi-office residential estate agency Jones Robinson, "a sustainable company is based primarily on its people, the culture they are the custodians of, and the values which underpin that."

And then he adds: "I have a little saying: if your people get a kick out of pleasing the customer, then as a business you're in the right place."

Making sure the 'why' is at the forefront of everyone's thinking can't be taken for granted," he asserts. "Its importance could be communicated by some kind of osmosis when we were a one office firm. With six different locations now, that isn't going to happen, so having a sense of purpose serves as our anchor. I would suggest it is an important part of the DNA of a sustainable business.



Charles Robinson

“I remember when I asked our staff what they thought was our prime purpose as a business, some said it’s to sell and let property. Others suggested it was to make money.

“I replied, well, if it’s really about getting in a lot of money, why don’t we just rob a bank? They were aghast. You can’t do that, it’s illegal. So, I pointed out, which was the purpose of my comment, a business also needs boundaries, and went on to explain the reasons why we have values and a culture which delivers them. It is a big thing for me.

“Our set of values, the behaviours we abide by, provide us with guidance when we have to address a problem or make a decision. Those values need collective buy-in to work but will serve to ensure that the company is one which people are proud to be part of.

“That’s important from an attracting young talent point of view. The new generation is drawn to businesses which are demonstrably responsible.

“Then came our third foundation, mission. Our purpose and values should last forever but mission is an objective, a goal with a timeline. Purpose is the ‘why’, with values underpinning it, and mission is the target. What they all serve to do is to make us accountable, and surely that has to be an attribute of a sustainable business.

“I remember after we completed a particular promotional campaign, a householder called to say our leaflet had been laminated which made it impossible to recycle. That made me realise this really matters to people.”

“It’s a myopic view that making sure purpose, values, and mission are meaningful comes at a cost,” says Robinson. “I would describe it as doing the right thing, and that the return on any investment is the development of a sustainable business.

“A sustainable business is never about short-term profitability, but long-term viability. If you want an example of a bottom-line



benefit, values translate to behaviours which lead to customer satisfaction.

“Local reputation is important for an estate agency. The difference between our charges is that typically we can be up to fifty per cent more. But that’s not an impediment.

“If the customer says how can we justify that, it gives us the opportunity and permission to talk about our purpose and values and what that will mean for them. It follows that a tangible benefit of being valued driven will be there in your customer reviews.”

And Robinson provides another justification. “We’ve got a market share of about twenty-one per cent of all sales and lets across the area we cover,” he explains, “and across the patch we are competing against a total of one hundred and sixty estate agency offices.”

Part of the process of building that long-term viability is that rather than having a conventional staff handbook, Jones Robinson have produced what they call their ‘company ethos booklet’ with the title ‘The Way We Are’. In it there are examples of behaviours and the consequence of applying the firm’s values as behaviours, such as being calm and patient.

“At every training session we start with a recap of our values,” says Robinson. “It’s all about the delivery, and you need energy and focus to constantly do this. But if a business is to be sustainable, it has to have root and branch consistency.”

What influenced his thinking is what he experienced when he started his career working at an estate agency. “It was all about cost reduction and maximising profitability,” he explains. “There was this expression ‘squeeze the lemon’ which was applied not just to staff but the customer.”

At the age of twenty-nine, he was appointed to run a struggling subsidiary of an estate agency group and turned it around to be the third most profitable. But by now he was completely disillusioned by the experience. “Treating people as chattel didn’t fit in with my personal values.”

So Robinson joined up with a former colleague David Jones who had left to set up on his own.

“There is truth,” he believes, “in the saying that the moment you stop trying to sell and try to help instead is actually the moment you start selling. It’s about ascertaining need and then offering a solution, but only if you have it.

“The corporate world just wants the sale. Doing the right thing, what does it mean? I would say it’s having a moral compass, which is over and above governance and compliance. But it’s not enough to have vales and purpose. People need to walk the talk.

“So for example, we talk about integrity, but how many times have there been when a colleague says you’ve got a phone call and you tell them to say you’re in a meeting? It might seem a small thing, but people take their lead from the behaviours of the owner or manager of the business they work for, and this doesn’t tick the honesty box.”

According to a Gallup poll, sixty-eight per cent of customers said that staff attitude determined whether they choose or decide to stay with a company. Just eight per cent said only the cheapest price determines their choice.

“A house buyer isn’t drawn to us because of values but because of a property we have on our books,” agrees Robinson, “but they don’t pay our fees; it’s the vendor. And if they care about having a service provider which demonstrates it does the right thing,

which lives by values which resonate with them, then they will be drawn to us.

“But you can’t be a Waitrose and a Lidl at the same time. And we don’t compromise on our standards because in a particular set of circumstances it could win us an instruction, because that would take us down the lowest common denominator route.”

“At the core of a sustainable company,” says Robinson, “is a culture and brand which are so strong that its longevity can be as infinite as you want it to be. It’s about fulfilment for all the stakeholders.

“I don’t think you can build a sustainable company if you don’t love what you’re doing. And as a business owner or director, doing the right thing, having a sustainable company is the best pillow to have if you want to get a good night’s sleep.”

www.jonesrobinson.co.uk

About Brevity Marketing



Kaia Vincent

The interview with Charles Robinson 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