

Sustainable Responsible Design: Insights from Wales (UK)

by Frank O'Connor and Iain Cox

As Frank O'Connor and Iain Cox share two cases to illustrate what Design Wales is doing to promote responsible design among SMEs, it is evident that several elements are needed to implement what turns out to be a complex mandate. Governments must support the agenda with appropriate policy. Companies must make the commitment to value-based brands. Designers have to contribute relevant expertise, and consumers must be willing to buy.



Increasingly, sustainable responsible design (SRD) is becoming important to businesses worldwide as supply-chain pressures, market demands, and legislation have pushed it to the top of the agenda. Until recently, action has mostly centered on large international companies. However, small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) represent a key element of national economies throughout the world,¹ and they play a significant role in the design, development, and manufacture of new products. SRD presents SMEs with an opportunity to create a competitive advantage, maximizing benefits for their businesses, as well as for their stakeholders.

1. SMEs account for more than 90 percent of all firms in Wales.



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Financed by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), Design Wales provides free and independent advice on all aspects of design to SMEs, helping them to realize and achieve their design-related objectives. Practical support is provided by a team of eight advisors via one-to-one advice and via a program of seminars and workshops. Design Wales also offers strategic advice to the WAG; this is frequently based on research undertaken to address the needs of Welsh SMEs.

Design Wales has recently been commissioned by the WAG to establish international best practice in government, academia, and firm-level SRD initiatives and practice, and to develop a detailed proposal for a Welsh SRD initiative. The long-term

objectives are to encourage and enable a long-term strategic approach to SRD in this country. It is anticipated that such an initiative would apply SRD thinking and practice to Welsh SMEs from a range of sectors, initially over a three-year period.

What do we mean by SRD? It's not hard to see that what we call sustainable responsible design is really just good design. However, for clarity, Design Wales uses the following working definition:

Sustainable responsible design follows a holistic "life cycle thinking," multi-stakeholder approach, taking into consideration all the key environmental, social, and economic impacts throughout the life cycle of the product/package, without unduly compromising other criteria, such as performance, aesthetics, function, quality, and cost.

This paper explores how two Welsh SMEs—David Colwell Design and Howies—are rising to the challenge. This was done through semi-structured interviews with the principals of both firms covering certain basic themes—definitions of SRD, difficulties in achieving SRD, examples of SRD products and services, values associated with SRD, relevance of SRD to industry, SRD and the role of multiple stakeholders, costs involved in SRD, and education and SRD—but the specifics varied depending upon the expertise and experiences of both the organizations and the interviewees. These themes formed the



Figure 1. David Colwell's first timber chair design (1978).

basis for a conversational guide, which was a key starting point for discussing the complicated, multi-faceted topic of SRD. Additional data was obtained from brochures, websites, the authors' personal experiences, and through reviewing the organizations' product ranges.

David Colwell Design

David Colwell is one of the UK's most respected furniture designers, with many international awards to his credit and designs displayed in collections throughout the world. He also passionately embraces sustainable design thinking and practice. Since the late 1970s, Colwell has been producing chairs and tables that offer exceptional comfort and classic styling, as well as environmental benefits. His designs explore the use of fast-grown ash and a technique called steam bending (figures 1 and 2). This technique offers production efficiency, strength, and low energy use, and it provides a much-needed market for forest products that have been considered marginal.

Ash is strongest when fast-grown, and it is renowned for its ability to absorb atmospheric carbons. It is a relatively inexpensive, self-seeding, natural material. It has no sap wood, so there is less waste. Ash is also particularly well suited to the climate and soil conditions of the UK.



Figure 2. David Colwell Design's most recent chair design.

Definitions

David Colwell's 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.

According to Colwell, SRD has several facets. These include: choice of material; employing appropriate manufacturing processes (that is, processes that have the minimum adverse environmental impact; considering the energy used); designing products for life (that is, balancing criteria such as function, comfort, durability, style, and aesthetics); supporting local economies and providing quality skilled employment; and making things that are a delight to own "because they satisfy you practically and visually, and don't let you down." It is fundamental, David Colwell argues, to calculate the costs of a product over its whole life cycle.

Difficulties in achieving SRD

David Colwell suggests that SRD needs to be inclusive, enabling us to reach out to a disillusioned population. He believes that the feeling of doing something useful is critical for a sustainable economy because people that feel valued will be more focused on achieving a sustainable future. The UK furniture industry provides a useful context for this perspective. The furniture market is highly competitive, with cheap imports and large multinationals making it increasingly difficult for small indigenous businesses to survive. Colwell feels that if UK industry implemented SRD thinking, it could provide a key differentiator in the marketplace. Unless the wider market embraces SRD, supports local economies, and enables critical skill development, it is unlikely that SRD can become a reality. To encourage this change, says Colwell, governments need to provide support for local SRD initiatives, thereby enabling localeconomies to strive and SRD to gain prominence.

