



Marcin Szala

# Making a difference through beer

*Andy Wales is a man on a mission – and he's decided that large companies can help achieve it. **Simon Hodgson** asks him about big business, books, and beer*

Let's try a little game of sustainability word-association. Ready? Mining: huge holes in the ground, conflict with local peoples, toxic waste. Oil: finite resources, climate change, spills. Beer: er, sorry, could you say that again?

If you've never thought of the brewing industry pioneering sustainable development (SD), then you probably haven't looked recently at SABMiller. It's a global giant with over 200 beer brands in more than 30 countries. And its approach to environmental and social issues is acknowledged to be among the forefront. Andy Wales is its Global Head of SD.

"My job is to sit at the boundary of the company and help those inside the business understand how external trends, new science, changing expectations and thinking impact the core business and what they do day to day," he explains. "And vice versa I help the outside world

understand the challenges those people face and how seriously they take the issues those external people are concerned about." Wales sees his role as an essential conduit: "I have the freedom to bridge new concepts internally and tell stories externally. You can make quite significant differences to the organisation's strategy."

What kind of issues are we talking about, I ask him. It's hard for many of us to think about brewing beer as one of the planet's great sustainability challenges.

Wales makes a convincing reply. "Water scarcity is a big challenge for the brewing industry over the medium and long term," he states without hesitation – it taking roughly five litres of water to make a litre of beer. But Wales goes on, showing the depth of connection to SABMiller's African roots (The 'SAB' standing originally for 'South African Breweries'). "The opportunity to sell low cost beers to

consumers who previously consumed illicit alcohol in Africa, using locally sourced grains from local smallholder farmers," he says. Or how about HIV/AIDS: "What we're doing on HIV/AIDS is not just working within our business but also up and down the value chain to work with farmers, work in taverns – to take the testing, the medicines, the whole peer-education piece up and down."

A look into SABMiller's most recent SD Report shows its 10 development priorities – including the topics Wales mentions, plus another key issue for anyone making alcohol – discouraging irresponsible drinking. And then there are all the generic challenges facing any global corporation: climate change, waste, human rights and so on.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the company has pioneered the concept of water foot-printing. "We like water foot-printing – just

like we like carbon foot-printing – because it helps understand the specific risk points in the value chain,” Wales explains, although he is much less confident that the methodology can be used for meaningful consumer product labelling. But it has a very powerful role in driving change internally. “Within a business you can easily equate carbon with money and water with an interruption to supply,” he points out. “That’s why we’ve worked with WWF to help test [their water foot-printing methodology]. The whole value ... is to understand what the company can do differently, and with water foot-printing we can understand which watersheds are most at risk and work with our suppliers, with local government, with NGOs to help protect those watersheds.

“In South Africa in our brewery it takes 4.5 litres of water to make a litre of beer. Overall in the market it will take 155 litres, the vast majority – more than 95 per cent – used in growing the source crops. In the Czech Republic it’s 45 litres. There’s less irrigation and lower temperatures. We did the footprint in the Czech Republic over three years and it is quite significantly different because of different weather patterns – that’s one of the issues about putting a label on a product for the consumer.”

It is easy to see how this job suits Wales. He started with a degree in Development Studies at Sussex, where he admits with a grin that he was involved in, or led “a number of anti corporate campaigns”. Brief stints in development charities suggested to him that he would find their processes frustrating. It was during one of many placements undertaken as part of his Forum for the Future Masters’ course that he began to really appreciate the dynamic and efficient culture of the business world, and its ability to really get things done. Could this, he wondered, be his route to making a difference on the issues he cared about? He eventually joined Interface, the revolutionary flooring company famed for its SD vision, and moved to be head of Sustainable Development at water company Severn Trent before SABMiller.

Wales’ suspicion proved correct. He’s a natural in the business environment – analytical, focused, energetic – and he’s been able to take others in his companies with him. It’s more than 10 years since he finished his Forum masters, and he’s recently been discussing progress with

two of his old course mates. “Eleven years ago we all went into big companies to try and make a difference,” he explains, “and this was a chance to ask ‘how do we feel about that now?’ All three of us feel that we’ve made quite a big difference, and we haven’t felt that frustrated. Admittedly, we’ve learned a lot about how to make things happen and the timescales over which things happen, but we haven’t felt frustrated.”

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So they wrote a book, Wales and his old colleagues Matt Gorman and Dunstan Hope. The title is “Big Business, Big Responsibilities” and it comes out of “pub conversations with people I’d known for a long time,” explains Wales, “with people who held quite senior jobs in other sectors who genuinely perceived that big business knew it was out there doing ‘bad’. I found it amazing that people who play such a key role in society – in education, in health, in the civil service – clearly haven’t interacted

with many people in business because their perception of how and why a business acts was so far from the truth.”

The book sets out to show how businesses around the world are changing, how they really ‘get it’ when it comes to sustainability but also where things haven’t worked. It starts by tackling some old myths – that business is always against regulation, that the only thing that motivates individuals in business is profit, or that businesses have to be held externally accountable before they change – before going on to look at new ways of doing things: new partnership models, the new idea of working at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ and so on. It touches on regulation and the risks that come from regulatory models not keeping up with the pace of regulation. And it launches on 26 July (see [www.bigresponsibilities.org](http://www.bigresponsibilities.org) for details).

I ask Wales what he does outside of work. “I see ‘work’ as a broad thing, much bigger than my job,” he says. “Work includes all the stuff I do on sustainability, writing the book, being a London Sustainable Development commissioner, working with small charities and local initiatives in Peckham.” Ok, try again – what does he do when he’s not doing his job? Wales laughs. “My job does take a lot of time,” he says “but it leaves me some additional time for work.” ■

*Simon Hodgson is MD and senior partner at Acona, where he heads the Group’s sustainable business practice [simon.hodgson@acona.com](mailto:simon.hodgson@acona.com)*



Andy Wales