

RACHEL BROWN

SUSTAINABLE
BUSINESS
NETWORK CEO



Rachel Brown is one of the most influential people in New Zealand's business community. Having started the Sustainable Business Network in 2002, Rachel works hard to help make New Zealand a model for sustainability. In early 2018 she was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit for years of service to sustainable business.





Interview by Claire Dilks & Nicola Hoogenboom
STAPLES RODWAY WOMEN IN BUSINESS
www.staplesrodway.co.nz/wib

Q: *What influenced you to get into sustainable business?*

A: I had activist parents, but we grew up in Howick, which was going through massive development in the late 60s and 70s. It was going from a rural part of Auckland to a high end, expensive suburb. A lot of the people who lived around us in our neighbourhood were MDs of global corporations and my parents were lovingly called the Hippies of Howick.

My parents were very values based and when we were little we used to get taken out to stop roading developments through mangrove swamps. My Mum was a scientist, so she would be looking at sediment samples and showing them to us kids, talking about vertebrates and fish life.

All the while the next door neighbours' parents were involved in car companies. So, I was able to see both sides and I could see the value of both.

I saw that business is really opportunity focused, they can see things really well and they make things happen fast, whereas on the negative side of the social movements tend to be the 'no, no, no' type, which is not very helpful. I wanted to look at how we could change things, rather than just say that we can't do things.

Q: *Why did you decide to start the SBN?*

A: I started working in sustainable business just before 2000. Before I was running the environmental business network, I was working in sustainable business for [ex-Waitakere City Mayor] Bob Harvey, where I realised really quickly that the business community were wary of government agencies, who were seen as stopping progress.

At the time, I was trying to say "there is a brighter way of doing business that looks after people, and the environment, while doing well, so let's work that piece out." They used to always look at me and say "that's really interesting, now look, there is a roading sign on the road, which is in the wrong place, can you get that moved." That's what they wanted to talk to me about. What I realised was that if business was going to follow anyone, they were going to follow each other, so I started an organisation of businesses that were doing this stuff. That was my part time... hobby... and then it eventually took over my life, so SBN was started in 2002 and it was a coming together of a bunch of different organisations. Businesses leading the charge was my mission.

Q: *What does sustainability mean to you?*

A: For me sustainable really is about the intergenerational and long-term. For that to work well you have to be able to live well, make money well, while looking after each other and the planet.

Q: *What does SBN do?*

A: We do a lot around connecting businesses and do a lot of events. Simply putting them in the same room, they can often find great things to do. They are like-minded, so they don't have to explain where they are coming from because they are already on the same page.

We also inspire people, because in business there are very few companies out there who genuinely lead. Initially somebody's example in one place, you may not think relates to you, but when you look at it, you think "we could take this part here, change it this way and use it". Our awards (NZI Sustainable Business Network Awards) are also part of how we inspire businesses every year.

We have a big piece around "act" — encouraging our members to do things themselves. We pull them together to collaborate, from making resources together, creating best practice guidelines, to big systemic projects, like our Million Metres Streams project or the Circular Economy. This is the opposite of the Linear Economy, "Take, Make, Waste". Take it



out of the ground, make it into waste. The Circular Economy looks at how we can make it so it never goes into waste.

We also advise companies, so if they have no idea what they can do, we help them start.

Q: How many people work for SBN?

A: We have around 20 people working for us and we also have business connectors around the country who are not staff, but affiliates.

Q: How do you fund it all?

A: We have an innovate funding stream. Membership is still the main funding for our work, but then we pull collaborations together, which are co-funded. The Million Metres Streams project is largely funded through crowdsourcing, which is working really well. Interestingly, we do get a lot of individuals, but the biggest source of funding for that is coming from business, not from individuals.



The Million Metres Streams Project is working to clean up NZ's waterways

Q: Do you notice that there has been a shift in attitude surrounding sustainability?

A: The biggest shift for sustainability is that it has gone from being an add-on for companies, the sponsorship relationship, etc., to looking at what they do as a business. Asking what their skill set is, seeing how they can influence from the inside out.

There was big growth up to 2007, then a big crash in 2008, then slowly rebuilding. But now it is in the space of "how do we grow a sustainable economy?"

Q: We have been doing a lot in our organisation, including becoming CEMARS accredited, do you think there is much space in the service sector to become more sustainable?

