

# Beyond the numbers

By Nick Jones, 7 months ago

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**BUSINESS //**

The sustainability movement is obsessed with the numbers: carbon footprints, energy savings, stakeholder engagement, triple bottom lines—the measures never end.

Business is driven by numbers too, which is why so many businesses have embraced sustainability as just one more metric to perform against. Which is all good, except that, as Albert Einstein said: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted”.

In its most holistic form, sustainability includes intangible outcomes arguably as valid as any of the reductionist world that sustainability often inhabits.

Some examples include:

- How vigilant is your business in spotting trends in society and planning to respond to them?
- How well do the values of the business line up with employees, customers and the community you operate in?
- How adaptive is the business to change?

- How does innovation fit into and support your strategy?
- How does the business measure success in terms of social and cultural outcomes, as well as economic and environmental outcomes?

This shift in thinking may not resonate with everybody, especially those who hide behind reports thick with spreadsheets. In my previous role as a market researcher and statistician, I saw too many executives miss the bigger opportunity, because they couldn't get beyond the numbers.



Albert and Elsa: "Not everything that counts can be counted"

Now in my capacity as a sustainability consultant, I see similar reliance on the relatively easy measures of sustainability. I don't advocate dropping the measures, but I do recommend seizing the real opportunity which is to innovate and grow.

A quick example: a client of ours is on track to become carbon-neutral. The first motivation was to avoid compliance costs that are imminent from government legislation (fear). The second was to use it to gain market share (greed). So far it's all been a numbers game. But a new opportunity has emerged: it turns out the process has introduced an entirely new market in the web space. Being entrepreneurial fellows, they've jumped at the chance and are launching a new web business later this year.

Seeing the value of these intangible aspects of a business takes time. It requires an ability to honestly reflect on the business' current position as well as observing what's

going on around you. Above all, it requires a willingness to explore the world of possibilities without the constraints of “how will we measure it?”

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