

## **Read full Q & A with Co-founder and Sustainability Manager at Orba,**

**Gillian Boucher**

### **Tell us a little bit about your sustainability journey as a business? What led Orba to building a product and brand around sustainable thinking?**

Orba is the brainchild of Marshall Westlake, a senior in the footwear industry, known as the grandfather of the Indonesian footwear industry and British expat living in east Java, Indonesia. When Marshall first moved to Java 30 years ago, packaging for products came in the form of banana leaf, discarded in the back yard and left to decompose. Since the introduction of plastic packaging the pollution through Java was something to behold.

Knowing that by producing shoes made from synthetics and plastics he was continuing to be part of the problem. He was on a mission to create the most sustainable shoe based on sustainable materials selection and processes. Orba was born and I was brought in, prior to the company being fully funded, as a co-founder and Sustainability Manager. I was able to embed sustainability initiatives into our business practices from the very beginning, ensuring that every decision made is made on a foundation underpinned by a commitment to more sustainable practices.

### **Explain your process as a business, how did you research, explore and make decisions about the sustainability initiatives that you could implement?**

Sustainability initiatives within our business are procedures that not only minimise the negative impacts that our business has, but also create positive impacts, within an environmental, social and economic context and within the context of strong sustainable practices.

The first step for us was to look at our business activities and identify impacts. As a footwear manufacturer dealing with many different materials, components and supply chain levels, our business activities are quite complex. We look at the environmental and social impacts regarding the materials we use, from resource extraction to processing and manufacturing, to end-of-life. We look at the impacts involved in the manufacturing of our products and our suppliers through our rigorous sustainable supply chain management. We look at our internal governance and how our company is structured and what sustainable practices look like for Orba staff and stakeholders. It's a multi-faceted, multi-layered approach and looks different for every business.

### **Why is sustainability important to you as a business? Why do you think it is important for Kapiti?**

If you're a business that has zero interest in mitigating or minimising your negative impacts, you're a business driven purely for profit and these types of businesses are going out of fashion. Fast. Apart from being blamed for the environmental degradation of the planet and for exacerbating inequalities in low-cost-countries

where most manufacturing of goods takes place, consumers have simply had enough of business-as-usual and are voting with their wallets. As legislation for implementing more sustainable practices in business grows, waiting to make changes until legislation is put in place has the potential of being economically unviable. Ignoring sustainability is just bad for business.

**Do you have a formal business sustainability policy? If yes, tell us about how you established that?**

Orba has a robust Sustainability Framework that outlines our overall approach to sustainable practices. This document is underpinned by the Orba Code of Business Ethics & Conduct and the Orba Sustainability Plan which allows us to set achievable goals, formally measure our progress on an annual basis and identify where we can make improvement. Our Orba Sustainable Purchasing Plan is the core document in our sustainable supply chain management and sets our policy for materials and supplier criteria and allows us to assess risk and benchmark against our Supplier Code of Conduct. It is essential that these documents are understood by everyone on our team, including our suppliers and this enables us to make sure we move in a forward direction on our sustainability pathway.

**What was your biggest challenge in working through more sustainable ways of operating?**

The most challenging aspect of incorporating more sustainable ways of operating was with suppliers who were not part of the sustainable fashion movement. Because our basic criteria for materials is plant-based and biodegradable, we need to know exactly what components and materials are made from and their processes of production. Some suppliers pushed back at this need for transparency and deemed it as suspicious as they were not used to customers looking for such detail. A lot of components of footwear are produced in low-cost-countries so finding suppliers that meet our criteria established in our Supplier Code of Conduct could be challenging. Materials supplied by eco-certified suppliers are also more expensive so finding a balance between sustainable suppliers and the economic constraints of a start-up business. Explaining the benefits of sustainable business practices to potential investors and stakeholders who were not part of the sustainability movement and belonged more to the 'business as usual' group presented challenges also as we have a 'no compromise' attitude toward our sustainability pathway.

**What are the benefits to your business of pursuing more sustainable operations?**

**Sustainability helps us give consumers what they want.** One of the biggest benefits in having robust sustainable supply chain management is limiting risk in our supply chain. This can come in the form of poor supplier conditions risking product quality and in consumer pressure for transparency in the supply chain. In the fashion industry, 'who makes your products' is the question most conscious consumers are asking. By choosing third-party verified materials and suppliers such as Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) and Fair Trade, we know that right down to the cultivation of raw materials the workers along our chain meet best practice standards of labour rights and that our materials are non-toxic and eco-certified.

**Sustainability helps us secure investment.** “Impact Investment” funds are also growing whereby investors want to invest their dollars in companies that are taking responsibility for the impacts of their activities and are giving back to the communities they work in.

