Guilty of greenwashing? Try a heart-centred approach

In the first of a series of articles on the topic of sustainability, Irish entrepreneur and retail expert, Andrew Thornton advises retail businesses to try using a heart-centred approach to addressing the climate crisis.

RIGHT now, business leaders face so many crises – the war in Ukraine and the knock-on impact on costs and supply chains, adjusting to the post Covid period, the so-called Great Resignation, to name but a few. Arguably the biggest issue all businesses face today, however, is the climate crisis.

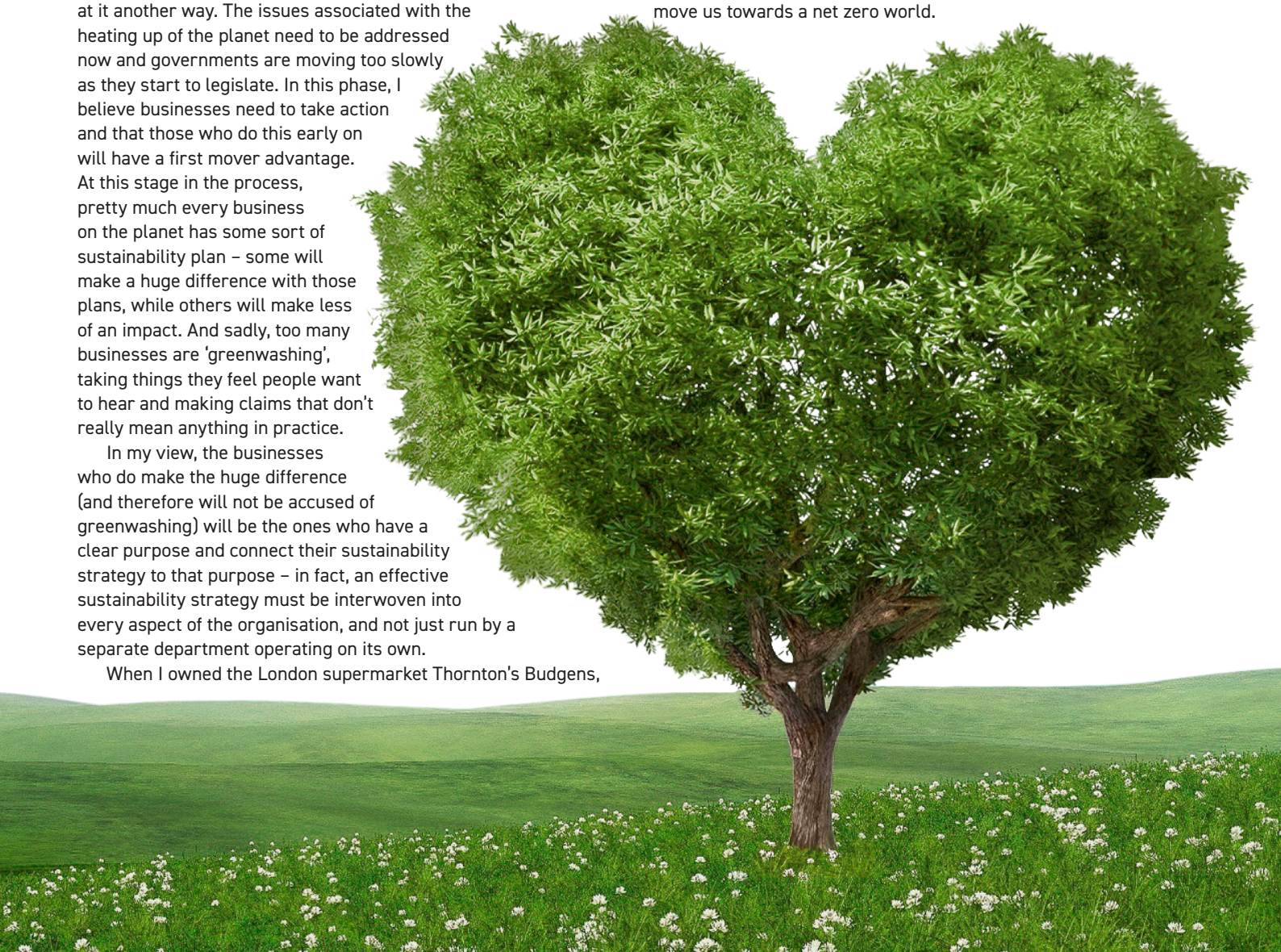
While you can reasonably argue that it is governments' job to legislate accordingly and businesses' job to implement, I look at it another way. The issues associated with the heating up of the planet need to be addressed now and governments are moving too slowly as they start to legislate. In this phase, I believe businesses need to take action and that those who do this early on will have a first mover advantage. At this stage in the process, pretty much every business on the planet has some sort of sustainability plan – some will make a huge difference with those plans, while others will make less of an impact. And sadly, too many businesses are 'greenwashing', taking things they feel people want to hear and making claims that don't really mean anything in practice.

