

# DOING WELL BY DOING GOOD: RAY C. ANDERSON AS EVANGELIST FOR CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

McClain Watson

*University of Texas at Dallas*

SUSTAINABILITY IS BECOMING an essential topic of 21st-century business communication (Kielstra, 2008; Lacy, Cooper, Hayward, & Neuberger, 2010). Dozens of forms of communication across thousands of firms are being used both to achieve a measure of operational sustainability and to publicize those efforts externally to the many external constituencies on whose attitudes and beliefs the success of those firms depend. The history of how this has come to be is interesting and important, but what I am interested in here is the fundamentally *narrative* nature of sustainability as a rhetorical topic and the degree to which telling stories about sustainability is becoming a critical business practice for companies of all kinds.

While most forms of external business written communication tend to be discrete, atomized, and dispatch-style (e.g., quarterly financial reports, press releases, Twitter posts), when businesses write about sustainability they typically take a longer view and use story-like narrative conventions to make an impact on readers. This makes sense given that any discussion of sustainability requires one to make a connection between what one is doing now and how that will impact the future. Think, for example, of an advertisement or press release touting investments an energy company is making in sustainable wind technology. The story typically goes, “We are making this investment today because it will pay off in the future and help ensure a cleaner environment for our kids.” The temporal projection is purely outward from the present into the future. Such statements about sustainability might be impressive and impactful, but they are typically not *dramatic* in a rhetorical sense because they do not contain the three temporal markers of traditional narrative (beginning, middle, end). While studies (“Corporate Sustainability Excellence,” 2008; World Business

Council for Sustainable Development, Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, Net Impact, Edelman, & Edelman Design Communications, 2008) show that the key to successful public business communication about sustainability is that it must feel *authentic* and *true*, this point about the dominant narrative trajectory of most public business communication about sustainability helps explain why the great majority of such communication takes the form of—and feels to readers like—mere advertising or public relations boilerplate. Add to this the fact that the success of the initiative being touted is stipulated a priori and likely never to be heard of again, and it is little wonder why the vast majority of sustainability storytelling achieves little lasting impact (“The State of Sustainability,” 2008).

Despite this, there are examples of public business communication about sustainability that use a different narrative form. In the following pages, I want to examine a recent book by one CEO who takes a very different approach in his sustainability narrative. His approach, while very hard won, has proven capable of making a significant impact both on industry and on the public mind.

## **THE CONVERSION NARRATIVE OF RAY C. ANDERSON**

Ray C. Anderson is the founder and CEO of Interface, Inc., the world’s leading producer of commercial carpet tiles. He has been called a “Hero of the Environment” by *Time Magazine* (2007), and “America’s Greenest CEO” by *US News and World Report* (Cohen, 1998). The 2007 Globescan Survey of Sustainability Experts ranked Interface, Inc. as the global company with the greatest commitment to sustainability (Anderson, 2009). Hundreds of times in dozens of different venues, Anderson has told the story of how he went from heading an extremely wasteful petroleum-based manufacturing company to being a guru of sustainability. What I want to show is that there is something particular about the structure of Anderson’s narrative that gives it its unique power and that has led to him being one of America’s most successful public communicators about business sustainability.

In a nutshell, what Anderson does is include “the past” into his sustainability narrative. Whereas most companies tell a sustainability story that begins now and moves into the future, Anderson’s narrative contains a more familiar Beginning (before)-Middle (change)-End (after) structure that is typically more aesthetically pleasing to

audiences. But this simple narrative addition does not only create aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, because he can start his story with a “before” and show his conversion from “plunderer of the earth” (Anderson, 2009, p. 225) to exemplar of how companies can “do well by doing good,” Anderson’s sustainability narrative delivers in spades what most can only dream of: authenticity and dramatic power.

## **Before**

The “Before” part of Anderson’s narrative is not pretty. (It is not for nothing that the book I draw on for Anderson’s quotes is titled *Confessions of a Radical Industrialist*.) Carpet making is an extremely wasteful, petroleum-dependent, and resource-intensive industry. Interface and its suppliers yearly “transformed more than a billion pounds of petroleum-derived raw materials into carpet tiles” and for decades Anderson’s plants sent six tons of carpet trimmings to the local landfill *every day* (Anderson, 2009, p. 8). What’s more, although Anderson obviously knew all this, he didn’t care. “What happened to [our materials when they reached the landfill]? I had no idea. Why should I? It was someone else’s problem, not mine. That’s what landfills were for” (Anderson, 2009, p. 8). Anderson’s job was to expand the business and fill the pockets of investors, not worry about the waste his company threw off. Interface followed all environmental regulations but, beyond that, had no environmental vision and didn’t think it needed one.

So far, this story of heedless industrial waste and environmental ignorance aligns squarely with the public’s impression of the mindset of most manufacturing companies. Anderson isn’t an evil genius, he isn’t malicious in his disregard of his company’s waste, he just doesn’t think it is his “job” to change a system that was “first and foremost, a waste-making machine” (Anderson, 2009, p. 40). This personal likeability and lack of defensiveness, combined with an almost-masochistic recounting of the scale of Interface’s waste generation, make the “Before” section of Anderson’s sustainability narrative at once familiar and anticipatory. We know Anderson cannot sustain both his personal likeability and his company’s wastefulness forever. Something will soon happen to force him to make a choice. The decisive moment approaches.