Examples of SRD

David Colwell expresses concern over the lack of SRD in practice. He feels that many of the more widely quoted examples of SRD are inappropriate—the recycling of plastics, for example, when it would be more sensible to reduce their use in such applications as packaging in the first place. He argues that much current legislation focuses on recycling, and this has restricted rather than encouraged businesses to apply SRD thinking.

Values

Colwell is convinced that SRD can work as a brand value. An individual's values can depend on his or her own interests and beliefs, and while interests can be influenced through education, training, and awareness-raising campaigns, he feels the real question is: Are designers leaders or followers? He feels passionately that leaders will maintain their integrity at all costs, while followers may sell out to falsify a brand value (such as SRD), perhaps for personal economic gain.

He argues that adopting SRD adds value to a design while providing a basis for questioning results to continually create more interesting and sustainable solutions.

The team approach

David Colwell endorses an approach that builds a team around a designer. The team deals with sales, production, and marketing and thus allows the designer to focus purely on good design. "To be successful, you need to select the right team and the right projects for your passion and values," he explains. However, he has found this ideal scenario difficult to realize so far. He feels

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strongly that there needs to be a market for any new product and suggests adopting a team approach to distribute products to the wider marketplace. Branding and marketing, he argues are crucial in mainstreaming SRD.

SRD does not sit comfortably with a consumer economy as we know it; it has to be about consuming less. It will make a difference only if it is taken seriously and not perceived as an add-on or a cynical marketing exercise.

Colwell has developed products that are sustainable and responsible, with increased performance, functionality, and quality. He believes that SRD offers an opportunity for developing new products and technologies that could revive the manufacturing sector, and concludes by arguing that with the right commitment and true life cycle costing, SRD is entirely possible.

Howies

Established in 1995, West Wales-based Howies operates in the overcrowded, ultra-competitive high-impact sports clothing and accessories market. *High-impact* refers to everything from the message behind the brand to the clothing, which is designed to withstand high impacts in sports such as skateboarding (figures 3 and 4). Howies has won numerous international design awards, and it was also recently listed as one of the UK's top ethical brands. The company embraces social and ethical responsibility (it donates 1 percent of its annual revenues to environmental and social projects), and it aspires to have as little impact on the environment as possible through careful selection and use of organic material. Howies tries to communicate these brand values to its target market through the respect it shows its employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders, and through the way the organization interacts with the natural environment.

Is less bad any better? Ideally it is better to be perfect! Zero impact is an aspiration.



Figure 3. Howies organic cotton t-shirt with slogan.



Figure 4. Howies bike bag sporting a large reflective road sign

The company currently employs 13 people and is managed by its co-founders, David and Clare Hieatt. They see Howies as a “market creator” at the beginning of a long journey.

Howies and SRD

David Hieatt says he believes the true value of SRD lies in “being honest in every thing you do and in every way you interact with your employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders.” The company aspires to challenge “the way things are done,” and to enable people to think for themselves. In other words, where we are now is not where we want to be. Hieatt argues that it is of critical importance to do things that are needed. “Don’t be ‘average,’ and don’t chase the bandwagon!” Although it is a team effort, Hieatt believes that the desire to make this happen rests on the people who run the business.

A balancing process

To incorporate SRD into the design process, Hieatt feels that a degree of balancing is required. In order to stimulate sales, products need to be desirable, yet they also need to be sustainable. This raises issues such as the best way to make high-quality, long-life products (which may result in lower sales volumes compared to low-quality, short-life products that regularly need to be replaced) while being faced with the need to survive and pay salaries.

Beliefs and values

Howies sees itself as “a stubborn mule in the corner,” as David Hieatt puts it. The company does things its own way, and this is sometimes difficult for others to accept. Crucially, this approach reflects on the relationship it has with customers. “Some will love us, and some will hate us,” he says. Pandering too much to customers is one reason, Hieatt feels, that some companies do not stay true to their values, and he believes that having and staying true to values makes for a better long-term business model.

Because not everyone values sustainability, and not every designer creates sustainable responsible products, Hieatt looks for staff that share his set of beliefs. He argues that a set of

beliefs has commercial value because if you believe in something then you are more likely to build products that are aligned with those beliefs: “Believers build stuff.” He adds that he is convinced that SRD can work as a brand value—being responsible with resources, and being honest. As David Hieatt maintains, he would rather fail doing what he considers right than to achieve success doing work that does not suit his values.

Maintaining integrity

Like many small companies, Howies faces daily challenges. When these occur, to ensure they remain true to their values, the founders ask themselves the following questions—which all require a positive response—as a basis for decision making. Does it feel right today? Will it feel right in six/twelve months? Will it feel right in five years? For Howies, maintaining integrity means doing business only with companies you *want* to do business with. For example, the company recently turned down a contract with a large retailer. Howies did not want to risk being treated like a commodity, or compromising stakeholders’ perceptions of its brand.