In my view, the businesses who do make the huge difference (and therefore will not be accused of greenwashing) will be the ones who have a clear purpose and connect their sustainability strategy to that purpose – in fact, an effective sustainability strategy must be interwoven into every aspect of the organisation, and not just run by a separate department operating on its own.

When I owned the London supermarket Thornton's Budgens, we won numerous sustainability awards. We had a clear purpose ('we are the community supermarket that really cares about people and planet') and a manifesto that outlined how we could deliver that purpose through our 'heartsets' (others would call them values) and we had habits to deliver those. We had a heart-based approach to engaging with our team that meant we used a 'coaching approach' to problem solving, as opposed to a 'boss knows the answer approach'; we taught people to actively listen and we regularly appreciated people, rather than always pointing out what wasn't working. We created what my colleagues called a 'family'.

Creating a community people want to join

I think if you run a purpose-driven and heart-centred organisation, you create a community that people want to be part of. Post-Covid, we are all crying out for community and connection, and we as business leaders can create those communities and at the same time create the most extraordinary loyalty, and deliver solutions that will move us towards a net zero world.



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One of our proudest achievements was the plastic free initiative we ran in 2018. Having met an organisation called A Plastic Planet (APP) and together watched the film A Plastic Ocean, we knew that with our purpose, we needed to do something. We had seen Dutch retailer Ekoplaza launch the world's first plastic free aisle and we decided to build on what they had done. We set ourselves the target of launching 1,500 plastic free lines in 26 zones across every category in the store – and we gave ourselves 10 weeks in which to do it! On November 8, 2018, we ended up launching 1,800 plastic free products, allowing our customers to do a whole plastic-free weekly shop if they wanted to. In so doing, we helped them reduce their plastic usage and helped reduce our environmental footprint.

However, with one store, this wasn't really going to do much towards a net zero world; our bigger objective was to show the major retailers that plastic reduction was much easier than they were suggesting. If little old us could produce 1,800 plastic free lines in 10 weeks, what was taking them so long?

Andrew Thornton, author and former CEO and founder of Thornton's Budgens.

Store sales up by 4%

We achieved results on so many levels. At a pure financial level, our total store sales increased by 4% over the market, a big number in grocery retailing. We did this by increasing sales to existing customers, who had a need to reduce their plastic use that no retailer was meeting, and through attracting new customers who also had a need to use less plastic.

At a team level, we created an extraordinary team spirit; the day we launched our plastic free initiative, I had a number of my team tell me it was the proudest day of their working life. We as humans want to have meaning in our lives and to make a difference; as a business leader, you can tap into that desire.

And at a global level, I had several major retailer CEOs from across the world tell me that we had changed the relationship between supermarkets and plastic worldwide. Not a bad achievement for one shop!

Our customers told us they loved the fact that we were actually doing something now – something real and tangible they could see. And they criticised our competitors (especially the multiples) for 'greenwashing' – they defined this as making grand promises to be delivered at some point in the future, but with no visible indication of how they were going

Sustainability

to get there. I remember visiting one a branch of one of the major UK chains where I saw a huge sign as I left saying that they were reducing plastic by x% by some date way out into the future. Yet I could see no indication of any plastic reduction ideas anywhere in the store. Contrast that to our store, where in every category we had a plastic free section where people could see exactly what we were doing at that moment. We were living it - our competitors were just talking about it.

I believe the intention of our competitors was genuine, but their approach didn't run through the veins of the company in the way ours did and their customers could sense it.

Delivering extraordinary results on the journey to net zero

Hopefully, I have demonstrated that having such a clear purpose and all our heart work allowed us to deliver extraordinary results; and this is an approach you can also use to play your part in the global drive to net zero.

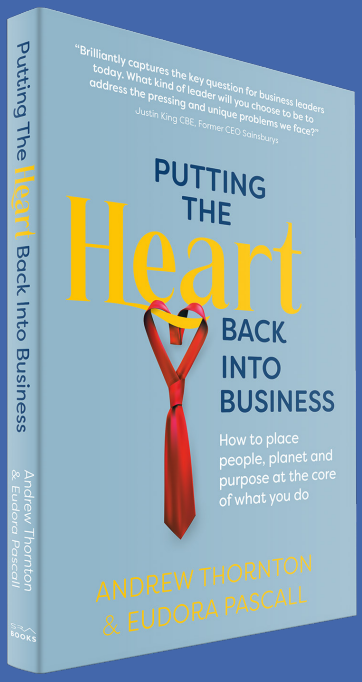
And if you as a business leader need any convincing that this is an issue you have a responsibility to address, just remember that record-busting week at the end of July – the front cover of The Irish Times on July 19 had a photo of what's known locally as 'Hole in the Wall' beach in Sutton, where I grew up – the number of people on the beach was probably hundreds if not thousands of times the maximum number of people I'd ever seen on the beach.

