

# COLUMNIST



**Andrew Thornton**

## Purpose is the key

**Andrew Thornton reveals how finding its authentic purpose can set a company on the path to sustainable success**

**I** have no doubt that having a unifying and authentic purpose that your employees, customers and community relate to is the key to businesses being more sustainable. It's the first of the 10 components of running a heartfelt business.

It's great that businesses having a purpose beyond making as much cash as possible is very trendy right now – everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon.

Yet, I believe I can tell the difference between an authentic purpose and one that is just spin. At Thornton's Budgens, our purpose was that we were 'the community supermarket that really cares about people and planet'.

This, and the manifesto that sat behind it, framed everything we did and helped enable autonomy. We encouraged people to innovate within the boundaries of this manifesto without the need to get approval.

When we saw the growing crisis with single-use plastics, our purpose helped us to be clear that we needed to act (see box below).

Nearly every time I am on a panel or interviewed, I get asked how to avoid 'greenwash'. My response is always to have an authentic purpose.

Thornton's Budgens never got accused of 'greenwashing', because everything it did was authentic, not spin or marketing.

On the basis that some of you are convinced, here's a quick-and-easy guide to developing an authentic purpose. These rules will apply whether you are a sole trader, a local convenience store or multinational supplier.

Rule one is to involve the key senior people in the business. The owner/founder/chief executive – depending on scale – needs to lead it.

Rule two is to lock yourself away for at least a day – two half days may be even better – uninterrupted to allow time for ideas to develop.

Rule three is not to outsource this to a consultant or business advisor – it needs to be your words. If it is practical to have the 'lock away' run by someone who

### ★ Easy when you're aligned

**+** DAVID ATTENBOROUGH HELPED the world understand the plastic crisis that is engulfing it, and customers wanted solutions. With the help of social enterprise A Plastic Planet, in the summer of 2018 we set ourselves the goal of launching at least 1,500 plastic-free lines in 10 weeks to show the multiples it was easier than they thought. We increased total store sales by 4%, won a stack of awards and changed a number of retailer chief executive's agendas. The extraordinary amount of hard work was 'easy' due to our aligning purpose.

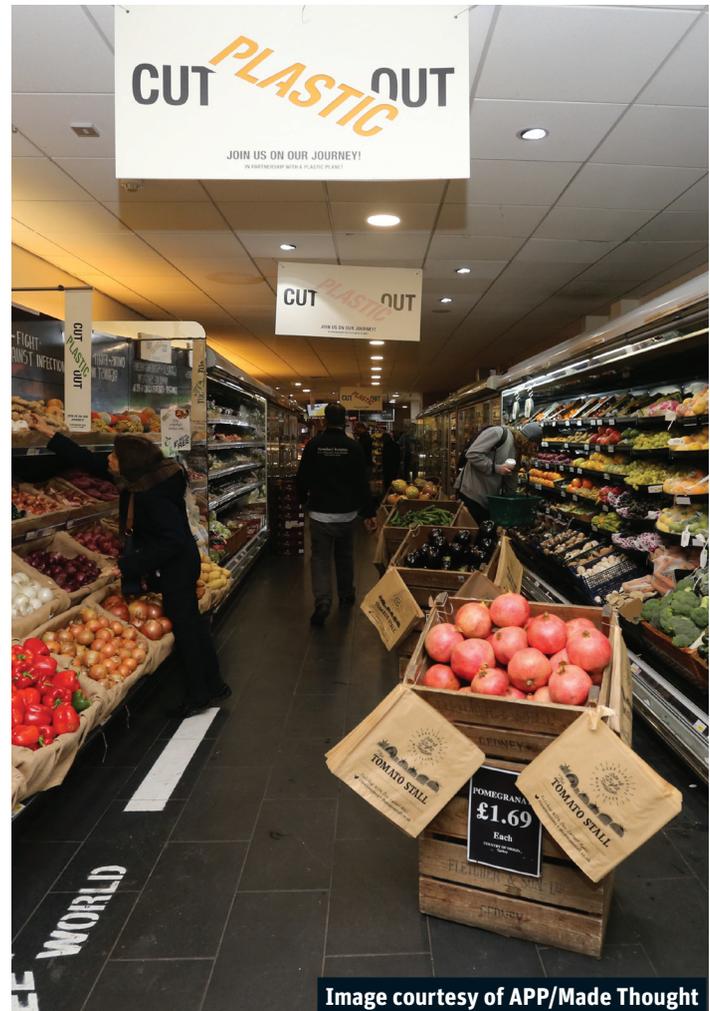


Image courtesy of APP/Made Thought

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isn't in the business, do so – they can be more objective than you and help guide you.

Rule four is to try to get a customer perspective. Ask customers what they see as your purpose or your role in local community. This helps show where you are, and does not mean you can't change.

Rule five is to use questions to get people thinking. Based upon the Japanese Ikigai concept and adapted by Best Buy in the US, here are some to start with. What does the world (or your local community) need? What are your company's capabilities – what are you good at? What drives people in your company? What are they passionate about or aspire to, and how can you make money from this?

Don't worry if on the first attempt you don't get a set of words that work – keep working on it and, a bit like a good stew, when its ready for eating, you'll know.

*Andrew Thornton is the former owner of Thornton's Budgens, founder of Heart in Business and author of upcoming release 'Putting the heart back into business'*