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Switching the Sustainability Paradigm: From Demanding Perfection to Authenticity

There is no such thing as perfection in corporate sustainability. It's all a journey, and it's all relative. It's time to switch the paradigm and get more authentic. And that goes for consumers as well.

Submitted by: **Elaine Cohen**

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By Elaine Cohen

This piece "[Decoding Nestlé Waters North America's Sustainability Journey: Environmental Villain?](#)" got me thinking.

Written by [Aman Singh](#), a commentator, editor and journalist who I respect tremendously, we might be forgiven for believing that the article was prompted by the need for a little positive PR. In her interview with Nestlé Waters North America's Corporate Affairs Exec Heidi Paul, Singh begins by asking her:

"With widespread and consistent criticism levied at the company for commoditizing water, adding plastic to landfills and turning what many feel is a basic human right into a sellable product, how can the company legitimately say it is creating shared value?"

Paul then launches into the Nestlé Waters rationale:

"...if people don't have access to bottled water, 63 percent say they will buy some other beverage from a package instead, often a sugared or caloric drink with a greater environmental impact."

Seriously?

It's like saying "If I hadn't stolen the Crown Jewels, somebody else would have."

See how fast that argument holds water (bottled or otherwise) before a High Court judge. Justifying a business line by the fact that it's a less bad alternative to even worse business lines is an abuse to the intelligence of the company's stakeholders and

certainly doesn't provide a positive rationale for a business which clearly makes Nestlé Waters **quite a lot of profit** (8.9 percent trading operating profit margin on 2012 sales of almost \$ 8 billion). Nestlé Waters has a vested financial interest in selling more water, whether or not this is the sustainable choice for people, society or planet.

Living With[out] Our Vices

So what makes **Nestlé Waters** so different from almost any other company on earth? How many corporations can actually say that every one of their business lines meets a compelling social or environmental need, and does so in a sustainable way?



What about alcohol? Could we live without alcohol? What about disposable diapers? Chewing gum? Cosmetics? Fabric conditioner? SUVs? Golf clubs? Party hats?

And of course, let's not forget the tobacco industry. Even a business whose product harms people's health stakes a claim to our sustainable future.

The point is, where do you draw the line?

The argument that bottled water is an unnecessary and abusive burden on planetary resources may or may not be relevant, but if it is, it's no different to most of the businesses that are out there to make a profit by selling products that people could probably do without.

"Quality of life" is relative. Meeting a need can be justified and rationalized in many different ways. So who are we kidding?

Nestlé Waters says that **per capita consumption of bottled water** in the U.S. is on the increase and has now reached 31 gallons annually. People are buying bottled water. People who buy it apparently believe it offers them some benefit. It's legal. Nestlé Waters is breaking no laws in marketing and just like other industries that manufacture, market and distribute "unsustainable" products, does that act make it "sustainable"?

Certainly not. But who's the judge?

Defining & Judging Sustainability

Sustainability can be defined in terms of degree and interpretation. The sustainability movement has moved away from "doing less harm" to the notion of "creating shared value", pioneered, ironically, by parent company **Nestlé** who has turned CSV into a brand almost as big as Perrier.

The line between doing business and doing sustainable business is not a single stroke however. It's a series of strokes, and in between, there are some strokes which don't align with our model of sustainability perfection. There are many companies, including Nestlé, who do fabulous things. In many parts of the world, **Nestlé's contribution to meeting social and environmental needs**, and advancing economic development which improves people's lives, is outstanding.



In some business lines (dare I throw in the **breast-milk controversy** as well), no matter how glossy the PR it's packaged in, maybe it's profit before people and profit before planet. The same profit that fuels CSV might also fuel CSG (where G is greenwash).

So what options are open to Nestlé Waters?

Commit to ensuring that all of its business lines pass the sustainability litmus test and get out of selling the scam that bottled water is said to be?

Or change the rhetoric and talk about the fact that Nestlé Waters is a legal, profitable business, providing consumer choice, managed in as sustainable way as possible, where possible, such as through recycling and water conservation efforts.

And what if Nestlé Waters said:

"We do what we can with what we have. We know that bottled water has downsides in terms of sustainability, as do many other products, but we try to minimize them. We know that consumers, in certain circumstances, prefer to consume bottled water and we provide that option."

Would that sound more authentic than:

"If we didn't sell bottled water, people would buy sugary drinks and get even more obese, therefore it's okay."

Switching Our Paradigms – and The Right to Judge

We need to switch our paradigm.

We are not the judge and jury of sustainable business. As long as we make the choice not to live like Fred and Wilma, we consume products we like, desire, appreciate, want, crave, display and purchase from companies that in some ways, offer real sustainable value through some of the things they do, and in other ways, destroy



that value. No one has come up with a way of unequivocally measuring who does more of what. Every company on earth does some of both.

Sustainability needs less rationalization, justification and ping-pong discourse about the relative sustainability merits of different products. What we all need is, simply, more honesty and more authenticity, both on the part of our corporations and also on the part of ourselves: consumers, employees, suppliers and critics, alongside action to advance more sustainable business activities.

If we seek all-encompassing sustainability perfection, we won't find it. What we should seek instead is an authentic reflection of motivations, behaviors and impacts. Theirs and ours.

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joe sibilia · a year ago

Elaine. Thanks for the great post. It takes a lot of courage for a company to extend their point of view in a Tweet chat. And, it takes a lot of courage to challenge them. The new media will accelerate change and has some risks and benefits. If we look at this over the long term, Nestle and/or any other multi national would not be motivated to participate in the conversation. That's changing. Governments have shown an inability to really affect the necessary improvements in society. Business, with its innovation, profit motive, conscience and impact can really be the vehicle for improving society. Let's keep them on track.

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elaine cohen → joe sibilia · a year ago

Thanks Joe!

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Hugo Skoppek · a year ago

Your point that sustainability is an ethical deed is well taken. It has been said that consumption is a moral act. So is production. Since we all leave a footprint on this planet, the ultimate question for citizens as well as corporate persons is: "Can we justify the expense?"

Given the fact that we have just about entered the time of year when we start living on credit, that may be a good question to ask.

<http://www.footprintnetwork.or...>

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elaine cohen → Hugo Skoppek · a year ago

Hi Hugo, yes indeed. Consumerism is the flip side of corporate irresponsibility. It takes two to tango.

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JeffMowatt · a year ago

There's only one way I know of to be authentic and that's to walk the talk. The concept of capitalism for social benefit existed long before 'creating shared value' and it was reasoned not in support of commoditising water but to de-commoditise children who had become a profit centre for organised crime. So authentic was this, that the author lost his life refusing to give up on it. When I tried to reason the case to Mark Kramer, I was censored. <http://economics4humanity.word...>

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