Commercial value

Howies does not advertise. Its budget does not permit this luxury. Instead, the company survives by encouraging people to write nice things about it. For a small company, Howies gets a lot of press coverage. The firm has an interesting story to tell, which is vital in an overcrowded marketplace where competing on cost and size

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simply isn't an option.

Instead of depending on advertising, Howies differentiates to gain an edge over its competition. The company does this by communicating its set of beliefs and values to customers. These values (honesty, responding to customer needs quickly, and simply staying true to company values) enable Howies to stand out from the competition and achieve commercial gain. Its customers believe in the company and seek out Howies products.

Design can make the difference

Howies believes in simplicity and in function. The founders feel it is critical to raise designers' awareness of the benefits of being sustainable and responsible, because design has a key role to play in bringing business into line with sustainability concerns. Currently, they feel there are relatively few sustainable and responsible products; however, this could change if just a few designers led the way in showing the benefits of SRD.

Howies views fashion as short-term, while sustainability provides a long-term solution: "Cool is two years of niceness, but to be good is long-term." The company assigns priority to function over fashion, arguing that functional products can be designed to look fashionable. This is translated into practice through its interest in multiple-life products, such as pre-worn, beat-up jeans.

Timing

Howies feels the time is right for introducing SRD practice to industry, and David Hieatt believes customers will respond to companies that use sustainable practices. He cites two main reasons for this.

1. An increased awareness of environmental issues and corporate social responsibility among consumers, industry, and government
2. From a modern business perspective, SRD can no longer be viewed as a fringe issue—for example, five years ago organic cotton was likely to raise a few eyebrows, but now it is an acceptable material.

The true cost

Like David Colwell, David Hieatt suggests that calculating costs over the full life cycle of a product is essential if SRD is to be embraced by business. He claims that this will not happen until accounting is based on more than just profit alone. "The bean counters need to understand other aspects of cost, as well as the long-term picture," he says. Organic material is currently more expensive than competing nonorganic materials; therefore Howies and its customers must shoulder the burden. Hieatt believes this needs to change, and that if true costs were applied, then his products would be far more competitive, if not cheaper than many competing products. Also like Colwell, Hieatt feels the government has a key role to play here. Legislation has not had much of a role in the textiles sector to date. The staff at Howies believes that smart companies will try to identify opportunities that potential regulations, such as producer responsibility and product take-back (currently being introduced in the electrical and electronic equipment sector of many countries), may offer.

The role of stakeholders

David Hieatt suggests that to achieve SRD, a multi-stakeholder approach is required. Key stakeholders would include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as government, media, industry, and academia. Hieatt sees the role of NGOs and the media as vital to achieve SRD, with NGOs bringing the issue into the public domain, gaining media attention, and putting pressure on governments and industry to make things happen.

Life-long learning

As a company, Howies believes in lifelong learning. From the start, the company's founders have asked themselves the question, "How can we operate in this sector and be sustainable and responsible?" Their response has been to encourage their staff to have fun, to read a lot, and to constantly challenge the ways things are done. Employees are actively encouraged to take days off to be creative, because creative ideas are critical for any business to compete. Howies offers a

library service that can be accessed free by their customers. This encourages them to become more knowledgeable about SRD and other issues, thus enabling them to offer their views to Howies. In the future, Howies intends to work more closely with its customers to gain further understanding of what it considers important elements in achieving SRD.

David Hieatt concludes by arguing that businesses are not designing for tomorrow. He feels that the next decade will see a huge growth in SRD, but that to get others to follow the lead of companies like his, SRD needs to be seen to work. Many people said Howies could not build a business around SRD. It has taken the company 10 years to reach its current position. Now Hieatt believes the company has developed a good business model for SRD and is in a position to show others how to do the same.

SRD is just good design

These case studies provide a unique insight into how two Welsh SMEs are rising to the challenge of SRD. Crucially, both emphasize that SRD is just good design. Their key reasons for adopting SRD serve to reinforce many principles that are becoming more widely accepted by industry.

- Environmental, social, and economic factors are all of a piece—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 SRD.

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

- Industry must awaken to the value of SRD — companies must develop a passion to include SRD thinking in everything they do.
- Values associated with SRD include 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 SRD values as the company they work for.
- SRD 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 SRD 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.
- SRD is essentially just good design. Being good is pleasurable, and enjoying what you do is fundamental to achieving successful SRD.

It is clear that SRD involves much more than products, processes, and services; it encompasses all aspects of a business, and requires all stakeholders to carefully examine their beliefs and values. Everyone must take responsibility! This paper reinforces the need for government to encourage and enable life-cycle costing, allowing industry and consumers alike to understand the true cost of their actions. These issues are fundamental to the successful adoption of SRD practices by industry, to ensure that sustainability is accessible to more than just the few who can afford an alternative elitist lifestyle.

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