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What female founders can do to create a sustainable business - according to top women entrepreneurs



On National Entrepreneur's Day, top businesswomen give their advice on how to be sustainable as a female founder

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Sustainability has gone from being a buzzword to a movement that business owners need to embrace. But, it covers environmental, social and economic impact, which means it is an extremely broad concept which is largely unregulated and open to misinterpretation. It can be overwhelming for companies to know exactly what it means for them, as well as where and how to start integrating sustainability into their business DNA.

The definition of sustainability was coined by Norway's first female prime minister Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland in 1980. She defined sustainable development as "meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of future generations."

As the founder of [The Women's Chapter](https://womenschapter.com/), a platform which champions and showcases women-led businesses, I've seen first-hand how challenging and costly it can be for founders to create sustainable organisations, but also how much positive impact, innovation and industry disruption it results in. There are now businesses popping up every week that are solving real problems in a sustainable way.

But understanding what sustainability means for business owners and how to implement it can be very overwhelming, so to mark [National Entrepreneur's Day](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/entrepreneurship/) I spoke to some of the UK's leading women in the sustainability sphere to get their view on what founders should consider...

What it means

Diana Verde Nieto, a globally recognised thought leader in sustainability and co-founder of [Positive Luxury](https://www.positiveluxury.com/), explains that sustainability in business means thinking about every decision in terms of the present, as well as the future.

"Businesses need to think about how the choices they make will impact both society and the planet, long-term, and work towards making that a central tenet of everything they do," she says, adding that our actions of today will impact the next 10,000 years.

But, she warns, one of the challenges is that “everybody thinks they’re sustainability experts, and gives advice with no tangible qualifications. Another challenge is the difference between consumer perception and market reality, which is often kept indistinct for a reason,” she says, adding that the word itself can mean fur-free, recyclable, biodegradable or fair trade, but there are few government regulations to standardise the verbiage surrounding the definition.



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Align with your purpose

Guya Merkle, founder of fine jewellery company [Vieri](https://en.vieri.com/), inherited her successful family business after her father’s sudden death in 2007, when she was just 21. Concerned about the ethics around gold mining, she soon found the business did not align with her purpose, so she restructured and took it on a different path, using only recycled gold.

She also founded The [Earthbeat Foundation](https://earthbeatfoundation.org/), which strives for better working conditions and alternative income solutions for gold miners. Merkle says understanding your purpose is central to how sustainable and successful your business can be. “It is no longer enough to offer great products or services, we have to make the world a better place by working around global problems,” she adds.

Rewire your Culture

Sustainability is about organisational change, says Diana Verde Nieto, adding that while, in the past, the goal for most businesses was to have a sustainability strategy, the goal now is to *be* sustainable.

“This means that sustainability can’t be just about your supply chain or processes. It has to be embedded into your culture and purpose,” she explains. “Everyone is responsible for activating sustainability principles in their job. Sustainability has to be integrated in every department... slowly wired into the fabric of business and marketing.”



Guya Merkle, founder of Vieri, restructured her business and took it on a different path

Determine your policies

Irene Forte, Founder of [Irene Forte Skincare](https://ireneforteskinicare.com/) (<https://ireneforteskinicare.com/>), advises that before launching any business, it's essential to craft a corporate social responsibility policy, which lays out the organisations economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities.

“Our company’s existence is part of a bigger system of people, values, other organisations and nature. The social responsibility of our business is to give back to the world just as it gives to us,” she says, adding that that while creating legal frameworks comes at a cost, it’s foundations are key.

“Before you hire anyone, you should ensure that you are committed to equal opportunity, supporting diversity and inclusion and committed to abiding by all fair labour practises.”

What can you do better

Victoria Pew, co-founder of [Hurr Collective](https://www.hurrcollective.com/) (<https://www.hurrcollective.com/>), the UK’s first peer-to-peer wardrobe rental platform, advises brands to examine every facet of their business and try to find a better way to work: “Be this manufacturing processes, fabrics used, your packaging or office recycling schemes. Positioning yourself as a sustainable business puts you in the spotlight, so every detail of your company needs to be thought through,” she says.



Victoria Pew, co-founder of Hurr Collective, advises brands to examine every facet of their business

Emily John, co-founder of [The Restory](https://the-restory.com/) (<https://the-restory.com/>), an on-demand show and handbag restoration service, advises that teams make a list and then rank it by cost, impact and time to implement - creating a roadmap to work towards and review.

“The first thing we could afford to do was to reuse as much material as we could, the next was to be carbon neutral on all our shipping outside of the UK, then recycled packaging. Now that we’re bigger we have invested in filtration systems for our sinks when disposing of cleaning materials and paints,” she says.

It's a process

Emily John says that business owners can get overwhelmed by thinking that they need to do it all at once and have to be “perfect” - but no company is fully sustainable.

“In all business sectors there are new solutions developing to improve sustainability, so I think it’s more important to approach it as a continuous improvement for your business and include it as a core part of your DNA as a company”, she says.

Irene Forte agrees: "Not everything can be done overnight - particularly as a small brand. Sustainable alternatives are usually more difficult, require more time, and are more costly. You have to be more patient, be willing to spend more, and be willing to take time to research sustainable alternatives".



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But Diana Verde Nieto cautions brands against over-communicating on things they haven't yet done, and overpromising: "Younger generations, especially, understand that sustainability is a journey and it's OK to not be perfect."

Community

Diana Verde Nieto counsels brands to look at their social and environmental frameworks beyond compliance, and work with the business suppliers to ensure that you are aligned on values and expectations.

"Look at your community investment - how do you work with your suppliers beyond risk mitigation and invest in the communities in which you operate, whatever your business?" she asks.

Collaborate

Victoria Pew says being sustainable opens up exciting opportunities to partner with other business owners: "If you can't find your own eco-friendly gift bags, consider partnering with a company that specialises in recycled packaging. There are lots of companies striving to make the world a better place, so find them and collaborate. There's really is no short-cut to building a sustainable company."

Michelle is founder and CEO of The Women's Chapter. [Check the website \(https://womenschapter.com/\)](https://womenschapter.com/) for a calendar of talks and events, as well as a directory of amazing women-led businesses.

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