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VOICES

Business as the Cause, Business as the Solution

By [RAY C. ANDERSON](#)

The year was 1994, and oil was \$18 a barrel. I didn't know or even care too much how my petroleum-intensive modular-carpet business related to the environment, except to comply with the law. But our customers were asking, "What's your company doing for the environment?" When we formed a company task force to answer that question, I agreed to give the group a visionary talk—with trepidation. "Comply" was not a vision.

Then a book landed on my desk: Paul Hawken's "The Ecology of Commerce." The thesis, that business and industry are at once the source of and the solution to environmental degradation, hit me between the eyes. Business is the biggest culprit in the decline of the biosphere; it therefore has the greatest potential to do good as it re-creates itself to be sustainable.

Suddenly, I understood the Earth's limitations as a source (of natural resources) and a sink (for our waste disposal). I call it a "spear in the chest" epiphany, and nearly 16 years later that spear is still in my chest.

I was 60 in 1994, and challenging the folks at Interface to become a sustainable enterprise changed everything. We began to think about running our business so it would take nothing from the Earth—not another drop of oil—and do no harm. We struggled with how to turn our manufacturing process into closed loops, where products are reborn through reclamation and recycling. Our product designers and marketers wondered, would we have to pursue new markets, offering hemp and wool textiles instead of high-performance nylon? Where would we find enough renewable wind, solar and geothermal to run a dozen factories on four continents? Most important, what would it cost? If the answer was "more," would our customers be willing to pay?

Today, we're about 60% toward our goal—zero environmental footprint by 2020. Our little (\$1 billion a year in sales, globally) commercial-carpet company has pioneered processes that recycle both the nylon face fiber and the vinyl backing of our carpets. We're using a mix of alternative, renewable sources of energy; through process efficiencies we have reduced our energy intensity per unit of output by 43%. We've also cut greenhouse-gas emissions by 44%, leading to a 94% net reduction when factoring in offsets such as landfill gas used for process energy.

As for costs, they're actually *down*. A zero-tolerance waste initiative has paid our way. We've reduced or avoided waste to the tune of \$433 million, more than compensating for all the costs of greening our company.

We know the hardest part of the climb is ahead. But we're no longer pioneering on our own; the industrial world is waking up to the urgency. The capitalist in me is convinced that green isn't a fad; born of necessity on a finite planet, it is both the right thing and the smart thing to do.

Ray C. Anderson is founder and chairman of Interface Inc. and author of "Confessions of a Radical Industrialist." He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.