

# Opinion

Subject experts speak out



Michael Braungart

Founder, Environmental Protection Encouragement Agency, and co-founder, MBDC

## It's time for corporations to move beyond guilt management

by Michael Braungart

Due to the increased intensity of ethical concerns, corporate responsibility has become a leading business issue in recent years. Companies are beginning to feel guilty for their wrongdoings, such as using child labor, manufacturing harmful products and polluting the environment. In regard to ecological damage, companies now strive to be sustainable. Sustainability, based on the principles of "eco-efficiency," promotes reducing and limiting the size of a company's ecological footprint. By reducing their emissions, minimizing their waste and limiting the number of toxic chemicals, companies are able to feel less bad about their work. In short, sustainability is a type of guilt management that helps a company feel better without actually having to make much of a stride to rectify the problem. Moreover, the authentic target of sustainability is zero – no footprint at all. Although this might be ideal for the environment, it's obviously not a good economic and social goal for a striving corporation.

Unlike conglomerates, ants experience no sense of regret with regards to their ecological footprint. Their total biomass is far greater than that of humans; nevertheless, they are not seen as an environmental hazard. On the contrary, their presence is instead used as an indicator of a region's health and vitality. Ants have no need to minimize their impact on the environment because, simply put, they provide a beneficial footprint. In other words, instead of being eco-efficient, they are *eco-effective*.

Eco-effectiveness is a strategy for designing human industry that is safe, profitable and regenerative, producing economic, ecological and social value. One avenue for eco-effectiveness is the "Cradle to Cradle" design paradigm, which designs materials to flow cyclically in appropriate and continuous biological or technical nutrient cycles, productively re-incorporating

all waste materials into new production and use phases. Materials optimized for the biological metabolism are termed biological nutrients (e.g. plant-based and biodegradable materials), and are intended for safe return to the environment as nutrients for living things. Materials optimized for the technical metabolism are termed "technical nutrients" (e.g. metals and some polymers), and are intended to circulate in closed-loop industrial cycles.

Under this framework, a distinction is made between products of consumption and products of service. Products of consumption, such as food, cosmetics and textiles, are made from biological nutrients and designed for safe disposal into the natural environment since they are consumed or degraded during use. Products of service, such as automobiles, washing machines, and computers, are designed using recyclable materials to provide a service and to be later returned for reuse and "upcycling." The ownership of the materials used in these products is retained by the producer, who instead sells the customer, for example, the service of being transported, getting clothes washed, or transferring information.

Through Cradle to Cradle Design, industries, like ants, no longer possess a need for CR. Guilt no longer has to be a way of life for the corporate world! Businesses that have already adopted these principles of emulating nature have, as a result, uncovered ways to be truly proud of the products and services they offer their customers. Some are even able to reach the "Triple Top Line" which supports the environment, society and economy at once. The real responsibility of corporations is purely to do good work.

*Co-authored by Benson Gabler*

[www.mbdc.com](http://www.mbdc.com), [www.epea.com](http://www.epea.com)

**Michael Braungart** is a chemist and professor of process engineering, who has spent many years developing tools to design eco-effective products and business systems. He founded the Environmental Protection Encouragement Agency in 1989, and co-founded McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry with William McDonough in 1995. He has worked with organizations and companies across the industrial spectrum, including Ford, Nike and the US Air Force.