

.....

Ray Anderson



Ray Anderson is the founder of Interface, Inc. An honours graduate of Georgia Institute of Technology, Ray learned the carpet trade through 14-plus years at various positions at Deering-Milliken and Callaway Mills; and, in 1973, set about founding a company to produce the first free-lay carpet tiles in America. Interface has since diversified and globalized its businesses, with sales in 110 countries and manufacturing facilities on four continents. It is the world's largest producer of commercial floor coverings.

In 1994 Ray had what he calls a 'spear in the chest' epiphany when he first read Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce*, seeking inspiration for a speech to an Interface task force on the company's environmental vision. Fourteen years and a sea change later, Interface, Inc, is more than 50% towards the vision of 'Mission Zero'. This is the company's promise to eliminate any negative impact it might have on the environment by the year 2020, through the redesign of processes and products, the pioneering of new technologies and efforts to reduce or eliminate waste and harmful emissions while increasing the use of renewable materials and sources of energy.

He has authored a book chronicling his journey, *Mid-Course Correction: Toward a Sustainable Enterprise: the Interface Model*, and become an unlikely screen hero in the 2004 Canadian documentary, 'The Corporation' and Leonardo DiCaprio's 'The 11th Hour'. He is a master commentator on the Sundance Channel's series, 'Big Ideas for a Small Planet', and was named one of TIME magazine's Heroes of the Environment in 2007, with a similar honour from Elle magazine that year. He is a sought-after speaker and adviser on environmental issues and was co-chair of the President's Council on Sustainable Development during President Clinton's administration.

Ray has been lauded by government, environmental and business groups alike. In 2007, he was honoured as a recipient of the Purpose Prize from Civic Ventures, a think tank and an incubator, generating ideas and inventing programs to help society to achieve the greatest return on experience, and by Auburn University with its International Quality of Life Award. In 1996 he received the Inaugural Millennium Award from Global Green, presented by Mikhail Gorbachev, and won recognition from Forbes magazine and Ernst & Young, which named him Entrepreneur of the Year – among many other honours.

Ray is former Board Chair for The Georgia Conservancy and serves on the boards of the Ida Cason Callaway Foundation, Rocky Mountain Institute, the David Suzuki Foundation, Emory University Board of Visitors, the ASID Foundation, Worldwatch Institute and Melaver, Inc. He is on the Advisory Boards of

the Harvard Medical School Center for Health and the Global Environment and the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper. He holds eight honorary doctorates from Northland College (public service), LaGrange College (business), N.C. State University (humane letters), University of Southern Maine (humane letters), The University of the South (civil law), Colby College (law), Kendall College (art) and Emory University (science).

The professional journey

What, in your view, are you best known for?

I think probably as the founder of Interface, which brought European carpet tile technology to America and effectively pioneered this new concept here. And then, 21 years later, for changing course towards environmental responsibility.

Let's talk about the founding of the business first. Why carpet tiles?

Back in the 1950s a family-owned Dutch company called Van Heugten invented carpet tiles, or modular carpet, which it sold under the name of Heuga. This improved technology was also being pursued by an English and a German company. So you had these three companies focusing on carpet tiles, with each one doing a little better than the last one. We then decided to team up with the British and the Germans to bring their technology to America, starting Interface from scratch with the idea of producing carpet tiles in America for the emerging so-called 'office of the future', which provided the perfect market for modular carpet – even demanded modular carpet.

What was your educational background?

I graduated from the Georgia Institute of Technology as an industrial engineer. After two years with a major food company, I moved into the carpet and textile business at Callaway Mills. I spent nine years there climbing the corporate ladder to the point where I was heading a number of corporate functions such as engineering and quality control.

Deering-Milliken then acquired Callaway, and all of the functions that I was responsible for at Callaway were absorbed into the larger company. I was assigned to the carpet business of Milliken as director of development, which is to say director of innovation. That's where I first came across the technology for carpet tiles. We ended up bringing some of that technology to America under Milliken's name.

