

# **Ecodesign and Sustainable Business Practice: Insights from design-led SMEs in Wales (UK)**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper outlines some key lessons for industry uncovered in a study carried out by Design Wales into how two Welsh small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are rising to the challenge of ecodesign and sustainable business practice.*

**Key words:** *SMEs, ecodesign, sustainable business practice, interviews*

## **1. Introduction**

Increasingly, ecodesign and sustainable business practice is becoming important to businesses worldwide. Until recently, action has mostly centered on large, international companies. However, SMEs represent a key element of national economies throughout the world<sup>1</sup>, and they play a significant role in the design, development, and manufacture of new products. Ecodesign presents SMEs with an opportunity to create a competitive advantage. Sustainable business practice maximizes benefits for SMEs as well as their stakeholders.

Established in 1994, Design Wales is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) to provide free and independent advice on all aspects of design to Welsh industry and to offer strategic design advice to the WAG. Practical support is provided by a team of eight advisors via one-to-one advice and a programme of seminars and workshops to help companies realize and achieve their design-related objectives.

Design Wales are committed to understanding and addressing the needs of Welsh SMEs. In 2004 the

authors interviewed David Colwell of David Colwell Design and David Heatt of howies® to gain an insight into how these two Welsh SMEs are rising to the challenge of ecodesign and sustainable business practice.

David Colwell is an international award winning furniture designer, with his designs displayed in collections throughout the world. David Colwell avidly embraces sustainable design thinking and practice. His designs explore the use of fast-grown ash and techniques such as steam bending. His passion is to create furniture that addresses real issues for the future.

*“On the principle that an interesting answer is most likely to come from an interesting question, I designed this furniture with sustainability high on the agenda. Really good design is about visualizing a better tomorrow.” David Colwell, 2004*

howies® operates in the overcrowded, ultra-competitive sports clothing and accessories market and has won numerous international design awards. It was also recently listed as one of the UK's top “ethical brands.” howies® embraces social and ethical responsibility<sup>2</sup>, and aspires to have as little impact on the environment as possible through careful selection and use of organic materials. The company communicates these brand values to its target market and stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> SMEs account for more than 90 percent of all firms in Wales.

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<sup>2</sup> howies® donates 1 percent of its annual revenues to environmental and social projects.

*“Is less bad any better? Ideally it is better to be perfect! Zero impact is an aspiration.” David Hieatt, 2004*

## 2. Methodology

The interviews were semi-structured covering certain basic themes around ecodesign and sustainable business practice; definitions, difficulties in achieving, examples of products and services, values associated with, relevance to industry, the role of multiple stakeholders, costing and education - but the specifics varied depending upon the expertise and experiences of both the organizations and the interviewees. These themes formed the basis for a conversational guide which was a key starting point for discussing the complicated, multi-faceted topics of ecodesign and sustainable business practice. Additional data was obtained from brochures, websites, and the authors' personal experiences and through reviewing the organizations' product ranges.

## 3. Lessons for industry

The study provided a unique insight into how two Welsh SMEs are rising to the challenge of sustainable business practice [1]. Crucially, it emphasized that ecodesign is just good design. Their key reasons for adoption serve to reinforce many principles which are becoming more widely accepted by industry:

- Environmental, social, and economic factors are linked—therefore, business can no longer be judged purely on the profit it makes.
- Long-term planning is needed if businesses are to be made sustainable.
- A growing market demand exists for ecodesign-led products.

The study also uncovered some key lessons that may be applied to industry as a whole.

- Industry must awaken to the value of ecodesign—companies must develop a passion to include sustainable business thinking in everything they do.
- Values associated with ecodesign and sustainable business practice includes

honesty, integrity, patience, and creativity. These values must be maintained at all costs.

- It is critical to build the right team. Employees must strive for the same values as the company they work for.
- Business requires strong leadership to make it happen. Designers can lead the way.
- Functional products can be designed to look fashionable, whereas fashionable products are not always functional.
- Developing a strong brand can be vital and it is critical to communicate your values clearly and consistently, both internally and externally.
- Multi-stakeholder involvement is necessary to place sustainability firmly on the map.
- Life cycle thinking must become commonplace. This applies to industry worldwide and will ensure that the true cost of products and services is understood by consumers and by stakeholders in general. (Government driven life cycle costing may have an important role to play here).

The study demonstrated that ecodesign and sustainable business practice involves much more than products, processes, and services; they encompass all aspects of a business, and require all stakeholders to carefully examine their beliefs and values. To move forward it is clear that everyone must take responsibility!

## References

[1] F. O'Connor and I. Cox, “Sustainable Responsible Design: Insights from Wales (UK)”, *Design Management Review*, DMI, Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 73-79.

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