



F R E U I S

PLAN B | BUSINESS UNUSUAL PRESENTS

7 SURPRISING LESSONS OF SUSTAINABILITY



VINEETA GREENWOOD
Founder of Wholegrain Digital

IN 2007, TWO BOLD IDEALISTS, TOM AND VINEETA GREENWOOD, ABANDONED THEIR CAREERS IN THE HOPE OF MAKING A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

After initially weathering a few lean financial years, the couple were surprised to find their principled approach beginning to attract some fans among big name brands.

Here, Vineeta gives her seven-point guide for businesses who hope to make a difference.



1

DREAM IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT

It was 2007, my boyfriend Tom and I started up a tiny company based in Wolverhampton.

We were tired of the jobs we had, and knew we wanted to form a business that would do something good for the planet, as well as doing good ourselves. Together, we also thought it would be a good idea to consider the businesses that we'd like to work for, so we drew up a list of our top three clients. It looked like this (top right).

That list seemed like exactly what it was – a wish-list. It certainly wasn't something we talked openly

about, but it helped us to define the kind of business we wanted to be. Five years later, we were both shocked when we had an email from M&S to enquire about working with them. Tom was so surprised he thought it was a spam enquiry.

By the end of the year we were working for M&S. By the next year Solar Century had also come on board, and by 2014 Ecover had signed up too.

It helped that we had set out our intentions clearly and that we were wishing for things that we wanted as a business without any other ulterior motive.

So when each of those relationships happened, it seemed to be for the right reasons.

The feedback we got was 'You're tiny, but what you're doing is good and that's why we think you're worth talking to.'



2

YOU CAN BE PRINCIPLED AND ADAPTABLE

Tom and I had begun working together when we lived in the same flat. We had fallen in love and wanted to spend more time together. Tom had a job making fireplaces more energy efficient and I was working as an electronics engineer for a company that made signalling systems. They were interesting jobs, but they didn't seem fulfilling.

Together, we quit our jobs to form a branding agency. Actually, we didn't have any branding experience at the time, we just knew that a lot of ethical companies made great products but marketed themselves poorly.

Together, we spent a long time studying what was needed and began building a business. But, as we began to gain clients, we realised that what these emerging companies really needed was not a branding service, but a website design service that would give them a public profile.

The more we looked at WordPress, the more we realised that most companies didn't want proprietary systems that would lock them in to working with a single web design firm. Instead, they were looking for a system that they could share and which would evolve over time.



At the same time, Bloomberg and No 10 Downing St were moving their platforms onto WordPress. We began to specialise in WordPress and for over a decade, we've been using it at scale for 'positive' business, the public sector and charities. We had found our niche.

3

NO MATTER YOUR SIZE, YOU CAN STILL SAY 'NO'

It was very tough in the early years. We worked for four years before we had a decent income. We just knew we had to make the business work, because we're not the sort of people who take orders very well – we're too rebellious!

Throwing in the towel was not an option, so we put our ethics before food, and said 'No' to things we didn't want to do. In some ways, it was lucky that we had enough savings from our previous jobs and we didn't have kids – because it's really not easy if you're poor.

We turned down a lot of clients. But then, as we built a really good portfolio of companies, we

began attracting other more ethical clients. Over the years, not everyone has shared our approach, and we've lost some huge accounts, including one or two when it almost bankrupted the business, as we tried to get rid of them.

But today many of our staff have been through those experiences with us and they understand that as a company we will continue to stand up for what we believe in.

These days we have a grading system, with a red list of companies we won't work for – anyone promoting gambling or binge drinking for instance – then there are grey projects, for companies



who are not doing any damage, but who are not necessarily making the world any better.

Finally, there's our green list of those who are actively making the world better. It's a grading system that still allows people with our business to challenge each judgement from their own point of view – but it gives us clarity on what we will and won't do.

4

SUCCESS ISN'T ALWAYS WHAT YOU THOUGHT IT WAS

You can be too successful! You become stressed because you have too much work and can't serve everyone.

Clients all come at once, like buses, and then all disappear at once. When they all arrive together, you can have the illusion of success and until something like the Coronavirus comes along and you realise, it's an illusion.

Success is definitely subjective. For me, if everyone is happy and getting training time and also time with their family that's success. If the business was making more money, but we were all working evenings and weekends, I would consider that as a failure. In the same way, when we've had too many employees, I felt that I am losing my personal connection with the staff, whereas the way it is now, I can maintain my sanity and it feels controllable.