When I saw that this was going to be a big thing I found my own European partners and we set out to create a company from scratch to develop this marketplace. It turned out that our technology was better than the Milliken technology and we were able to steal a march on Milliken and then quickly become the leader in America. By 1988, 15 years into our existence, we were number two in the world. We then acquired Heuga, which was number one, thus combining the three leading technologies in the world into one global company. We became number one in the world by a wide margin.

And then, in 1994, we began to hear a question from our customers that we'd never heard before. "What is your company doing for the environment?" But we had no answers.

What was the context for this?

I think there was a handful of people in the architecture and the interior design fields who were becoming really sensitised to the issue of the environment. They were early movers who realised that they had great power over the specifications that they developed for the buildings they built. So they began to ask these questions just to see what responses they would get from their suppliers. And we listened. I think that's maybe what set us apart from our competitors. We listened very carefully and we said, hell, we don't have any answers and we need some. Our customers care; we have to care, too.

So we created a taskforce made up of people from our divisions around the world to see what we were doing. And the organisers of the taskforce asked me to launch it with a kick-off speech about my environmental vision. Well, I didn't have an environmental vision, except to comply with the law! I'd spent 21 years building a company from scratch with survival in mind and, by 1994, when we'd succeeded beyond anybody's wildest dreams, I was 60 years old – the time people start thinking about retirement.

But the request to speak was there. Because I didn't have the vision (I knew 'comply' was not a vision) I knew they were looking for, I was really worried about what I should say. And at that propitious moment a book landed on my desk. It was Paul Hawken's book, *The Ecology of Commerce*.

Was that serendipity?

Pure serendipity. And there's a back story there that's almost kind of spooky. One of our sales managers in southern California was pursuing the carpet order for a new demonstration green building that was being built in a Los Angeles suburb, and she kept running into this environmental consultant who rejected everything she put forward by way of product proposals. And he finally said to her, 'Look, Interface just doesn't get it.' And that word got back to me. And my response, so help me God, was: 'Interface doesn't get what?' Which sort of confirmed the consultant's point of view, I think.

And then, more or less simultaneously, a young woman living in Seattle, Washington, working for the state of Washington's environmental protection division, hears this guy speak, likes what he has to say and buys his book. She reads it. She sends it to her mother. Her mother is the sales manager in southern California who has had to convey the message that Interface just doesn't get it, and has had to choke on her CEO's response: 'Interface doesn't get what?' So courageously she sends the book to her CEO, me, and it lands on my desk at that propitious moment.

I picked it up with no idea who Paul Hawken was or what the book was about or anything. I began to thumb the thing, as you would do with a new book. On page 19, I came to a chapter heading, 'The Death of Birth'. I began to read and I found very quickly that the death of birth is a phrase to describe species extinction – species disappearing, never again to experience the miracle of birth.

And it was like a spear in the chest.

As I got more deeply into the book, I found that Hawken's central point was that the living systems, the life support systems, the biosphere itself that supports and nurtures all of life, is in decline, serious decline, long-term, systemic decline. And the biggest culprit in this is the industrial system – the way we make stuff, this linear take–make–waste system that we're all part of – digging up the earth and turning it into products that become scrap or waste for landfills in very short order.

He then goes on to say there's only one institution on earth that is large enough, powerful enough, pervasive enough *and* wealthy enough to change that course. And that's the same institution that's doing the damage: the institution of business. Well, I took that very seriously and used Hawken's material in the speech. In fact, he gave me almost more vision than I could handle! And I made that speech to that tiny taskforce and challenged them to lead our company to sustainability and beyond. To make Interface a restorative company. To put back more than we take and do good for the earth, not just 'do no harm'.

Did you have to face a lot of scepticism initially?