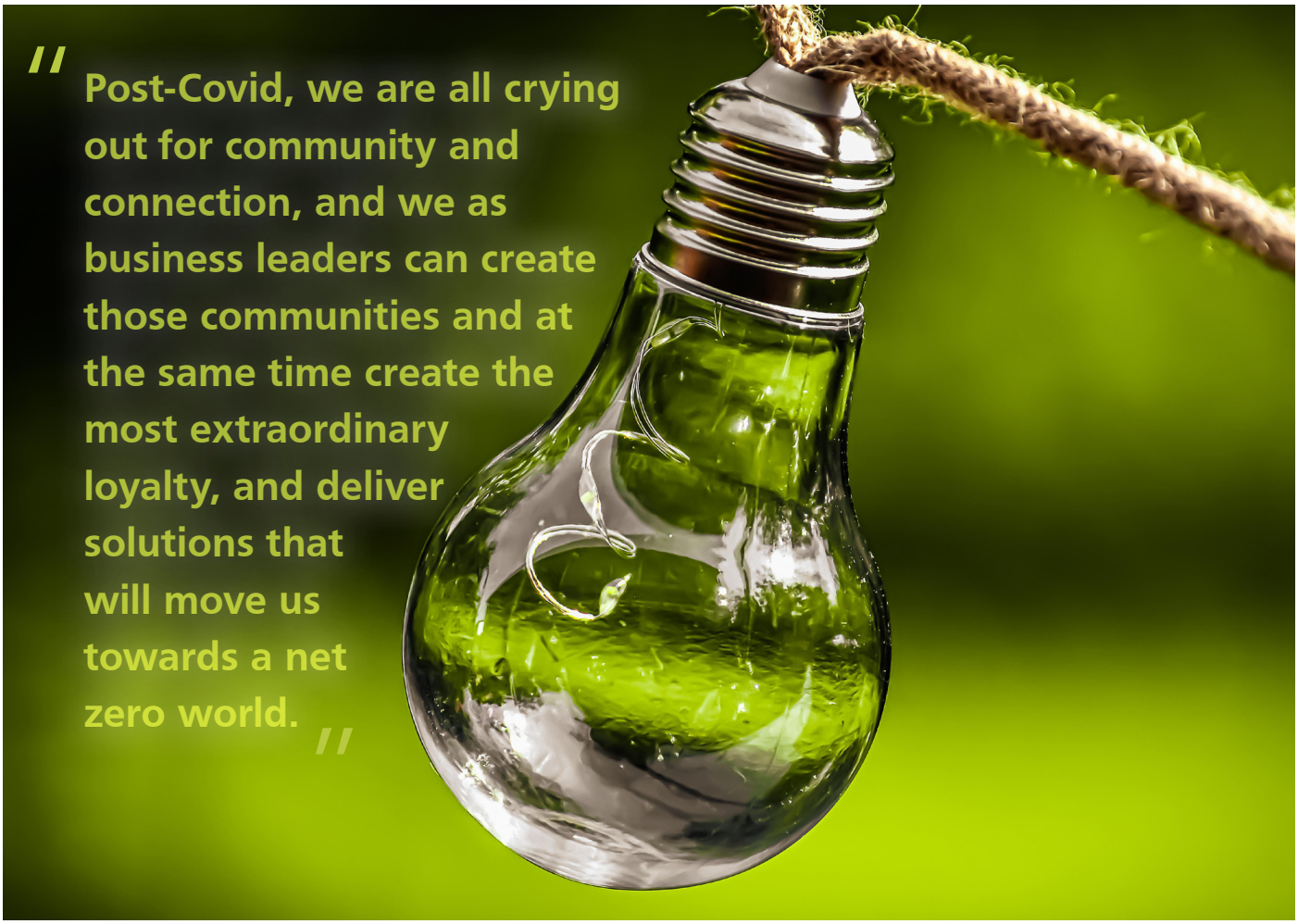
We are all in this together and you can play your part by getting your business to start to take this seriously NOW. I guarantee that as well as having a lighter conscience, you will also get a significant competitive advantage!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IRISH entrepreneur Andrew Thornton was founder and CEO of award-winning independent supermarket, Thornton's Budgens, which was the UK's first supermarket with plastic free zones. They also implemented Andrew's heart-centred way of doing business, which aimed to put people and planet first while trusting that profit would still follow. In fact, his store sales increased by 4% over the market and he created an extraordinary team spirit.

Andrew and his partner Eudora have co-authored 'Putting the Heart Back into Business: How to place people, planet and purpose at the core of what you do', which is out now, available on Amazon.





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