

Editorial

Earth Day, Then and Now

By Ray C. Anderson

In 1970, when that very first Earth Day was celebrated, I was 35 years old. I didn't know it then, but I was about to make a decision that would change the course of my life and that of my family. In 1973, I would found Interface, bringing over the technology to make modular carpet—carpet tile—from Europe and putting everything we had on the line to do it. A lot of people thought I had “gone ‘round the bend””; that I was mortgaging my family's future on a very risky idea.

Twenty-one years later, I was accused of similar folly when I challenged our company—by then a global, nearly \$1 billion enterprise—to turn our back on the industrial system that had brought us such good fortune and to re-imagine everything—from people to processes to products—to create a sustainable enterprise. This time, I wasn't just risking my family's future; Interface was a publicly traded company. More than one investor (and competitors, too) said I'd “gone ‘round the bend.” I responded that yes, I had, because it was my job to look around the bend and see what's next. I reminded them that I'd done the same thing with carpet tiles, and that had worked out pretty well.

Another 16 years later, Interface is truly on a path that no one, perhaps not even I, could have visualized for our petroleum-intensive company. Today, we're about 60 percent toward our “Mission Zero” goal—zero environmental footprint by 2020. Our commercial carpet company has pioneered new industrial processes, like recycling both the nylon face fiber and the vinyl backing of our carpets, using alternative, renewable sources of energy, and reducing waste by some \$433 million. We've already reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 44 percent (resulting in a 94 percent net reduction, counting verifiable offsets), when Kyoto only called for seven percent by 2012. Water usage is down 80 percent.

We've adopted biomimicry—using nature as a design mentor and model—for both product and process redesign. Perhaps most important, we've attracted the attention of big, global companies—Wal-Mart, for example, which studied what we were doing and became convinced it was feasible. We've imagined the prototypical company of the 21st century, and set out to become it.

I've read accounts of that first Earth Day. Jack Lewis, an assistant editor at the EPA, said, “In the waning months of the 1960s, environmental problems were proliferating like a many-headed hydra, a monster no one could understand let alone tame or slay. Rampant air pollution was linked to disease and death in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere as noxious fumes, spewed out by cars and factories, made city life less and less bearable. In the wake of Rachel Carson's 1962 bestseller *Silent Spring*, there was widespread concern over large-scale use of pesticides near densely populated communities. In addition, huge fish kills were reported on the Great Lakes, and the media carried the news that Lake Erie, one of America's largest bodies of fresh water, was in its death throes. Ohio had another jolt when Cleveland's Cuyahoga River, an artery inundated with oil and toxic chemicals, burst into flames by spontaneous combustion.” It reads like science fiction; like some Armageddon destined for the big screen, doesn't it? And yet, it was true, every word of it.

In the years after that first Earth Day, the EPA would ban lead in gasoline, lowering lead levels in our air by more than 90 percent, and also ban DDT, a dangerous pesticide. Unsafe garbage dumps all over the nation would close, and recycling would go mainstream. Wastewater treatment funding—the second biggest public works effort in U.S. history—would result in cleaner rivers. Fuel economy standards would be set for all cars and trucks, and then hybrid cars would emerge, allowing consumers even more choices when it came to fuel efficiency. The EPA would become a powerful body, more robust in some years and less so in others, but nonetheless here to stay. Its creation was the right and the smart thing to do.

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Brooks Kraft/Corbis

Ray Anderson, founder and chairman of Interface, at his company headquarters, in West Point, GA



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Today, business and industry—at once the main culprit and the essential solution to environmental degradation—are waking up to the same sense of urgency that must have created that very first Earth Day. With natural resources in decline, and prices for petroleum and other nonrenewable resources on the rise, the choice is becoming clear. There is no alternative to protecting nature if we want air, water, soil creation (thus food), materials, energy, climate regulation, the carbon cycle (including photosynthesis), pollination, seed dispersal, flood and insect control. Take away any of those and there would be very little economy left.

But what if scarcity and high prices aren't enough to inspire change? Is there a tipping point for business and industry? When will we recognize that it is both the right thing and the smart thing to do?

Right now is a good time, because at Interface, the business case for sustainability is crystal clear:

1. Our costs are down, not up, dispelling the myth that sustainability is expensive. Our first initiative—zero-tolerance waste—has netted us \$433 million in saved or avoided costs, more than paying for all capital investments and other costs associated with sustainability.
2. Our products are the best they've ever been. Sustainability is a wellspring of innovation; our product designers have been particularly successful using biomimicry as a guide, nature as inspiration.
3. Our people are galvanized around our mission and a shared higher purpose—Maslow at his best: self-actualization that comes when people commit to something bigger than themselves. Academics and

experts who have studied the cultural transformation at Interface say they've never before seen the type of top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top alignment that sustainability has fostered.

4. The goodwill of the marketplace is tremendous, winning business for Interface because customers want to be aligned with a company that is trying to do the right thing. No amount of marketing, no clever ad campaign, could have created the kind of customer loyalty that we have experienced. It makes sense, given that the whole journey began for us in 1994 when our customers started asking, "What is Interface doing for the environment?"

A capitalist to the core, I can't think of a better business case than lower costs, better products, higher morale, and goodwill in the marketplace.

While those who held that very first Earth Day weren't even on my radar back in 1970, I feel like a kindred spirit to them. I hope I am among the first of a legion of entrepreneurs who will look around the bend and see sustainability for all that it can be: A better way to a bigger and more legitimate profit; the right thing and the smart thing to do.

Those first organizers didn't know what Earth Day—their child—would turn out to be, any more than I knew in 1973 that Interface—my child—would become a company that would help lead the way to a new industrial revolution. Some 40 years later, as I salute those founders, I say we've only just begun.

Ray C. Anderson is the founder and chairman of Atlanta, GA-based Interface, Inc. His most recent book is Confessions of a Radical Industrialist (St. Martin's Press, 2009).

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