5

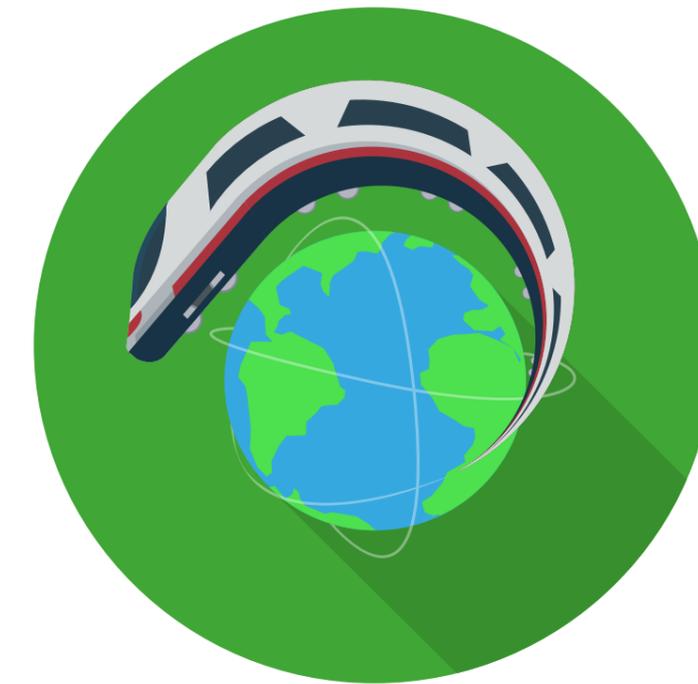
BUILD THE WORLD YOU WANT TO SEE

We offer our staff incentives that might be considered unusual at other companies. For instance, if you have renewable energy at home, we give you an extra day of holiday. It was an idea that began three years ago and now for the first time, as well as using 100% renewable energy at our offices, our staff also use 100% renewable energy at home too.

Of course, not every one of our staff is as excited by the idea of renewable energy as Tom and I, but they like the time off – so that's why they all do it.

Our team also get a day off either side of their holiday if they go by train, rather than travelling by plane. It is an idea that not only gives them extra time off, but makes it a more leisurely journey to come back from wherever they've been.

We also pay for their use of Santander bikes and we encourage the use of electric taxis. There's even a company policy of encouraging staff to eat plant-based meals at our company Christmas meal and on team outings.



BRIGHT IDEA

If an employee has renewable energy at home, give them an extra day off.

6

HIRE POSITIVE PEOPLE AND GIVE THEM SOME FREEDOM

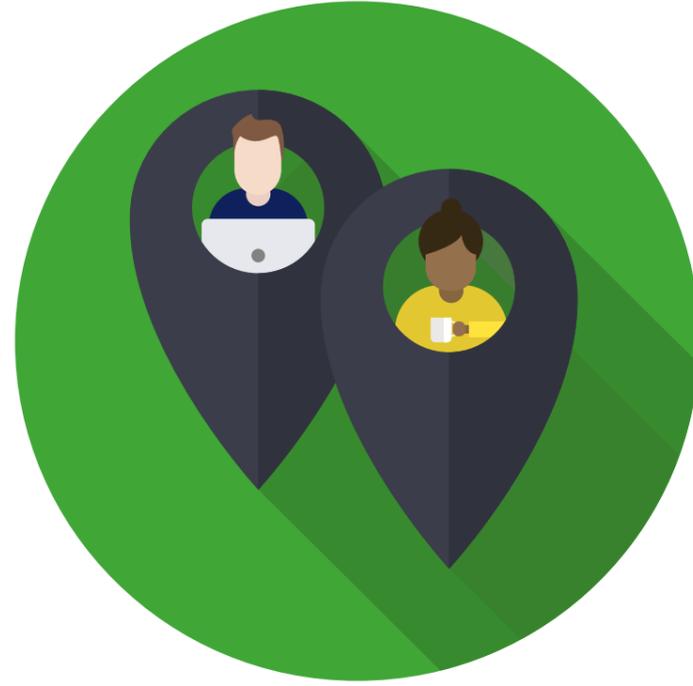
We look to hire people who have a positive intent, whether that means they have passion for trying to end homelessness, living more sustainably, or even to just raise their children well. Although that stipulation certainly doesn't mean that we expect everyone to have the same approach to life – if everybody thought the same way you definitely wouldn't stand to benefit that much as a company.

While we're based in Somerset House in central London, we have also always encouraged remote working. My husband Tom and I go in two to three times a week. Until lockdown, every Thursday

was a fixed London day for all the staff, although some team members prefer to work from the office more regularly. We have definitely noticed the importance of checking in on one and another, without regular contact it can be lonely for people working from home – and it's something that's important to monitor.

Over the years, because we encouraged people to be nice to each other, we occasionally found some people were able to get away with naughty behaviour and it's something we've learned to deal with. When somebody is hiding, or not

contributing, you need to be in a position to give the right feedback that stops them acting that way and addresses that behaviour. We've definitely got better at that over the years – but, at the same time, we're also very lucky with the staff we have today.



7

BECOMING A B CORP IS A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION

We were working with Ecover and our contact there kept saying we should join them and become a B Corp, but we always felt confident that we were working sustainably as a business.

Then in 2016, we changed our minds. Tom filled out the assessment and we were shocked – we didn't pass. We thought: 'How is that possible?'

But, while we were doing everything right, we had no framework or model to compare ourselves to.

So, we were delighted when we were finally certified in March 2017 in time for our 10th anniversary and we celebrated with a party and gluten-free cupcakes!



FACT BOX

NAME Wholegrain Digital

BUSINESS Sustainable website design

MISSION To create the best websites in the world, use our business as a force for good, and help to accelerate the shift to an Internet that's good for people and planet

FOUNDED 2007

FOUNDER Vineeta and Tom Greenwood

EMPLOYEES 16

TURNOVER £750,000 per annum

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