A: I think that the service sector is the brains behind business. Accountants for example can either choose to support sustainability or undermine it by seeing it solely as a cost. Staples Rodway already does a lot in helping sustainable organisations and you could be a massive influencer in the area of sustainable growth, as you deal with so many locally-owned businesses. These sorts of businesses really do need help

and it is often their lawyers and accountants that they go to. Some advisors will say that you are wasting your time, and not support someone's vision, like Ethique (see our story on page 20). If Ethique's founder had hit advisors that had said she was wasting her time, she would have kept going on her mission, but without the support she needed. But somebody getting in behind her and talking to her about making more money, or faster money, or different money by doing great stuff, or through alliances, makes it an easier mission.

It is a choice and it always comes down to individuals, you will meet accountants and lawyers who are giving great advice and influencing. And service providers can lobby for change. The tax working group, for example, could be bringing this into the agenda.

Q: What is coming in the future?

A: For SBN our big push is for the Circular Economy. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation is massive and is looking for more examples on-the-ground. New Zealand is ideal for that, we are small, interconnected. You can talk to your Prime Minister, leaders of industry, community organisations. You can bring the group together because of having such quick access. The challenge is getting things funded.

Q: What does the business environment look like these days?

A: In the early days, I was the young woman in a room full of blokes, and it is still mainly men. If you go to a CEO forum, if there are women there they will be senior, but generally not the CEO.

I used to have to go to meetings where I had to learn some rugby language, just to talk to some of these people at networking drinks after these forums.

Sometimes, when I say things from a people or planetary angle, I get looked at like I've lost the plot! I spoke to a woman on the board of one of our largest corporates the other day, who said the same thing. She said that she tries to bring the soft stuff into the board room and they don't get a look-in. There is a difference between men and women and there are not enough women in these senior roles.

Q: Do you think we would be more sustainable if we had more women at the boardroom table?

A: I do, but it isn't just women, it is diversity. Women, Maori, people who are from cultures that are more community focused. It is good for business.

Q: What are your proudest moments?

A: Most recently it would be being awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit. I am very self-critical, I look it and think that I have been doing this for 20 years and question what I have done, but it reminds me how far we have come. Funnily, I have no idea who nominated me! It really is an honour being recognised for the work I have been doing.

Another is being picked by Al Gore eight years ago to be part of a 24-hour global broadcast. There were 24 people,

including Al Gore and I was the New Zealand representative, which was pretty amazing.

Meeting Anita Roddick (Founder of The Body Shop) was another. It was pretty scary for me, she has such a big personality and this amazing laser focus. And she really doesn't suffer fools! She was an amazing woman.

I am also really proud of the work we are doing in Million Metres right now. We are pulling together so many diverse players, from the people who want to save their local stream to these passionate business people who want to throw money at it. And the knock-on effect of cleaning up our rivers is that it helps our oceans.

Q: *What has been your biggest challenge?*

A: Personally — trying to not work all the time.

For SBN it has been the past ten years and needing to bust the perception of cost vs. investment. Our name isn't always helpful — the S words gets in the way. Recently research with NZI reinforced that businesses operating with sustainability in mind are doing well, but the ones who didn't, it was because they saw it as a cost.

Q: *Who do you look up to?*

A: Lots of people — people like Taika Waititi; Al Gore — his Inconvenient Truth really brought a lot of awareness; Anita Roddick — she was incredible; Dame Anne Salmond — her storytelling is amazing and she brings in Iwi beautifully.

Q: *What are your tips for women looking to get into leadership positions?*

- A:**
1. Don't buy into the male-dominated culture, bring your true self into the game.
 2. Be bold — hold your truth and share it.
 3. Don't hold yourself back, get up there and do it — push for the things you think need to happen.
 4. Bravery — a lot of people won't do things because they haven't done them before, or they are a bit awkward. Pull in a network of supporters.



The Circular Economy is an integral aspect of Rachel's work at SBN

SUSTAINABILITY GROWING IN STAPLES RODWAY'S AUCKLAND OFFICE

As part of our Auckland office's CEMARS certification on 30 March 2017 we have formed a sustainability committee, where we come up with new initiatives to improve the environmental impact of our office.

Since becoming accredited, our electricity usage has been reduced by over 30%. This is due to a change in our overhead office lighting to LED bulbs.

Recycling bins have also been placed around the office to encourage our staff to make conscious decisions about their waste and to reduce the negative impact this waste can have on the environment. We have also taken this opportunity to implement compostable waste bins.

Low levels of chemicals such as carbon monoxide and formaldehyde can be removed from indoor environments by plant leaves alone — so we have decided to distribute a number of plants that specifically target air purification. Of course they are nice to have around, too.

We are continuously improving our environmental practices, including our next initiative, which is a multi-layered effort to reduce paper usage. Watch this space!

