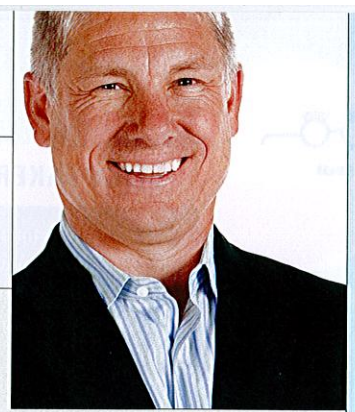


# Conversation

## Herman Miller CEO Brian Walker on meeting sustainability goals – with customers' help



When Brian Walker became CEO of the office-furniture maker Herman Miller, five years ago, he aimed to put the company well ahead of its competitors in terms of environmental impact. The company – known for inventing that icon of the *Mad Men* era, the Eames lounge chair, as well as many of the furnishings in modern offices – vowed to produce no landfill waste, hazardous waste, or manufacturing emissions and to rely completely on “green energy” by 2020. We checked in with Walker to see if he’s having second thoughts.

### Are those impossible-sounding goals really achievable?

It’s less important for us to achieve a particular number than to make sure we set our sights on sustainability goals so audacious that they drag us kicking and screaming toward them. If your ambition is lofty enough – and if you measure your progress – you eventually figure out a way

Consumers expect companies to have a sustainability focus.

to get close to it. That said, we believe our 2020 goals are doable. For example, as an interim target, we determined that we wanted 50% of our product sales to meet what we call our Design for the Environment sustainability standard by 2010. That seemed crazy, considering that only 5% of our products

met the standard at the time, but we’ve managed to hit that target ahead of schedule. Our suppliers know which materials, chemicals, and compounds are and aren’t acceptable in our products. What we have not yet done is spend as much time understanding how green their operations are. I wish we were further along on that front.

### Are your customers changing their buying habits to favor products made with sustainable processes?

Yes. More than 90% of our customer RFPs now include questions and criteria related to sustainability. We would love it if customers would help us even further, because sustainability initiatives get harder and harder to execute as you move beyond the initial opportunities. Take our 2020 goal of no landfill waste. It’s easy to make a big impact at first, by recycling production waste to manufacture other products. But if the recycled material doesn’t

meet your product standards, you’re stuck with something that has to go to the landfill.

We’ve started using recycled material to make one type of veneer, but aesthetically it’s not as high quality as the veneers we typically use, so we can’t use it on the exterior elements of our furniture. The architects and designers who are our customers simply wouldn’t accept it. As for the interiors of drawers and such, that’s a different story. Customers readily accept the veneer there, and they appreciate our use of recycled material. Now, if we could get them to like the look of recycled veneers and powder coatings on the exterior surfaces, too, we could get our landfill waste a lot closer to zero. But we haven’t yet pushed customers to change their attitude about that.

### You say customers appreciate your use of recycled material. Are they willing to pay a premium for products whose manufacture generates less waste?

Well, we were right a few years back when we determined that if we could achieve a leadership position in sustainability, it might boost demand from our customers. But we’ve found that consumers – and this is true in a lot of other segments – now expect companies to have a sustainability focus. They won’t pay a premium for it.

### Was your decision to put a sustainability strategy into high gear a few years ago purely a business choice or more of a gut decision?

It was both. We certainly perceived the business logic of sustainability, given the constraints on the world’s natural resources, our customers’ growing awareness of and interest in environmental issues, the possibilities for cost savings, and the need to keep our employees engaged. But businesspeople often want to believe that answers in strategy can be looked up in a book and you can write them all down and add them up and they equal something. It’s not like that. Often you simply start with a belief, or maybe just an inkling, and if you’re lucky, the evidence starts to pile up that you were right. In hindsight, people outside the company think you had a great business plan, but all you had was a belief. Our belief was that sustainability was going to have a growing importance both to us and to our customers. The evidence, I’m thankful to say, is piling up.

–Josette Akresh-Gonzales  
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