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R Power

With the new sustainability, mastering Reduce, Reuse, Recycle is just the first step.

By David Oakey -- Interior Design, November 1, 2001

In the late 1950s, when I was perhaps seven, I noticed an absence from the landscape around my home in England. Every previous spring and autumn, the fields where my father grew vegetables had bloomed tufts of vibrant pinks, purples, and greens as he blanketed the soil in fertilizing shoddy, residual dyed wool from the carpet mills in nearby Kiddeminster. But that year autumn turned into winter, and the harvested fields still lay drab. When I asked my father where the yarns had gone, he explained that they now contained nylon and moth-repelling chemicals, which were toxic.

Those fields so drained of color and life had only a fleeting impact on the mind of a seven-year-old, but they now resonate with me as an adult designer. Three decades after the environmental movement began, we are only starting to understand the notion of sustainability—and are still foggy about how to achieve it. However, as design and business both promote and respond to environmental awareness, it's becoming clear, even to such skeptics as myself, that sustainability goes much further than the mantra, albeit pertinent, of Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. In fact, these principles taken from nature apply to not only products and materials but also innovative, potentially profitable business models in ways that are simultaneously obvious and counterintuitive.

Indeed, sustainability may be as important to business as to the environment. *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, written in 1999 by Smith & Hawken cofounder Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, points out that most businesses continue to operate on a capitalist model first developed in the 18th century, when natural resources were abundant and labor availability was the primary constraint. With a scarcity of natural resources and a surplus of labor, our situation is now the reverse, and *Natural Capitalism* makes a compelling case that business models need to change accordingly.

What form should these changes take? Here we can look to biomimicry, the theory that natural organisms and processes offer the best models for solving human problems: A leaf showed us how to develop solar cells, the barbs on the seeds of certain weeds inspired Velcro, and Speedo learned to manufacture high-performance swimsuits by examining the propelling properties of sharkskin. In less concrete ways, nature can teach us about such concepts as marketing, too. Plants, for example, blanket the landscape with their seeds (as with dandelions), produce a few seeds that are better protected by shells (acorns), or bear fruit for dispersal by animals (apples). These three strategies—equivalent to low-cost, blanket marketing, focused, high-value marketing, and cobranding and copromoting, respectively—offer insights about disseminating a company's message.

On a larger scale, we can observe entire natural systems. Just as a tree or animal relies on the rest of the forest for survival, a business relies on other industries and even its competitors. Look at the success of PC technology, shared by many companies, over Apple's proprietary Macintosh operating system, and you'll see that a business often serves its own best interests by cooperating with its competitors.

Here I'm reminded of a magazine article I read several years ago. Two instructors were critiquing a student's athletic-shoe prototype, constructed of components that could easily be dismantled for recycling. One instructor criticized the design as unfeasible, citing its lack of pumps, gizmos, and other marketable features. The other instructor praised the shoe but added that the student would face the burden of convincing both manufacturers and consumers of its merits.

What biomimicry shows us—though the second instructor was right that the task of convincing looms large—is that sustainability isn't at odds with good business practices. It can be achieved in steps beginning with the familiar Reuse, Reduce, Recycle and continuing with Rethink and Redesign, for processes and systems in addition to products. By adopting a worldview that includes this broader definition of sustainability, businesses will not only have the satisfaction of being socially responsible but also benefit in terms of product innovation, operating efficiency, marketing success, and long-term financial health. Indeed, the student who designed the recyclable athletic shoe might be pleased to hear that Nike has begun to look to biomimicry to develop new practices.

Visiting my father 15 years after he stopped buying shoddy from the carpet mills—I had moved to the U.S. by then—I heard him complaining about weeds. Enamored of my new home, I proudly told him that Americans had a spray that could kill

weeds and their roots so they wouldn't grow back. "I once tried something like that, but I stopped hearing the birds sing," he told me. At the time, this cryptic statement made me think he was losing it. Today, I realize that my father, who never went to college, understood the impact our actions have on the environment better than I did. The spray killed the weeds, destroying the bugs' habitat, so the birds that ate the bugs stopped coming. If we make sustainability our driving concept, our businesses will grow in tandem with the environment instead of fighting it. We must finally acknowledge that 250 years of capitalism have something to learn from the experience of 4 billion years of life on our planet.

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