It began right there with that taskforce. They listened and they went away shaking their heads and were almost in revolt, you know? We make carpet tiles, what is this sustainability stuff? They'd maybe expected something along the lines of 'how do we keep our reputation clean and how do we deal with the regulators', and more of that sort of compliance kind of thinking. But this went so far beyond compliance it left them breathless.

There was one person in the taskforce, however, from Britain, who had come over with some of the earliest of our processing machinery and decided to stay in America. And he said something to the effect that, you know, all my life I've made compromises for the sake of putting bread on the table and taking care of my family. If we can do this and really do it well we'd set an example for the whole world. If we can do it, anybody can. And we would make up for all those compromises we've ever made.

Brave words.

Strong stuff. And then the taskforce gained some traction and they each went back to their individual businesses and began with the mantra: do something. Just do something.

But, still, you've got a company of 5000 people and none of them had ever heard the word sustainability and had no idea what it meant. And this little handful of people, each going back to their individual businesses, were like voices in the wilderness, straws in the wind, so to speak. It took fully a year for us to gain real traction and during that period I spoke at every opportunity to our people at plant meetings, sales meetings, any time I could

get an audience. I talked about this environmental vision and our environmental stewardship responsibility and gradually, one mind at a time, they came around. That's the way it happened.

Over the course of that year we devised a plan and articulated the vision in very clear and hopefully understandable words: that we've got this mountain to climb and it's named 'Mount Sustainability'. And the point at the top, if you can visualise the point at the top of a mountain, symbolises zero footprint, zero environmental impact. That's sustainability and that's where we're going. We've got to climb this whole mountain and there are at least seven faces to the mountain. So, we spent that first year defining the seven faces of Mount Sustainability and how you would go about climbing them.

Over the course of that year we devised a plan and articulated the vision in very clear and hopefully understandable words: that we've got this mountain to climb and it's named 'Mount Sustainability'. And the point at the top, if you can visualise the point at the top of a mountain, symbolises zero footprint, zero environmental impact. That's sustainability and that's where we're going. We've got to climb this whole mountain and there are at least seven faces to the mountain.

Why seven?

Well, when we thought about the mountain and the broad areas of activity that we had to tackle, it seemed to sort itself out into seven fronts. The first of those was to eliminate waste, to eliminate the very concept. There's no waste in nature. One organism's waste is another's food. So we looked at nature to show us how to do this. The next face of the mountain is energy. Nature runs on sunlight. How do you run an industrial enterprise on sunlight? Everything in nature is cyclical. How do you then take these linear processes, the take-make-waste processes, and bend them into cyclical processes? In nature there are no emissions that are harmful to anybody. So how do we create factories that have no emissions? Or at least so that what goes out is harmless to the biosphere? And then you've got the whole area of transportation to deal with, which is separate unto itself. So we've got five faces there. Waste, emissions, energy, material flows and transportation. And then the sixth face we realised probably ought to be first on the list because nothing of any lasting value happens without it, and that is the culture shift.

That's quite a big challenge, isn't it?

Right! It's huge; it's changing minds. It's changing the world view of 5000 people from the notion that we can take it for granted that there are infinite resources, to a realisation that the earth is finite. It's finite as a source, in terms of what it can provide. It's finite as a sink, as to what it can absorb and assimilate and endure. So we have to think beyond the next quarter and we have to think beyond our own lifetime. The timeframe has to shift here beyond our brief time on earth to our grandchildren, their grandchildren and their grandchildren.

So, over time, one mind at a time we made the shift. And we spent a lot of energy and effort to create the opportunity for people to change their minds.

Did you apply this approach to your shareholders as well?

When we talked to Wall Street we talked about waste elimination and we gave this particular issue a name, QUEST (Quality Utilising Employee Suggestions and Teamwork). How can you argue with that?

So that's what we talked to Wall Street about until the rest of the plan was not only conceived and in place, but things were actually happening. And in the annual report to our shareholders for the year 2000, which came out in early 2001, the tagline was: a better way to bigger profits.

