

THE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

Interview with Mat Rule,
Chief Executive, Toca.io



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.

Where to start? With a sense of purpose

“You can have an impressive mission statement and a set of meaningful values, but if you don’t have a company which is financially sound, you haven’t got the basis of a sustainable business which is going to have a long-term impact.”

To which Mat Rule, founder and chief executive of Toca-io adds what he believes to be the starting point for a sustainable business. Which is a sense of purpose, a mission if you will.

“Ours came out of a common frustration that the traditional methods of software development were slow, clunky, and simply out of date,” he explains. “Complex, expensive projects took forever to complete, hindering progress and innovation.

“So the reason for starting Toca-io was to make digital transformation faster, more affordable, and accessible to companies of all sizes.

“If a business is to become sustainable, I don’t believe it can have a chief executive who thinks they know all the answers. As a business progresses, the role of its leadership is to sharpen the ideas of the team and provide guidance, otherwise the future



Mat Rule

viability of the company is dependent on the entrepreneurial founder rather than having a sustainable platform based on motivated and engaged people.”

A test of the resilience of a sustainable business is when it is confronted with a moral dilemma, Rule believes. “What would happen if a potential customer completely contrary to your ethos came in with a big order at a time when your business really needed the work.

“Would you take it? I would argue you have to turn it down if it is so at odds with the values of your people, the very being of your company because while you gain an injection of revenue, at the same time you’re destroying the very fabric of your team and will inevitably have to hire new key people.

“Values are only one element of a sustainable business. Leadership has to demonstrate stoicism.”

“Subconsciously,” says Rule, “the characteristics the founder will look for in deciding their first hire will most likely mirror

their own values and beliefs, because they've got to be able to trust that person implicitly. That in itself should tell you why values are important as the company grows.

“But as time goes on, you have to let the company breathe, otherwise in the early stages of its development values could seem like the imposition of commandments. We crafted our values when we first moved office, so we could encapsulate what we are all about. Values have to be distilled so they aren't waffley, but then they can become bland and generic, and meaningless as a result.

“On the other hand there can also be disbelief if they're simply happy, clappy evangelical messages.”

That said, Rule isn't about to suggest that a company is going to be able to compete on moral values regardless of its product offering.

“Innately though,” he asserts, “a sustainable business is born out of the founders wanting to build something which make a positive impact on people's lives, with the belief that wealth will flow from that.

“If your teams are motivated, they will listen to the customer, care about the customer, and I think that's evidence of a sustainable business, because if you combine that with doing the right thing, the customer will want to have a continuing relationship with your company.”

Two completely different events shaped his thinking. “We were looking to hire a sales development representative and for the first interview arranged that candidates would log in and answer questions on video,” he recalls. “Someone responded by saying they thought it was an impersonal process and did we believe people should be treated like automatons.

“Then there was the time we did a pitch online to VCs who told us they were unhappy with our lack of diversity because there wasn’t a woman in our team of five. But only two per cent of software developers in the UK are women.

“So my point is that while the business trying to do the right thing could address the video question which was completely in our control, dealing with the VC’s observation wasn’t.

“Except that now one of our goals as a business is to see how we can help address the issue of girls dropping out of stem subjects because otherwise we aren’t going to be able to build diverse technology companies.

“I think the difference is that in both instances we weren’t consciously going against what our company stands for. How do you make people believe you? A company’s leadership has not only got to walk the talk but demonstrate that actions are being taken.”

According to Rule, applying Scope one, two, and then three emissions criteria mean that suppliers further down the supply



chain will have to meet better sustainability standards as prime contractors and the companies they work for need to have evidence of the full picture.

“But, he asks, is it sustainable for a company to be deemed carbon neutral in this country regardless of how their products are made in China?

“For a public company,” he suggests, “it will be shareholder sentiment which will influence whether it will be focused on the long-term game rather than immediate short-term gain.

“At the moment,” he senses, “it’s a difficult balance for a quoted company between values and shareholder pressure for a constantly increasing return on investment.

“An independently owned company which wants to build a platform to deliver a long-term mission has more choice as to where to strike that balance.

“And for a company to be sustainable, it can’t just veneer initiatives on to its business. The most that can achieve is a short-term win. Increasingly I believe there will be a competitive advantage in a company being able to demonstrate it is doing the right thing.

“What we need to keep in mind is that ‘sustainable’ isn’t something a company can boast about achieving. The thinking should be how do we take this to the next level, how do we continue to drive incremental change?

www.toca.io

About Brevity Marketing



Kaia Vincent

The interview with Mat Rule 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.

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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.

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