**Sustainability gives us access to a global network of like-minded businesses** and ‘businesses for good’ like to help and work with each other. Becoming a Certified B Corporation has opened the door to incredible networking and collaboration opportunities with like-minded brands in Aotearoa, and as we move into international markets, we know that the B Corporation logo is identified globally as the gold standard for sustainable business practices.

Sustainability is an investment but one with returns, and market research shows that consumers are willing to pay a premium for more sustainable products.

### **What is your key area of focus for improving your environmental sustainability?**

Orba minimises negative environmental impact and creates positive environmental impact through materials selection and our natural dyeing processes. We choose materials that are made from highly renewable plants such as flax, kenaf (hemp) and ramie (nettle) that require little more than rainwater to grow and can grow efficiently in soil that is not suitable for food agriculture. They have a very low environmental impact for growth, cultivation, and processing into yarn fibre and our canvas upper is hand-woven by traditional weavers in Bali reducing energy consumption during manufacturing. Our insoles are also made from highly renewable plant-based materials such as coir (coconut husk) and cork and the entire shoe is sewn with organic cotton thread.

By choosing these renewable plant-based materials, we are also minimising our environmental impact at the end of life of our product as these materials are untreated, non-toxic, contain zero plastics and synthetics and are biodegradable.

Later this year we will be releasing a range of coloured Orba’s where our canvas will be dyed with colour derived from 5 different species of plants using traditional toxic- and chemical-free plant-based Balinese dyeing methods. This natural dyeing process means that water waste is non-toxic, there are no chemicals released into ground water and no heavy metal contamination. As our capital base grows we will be able to engage with and pay more certifying organisations, such as Cradle to Cradle, Fair Trade, Made Safe, and others.

One initiative that really sets us apart from a lot of start-ups in this sector is our ‘helping hand’ initiative whereby we fund training programs for our smaller suppliers to help them grow in a more environmentally conscious and sustainable way. Two particular suppliers – our traditional weaving and dyeing facilities in Bali – haven’t the resources for eco-certification which can be a costly process. Rather than move on and find replacement suppliers, we committed to funding the International Labour Organisation’s SCORE training program to help them on a pathway to future eco-

certification.

**Which sustainability initiatives are you most proud of and why?**

Becoming a Certified B Corporation in 2021 just three months after launching the Orba “Ghost” was an incredible achievement. The impact assessment and auditing process is extremely thorough, requiring much evidence and documentation to support our approach, our activities, our claims and our commitments. Achieving certification confirmed and validated our sustainability pathway and our identity as a ‘business for good’. In 2021 Orba won a Global Footwear Award and a Best Design Award in the sustainability category and this past July won in the Emerging Products category (10 or fewer full-time employees) at the Wellington Gold Awards. These awards endorse the unique world-first approach to design and sustainability that Orba delivers, and we are very proud to have our efforts recognised.

**What are the biggest costs to your business of doing sustainability work?**

We don’t believe there are any overall costs to our business by having a commitment to sustainable practices. Sustainable initiatives are an investment but one with great returns. The benefits outweigh those than if we were a ‘profit only’ business. It does cost us more to use our highly renewable materials in our products, but these should reduce in the medium term, as volumes grow. Researched reports say that US sneaker buyers pay just under \$100 on average for sneakers but pay an average of \$150 for sneakers that make “eco” claims. This price premium enables us to recover the extra costs. Investing in training programs for our smaller suppliers to help them grow more sustainably also lessens potentially costly risks in our supply chain.

**Share some of the best business sustainability resources that you have come across?**

I have an MSc in Sustainable Development, so I came to Orba with a lot of tools in my toolbelt, however, there is a huge amount of resources out there and with the sustainability movement growing, these resources are just increasing. There are some wonderful sustainability consultants and consulting firms in NZ that specialise in all sectors that can help a business identify the best pathway for them. The Sustainable Business Network (SBN) has a wealth of tools and resources as does the [business.govt.nz](http://business.govt.nz) website.

**If you had one piece of advice for another business owner about trying to be more sustainable, what would it be?**

Defining what ‘sustainability’ is will be different for every business and what a sustainable pathway looks like for any business will be determined by many variables. Nominate a Sustainability Hero within your team who can begin to identify your journey, and don’t wait to get started - the longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to embed better practices. And while some compromises will be necessary from time to time, minimise them, and revisit compromises on a regular basis with a view to reversing the compromise as more sustainable materials and processes start to be available.

Orba shoes are made from nature and designed to biodegrade. To find out more about the work they do visit <https://orbashoes.eco/>