We spelled out the whole initiative there, all seven faces of the mountain, with the ultimate objective being the seventh face of the mountain: to change the way we go to market and re-invent commerce. Instead of selling products and stuff we would sell the service that the product delivered: the colour, the texture, the comfort underfoot, the acoustical value, the ambience, the functionality – all the reasons anybody would want a carpet. We would satisfy those reasons but retain ownership of the means – that is, the stuff itself – and give that stuff life after life in closed loop material flows.

And how did you propose to do that?

When we began the technology did not exist. This is about recycling – getting our products back at the end of their first useful life and giving them life after life by separating them into their individual components and putting each of those components back into its own closed loop. We've just

now, over the last year, put the technology in place to close the loop on the most difficult of all material components to recycle: the nylon, the polyamide face of the carpet.

It's ironic. DuPont invented nylon and DuPont says it's impossible to recycle it. But we and another supplier figured out how to do it.

You were saying that it was the questioning of the people who were commissioning for premises, for hotels, for offices and so on, that prompted you to go start this journey

Right.

So obviously they were asking this question of other suppliers too?

Oh, I'm sure they were.

In your experience, what was it that made you listen?

Well, that's an interesting question. There was a day in August in 1974, in our start-up year. We had spent 1973 building and equipping the factory and training our initial workforce and in early 1974 we launched our first product line. And that, you may remember, was in the middle of a horrific recession.

I remember one day in August of 1974. Here we are, with our factory built and equipped, our workforce hired and trained, raw materials bought and paid for, products developed and I looked at the order book and there was not a single order. And that is a traumatic experience. It says you're one order away from being out of business. If you don't get the next order, it's like the next heartbeat. If you don't get it, you die. So, with my life savings invested in this new company, I was looking at failure: corporate death and financial ruin for myself, personally.

Well, we got the next order and then the next one and the next one and so forth. We survived. But from that day on, the customer has been the single most important person in our company. I remember having conversations with our plant people when we were still a very small company, like meeting with them at Christmas time and asking, who do you think is the most important person in this company? And they would say, well, you. Or

Joe Kyle, who was our manufacturing guy or Mr Russell, our marketing guy. And I said no, no, no, no. The most important person is our customer and don't you forget it. We'll do anything for our customers. From that traumatic experience of an empty order book, we were a customer-intimate company from that day forward. So, 21 years later, when our customers were asking these questions to which we had no answers, we listened and said, you know, this is important.

That led to the taskforce and then the speech and all of that. It was an epiphanal experience for me personally. And then, over the course of the next year or two, I'd say, that epiphany spread one mind at a time through our company so that we began to really gain traction. From the beginning, though, we made real progress on the waste elimination front; we saved a lot of money and we took the view that we could save this money and put it in the bank, or we could re-invest some of it in the mountain-climbing plan.

And we did. We took the more holistic view that said: we don't want to optimise just this part of the company or that part of the company or another part of the company. We want to optimise the whole thing, and move the company from where it is today to a totally different place.

Where are you now in terms of the mountain?

Well, we're at different places on different faces of the mountain and it depends on how you weigh the individual faces. For example, our greenhouse gas emissions have been reduced by a net 82%, in absolute tonnage. Our carbon intensity has been reduced at Interface by 89%. This is phenomenal. I doubt if there's another company on earth which has done that over the same period of time. And we're a petro-intensive company; so if we can do it, anybody can.

In terms of using renewable and recycled materials, we're at 25% and growing very rapidly. We've reduced fossil fuel energy intensity by 60%; and something like 27% of our total energy today is coming from renewable sources; 88% of our electricity is from renewable sources. We've shut down a third of our smoke stacks and 71% of our effluent pipes by creating process changes that obviate the need for them. So, depending on how you weigh all this out, we're somewhere better than halfway to that objective. The ideal objective is a zero footprint.