## **Epiphany**

In June 1994, a handwritten note from an associate in the research division crossed Anderson’s desk. The note said, “Some customers

want to know what Interface is doing for the environment. How should I answer?" Anderson had no answer. The associate recommended convening an internal environmental task force and Anderson gave his go-ahead. While struggling to prepare a speech to kick off the task force meeting, "as if by pure serendipity, a book, *The Ecology of Commerce* by Paul Hawken, arrived on my desk" (Anderson, 2009, p. 10). He read it. "I've often described the moment I finished reading that story as a spear in the chest. I stood indicted as a plunderer, a destroyer of the earth, a thief, stealing my grandchildren's future. And I thought, *My God, someday what I do here will be illegal. Someday they'll send people like me to jail*" (Anderson, 2009, p. 14).

This moment of breakthrough, of crisis, is the most dramatic of Anderson's sustainability narrative. Hawken helped Anderson see the errors of his past and guided him down a new path of environmental responsibility, commitment, and leadership. The sinner has been saved and is ready for his new role as evangelist for the cause. Because readers have seen the depths of Anderson's ignorance and the degree of Interface's environmental waste, this conversion has great power. But how do we know the conversion is true?

### **Since**

The remainder of Anderson's narrative, and the majority of his public communication, describes the degree to which his newfound commitment to sustainability has transformed Interface and led it to be not only the world's number one manufacturer of carpet tiles but the world's leading exemplar of industrial sustainability. With the enthusiasm of the convert, Anderson has reconfigured Interface and led it to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 82%, fossil fuel consumption by 60%, water use by 75%, all while increasing sales by 66% and doubling profits (Anderson, 2009). Anderson's goal is to summit "Mount Sustainability" and reduce Interface's environmental footprint to zero, something he expects to do in the next decade. Not content to reform only itself, with the creation of sustainability consulting firm Interface RAISE, Interface has also entered an entirely new industry, sustainability consulting, and has helped Wal-Mart to bring its outsourcing and supply chain procedures in line with rigorous sustainability targets. Interface's story shows that, with bold leadership and

a company-wide vision, any business can change its ways and begin doing well by doing good.

## **TELLING SUSTAINABILITY NARRATIVES IS A CRITICAL BUSINESS PRACTICE**

In this short piece, I have tried to show why Anderson's sustainability narrative has achieved such prominence in public discourses about corporate sustainability. Because most companies are not able or are unwilling to publicize their past environmental indiscretions, they are not able to tell a story as authentic and inspiring as the one Anderson can tell about Interface. Making operational changes, reducing carbon footprints, and eliminating waste are all critical steps toward becoming more sustainable. More and more important, though, are the stories business leaders tell about those changes and about their company's journey toward greater sustainability. As we move toward a business environment that will demand a greater degree of corporate sustainability, it seems clear that the telling of sustainability narratives will become an even more critical business practice in the years to come.

### **References**

- Anderson, R. C. (2009). *Confessions of a radical industrialist*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Cohen, W. (1998, December 28). *U.S. News and World Report*, 125(25), 51.
- Corporate sustainability excellence in context. (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.econtext.co.uk/downloads/CS-Excellence-in-Context.pdf>
- Kielstra, P. (2008). *Doing good: Business and the sustainability challenge*. Retrieved from [http://graphics.eiu.com/upload/Sustainability\\_allponsors.pdf](http://graphics.eiu.com/upload/Sustainability_allponsors.pdf)
- Lacy, P., Cooper, T., Hayward, R., & Neuberger, L. (2010, June). *A new era of sustainability: UN global compact—Accenture CEO study 2010*. Retrieved from [https://microsite.accenture.com/sustainability/Documents/Accenture\\_UNGC\\_Study\\_2010.pdf](https://microsite.accenture.com/sustainability/Documents/Accenture_UNGC_Study_2010.pdf)
- Time International (2007, October 17). Heroes of the environment. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/0,28757,1663317,00.html>
- The state of sustainability communication. (2008). Retrieved from <http://newsroom.imc2.com/pr/imc2/document/StateOfSustainabilityCommunications.pdf>
- World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, Net Impact, Edelman, & Edelman Design Communications. (2008). *Corporate responsibility and sustainability communications: Who's listening, who's leading, what matters most?* Retrieved from [http://www.edelman.com/expertise/practices/csr/documents/EdelmanCSR020508Final\\_000.pdf](http://www.edelman.com/expertise/practices/csr/documents/EdelmanCSR020508Final_000.pdf)

*McClain Watson coordinates undergraduate and graduate business communication courses and directs the writing lab in the School of Management at the University of Texas at Dallas. Address correspondence to McClain Watson, SM43, School of Management, University of Texas at Dallas, 800 West Campbell Road, Richardson, TX 75080; email: mcclain.watson@utdallas.edu.*

Copyright of Business Communication Quarterly is the property of Association for Business Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.