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Sustainability a way of business

Rachel Brown says green's the way for companies to go, writes Val Leveson

SINCE she was a child, Rachel Brown felt people needed to look after the environment better — and it's this passion that has forged her career path with the Sustainable Business Network.

"My parents were teachers and activists, so when I was a child I took part in such things as the stop Springbok tours campaign. At university, one of my lecturers was Jeanette Fitzsimons, which also had an effect."

Brown talks of her travels after university when she was "horrified" at the pollution and poverty in developing countries. She was also struck by the lack of compassion she saw about her.

"When I was back in New Zealand in the early 90s, I decided I wanted to be doing something so that this country doesn't go the same way."

That's when she decided to do a postgraduate diploma in environment and technology.

She then worked for a city council clean-up production campaign.

"It was voluntary for businesses to get into. I found that many hadn't really thought about environmental issues and it seemed they didn't have time to really think about what they were doing. That's when I set up the Environmental Business Network.

"So, at this time I was still working for the council, but was setting up this other concern too.

"The reason was I was finding that businesses weren't responding to council staff in the same way as they do with other business professionals.

"This was 15 years ago, and it was hard to persuade businesses to think at a higher level — my interest was not the basics of saving water or recycling, but what companies made and how they made it."

The business grew to have 850 busi-



DEDICATED: Rachel Brown, chief executive of Sustainable Business Network, has always felt passionate about caring for the environment.

PICTURE / TED BAGHURST

nesses on board. "At first I worked in my garage — then in town.

"I then merged with Businesses for Social Responsibility and we renamed the business the Sustainable Business Network," says Brown.

"We've now been going seven years. We are in the fifth year of the Sustainable Business Awards — which are being co-sponsored by the *New Zealand Herald*."

She says the awards help people to publicise the fact that they are a

sustainable business. "We help them tell their story. Recognition is so important. It's about the story behind the brand."

Brown says she would particularly like to get rid of the myth that sustainability equals cost.

"All businesses need investment because of the fast-paced nature of things — but there are also many cost benefits behind sustainability — it's known to increase customer loyalty.

"And it's known that the smartest

graduates want to work in ethically sound organisations.

"A business that incorporates fair trade and sustainability will inevitably attract good, thinking people. These values also aid retention — employees feel they're involved in a company that's doing good."

Brown uses the example of the merger of NZI and State into IAG. "These were competing insurance companies that joined together under the banner of using sustainability to

create a common issue. Usually when companies merge morale goes down — but in this case staff loyalty went up tremendously. People were pleased to be working for a progressive company," she says.

"The fact is that people want to work for a place that they feel is doing good — there is a growing preference for working with an ethical business."

If you wish to find companies that take sustainability seriously, you can find them www.greenlist.co.nz.

If you particularly want to get a job that focuses on sustainability, Brown says many companies do have environmental management roles (which tend to be compliance focused) or sustainability jobs — often manager positions.

She makes the point that the smaller to middle-sized companies often can't employ one person dedicated to that role — but find knowledge in this area is important.

"This is particularly true for exporting companies — [with] the growth in fair trade and environmental awareness overseas there's been a dramatic shift. There's lots of demand for people who know how to respond."

She suggests it's wise for people doing business degrees to include sustainability subjects in their studies. "Knowing about these things can be a real fast track into senior roles."

Brown says businesses that want the sustainability tag need to realise they have to walk the talk.

"It's not about greenwashing — people see through that pretty quickly, particularly with the existence of the internet and fast-paced media.

"Remember — a bad reputation sticks and undermines everything else that you have done — that's what BP is learning now."

Brown says the marketing opportunities with having a sustainable business are enormous. She says the sustainability awards are to celebrate companies that are walking the talk — and to give them publicity.

"In New Zealand, many companies just say, 'Well, I'm doing fine'. The awards are to show them that other companies are doing more than that, so the others can look at it and say, 'Well, if they can do it...'"

Winning also gives a company's staff pride in their workplace. "Anyone can enter — but there is a process to go through and 10 categories which include vision, values, how staff are managed, future thinking and more. Companies find it valuable going through the learning processes."

If you want to gauge your sustainability progress, go to the online tool www.getsustonline.org.nz.

MOVERS & SHAKERS

■ Mercer has named Graeme Mather as market business leader for its Investment Consulting business in Australia/New Zealand, as the company continues to strengthen its leadership in the Asia Pacific region.

■ The Auckland corporate group welcome senior associate Mark Tan back to Simpson Grierson. Nick Wilson also joins the Auckland commercial property group as an associate, after two years at a leading London law firm.

■ Daniel Erickson has joined the partnership at specialist employment law firm, Kiely Thompson Caisley.

■ McCann Worldgroup has appointed Sue-Ellen Craig to the newly created role of general manager in the Auckland office.

■ New Zealand Post Targeted Communications has made three new appointments as it looks to grow its presence in the digital arena. David Murphy was appointed as strategic consultant — Digital, Ritsa Magiannis joins as e-marketing consultant and Hamish Congalton as client solutions manager — Digital.

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