And QUEST has saved the company \$393 million.

That's an amazing figure

Absolutely. It has paid for all the rest of this mountain climb, all the R&D, all the capital expenditures, all of the training, everything – more than paid for by the waste elimination alone. And this is not a small company. This is a \$1 billion company.

How do you view other companies which make excuses about why they are not making the same stringent efforts that you are?

Do you know the name Deepak Chopra? Deepak has this wonderful saying. He says that people are really doing the best they can, given their level of awareness. This whole environmental and social equity movement is about awareness, about raising levels of awareness. And there's always a higher level for anybody. Even for Deepak himself there's a higher level of awareness, and that is the name of the game. It doesn't make me mad. It makes me sad that others have not achieved a level of awareness about what to me is so obvious: that we're destroying the biosphere.

Current views

How do you define sustainability? Because it seems that different people have different ways of defining it.

That's true. What we did is take all of it in and ask, well, how does this apply to us? And we concluded that sustainability for us means taking from the earth only that which is naturally and rapidly renewable – not another fresh drop of oil – and doing no harm to the biosphere. That's sustainability for us. And then there's the fairness part of it too.

What do you mean by that?

Fairness is in our bones. We know that that means diversity and, certainly in the United States, it means cultural, ethnic and racial diversity. And we operate most everywhere in what is a very complex world, so adapting to local customs and treating people right everywhere is very important. But fundamentally we are focused on the environment and that means take nothing and do no harm. We believe strongly that resource efficiency is the way we help to create a rising tide that will float everybody's boat higher.

And from that everything else flows?

Yes. And then beyond sustainable is restorative, which is to put back more than we take. Do good, not just do no harm. When I first put that to our people in that first taskforce meeting they came back to me and said, 'You know, we think we understand sustainability and how we can begin to move in that direction, but this thing called restorative seems to us like perpetual motion. And how do you do that?' As we talked about it, we realised if we could really begin to move in a demonstrable, credible, measurable way towards sustainability, get a really clear fix of what that meant to us and begin to move in that direction, something else just might happen. We might influence somebody else to move, too.

We really felt that we could attract other businesses to a better business model. And that's how we have become restorative: through the power of influence. It's not just what we do, but what we influence others to do. That's how we become restorative.

And I would say today that Interface is a restorative company. Even though we're a bit over halfway to sustainability, the influence that we've had in the world is amazing. We have companies coming to us every day asking, 'How do you do this?' And we've even created a consulting arm within Interface to deal with those companies, which, by the way, we call InterfaceRAISE – raise expectations, standards, awareness and profits. We realised that 14 years of this has created a lot of value. It's a furtherance of the restorative initiative.

Would you say that, overall, you feel optimistic about where we are headed?

Well, I'm deeply concerned. People ask me all the time, are you optimistic? And I cannot say I am. I think there's going to be a lot of pain before humankind figures this out and we reverse the wrong course that we're on. That's why I wrote my book, *Mid-Course Correction*, because the whole damn system has got to have a mid-course correction.

So business has a big role to play?

Paul Hawken was absolutely right. Business has to lead. Well, I say absolutely right because I've slightly modified my own view of that over time

to the point that I'd say today if business does not come aboard, where its influence is so powerful in the world for good or for ill, and have that mid-course correction collectively as an industrial system, it's over for humankind. It's just a matter of time.

If business does not come aboard, where its influence is so powerful in the world for good or for ill, and have that mid-course correction collectively as an industrial system, it's over for humankind. It's just a matter of time.

What role can governments and ordinary people play?

Well, business is undoubtedly the most powerful institution on earth. Governments follow, they don't lead. People? Well, if people could institutionalise themselves to speak with one voice it would be the people that would be the most powerful because business responds to its customers. Politicians respond to their voters. So it's people ultimately who have the power, but the people don't yet speak with one voice. If they did it would move markets, move governments and move the whole thing.

Look at Jeff Immelt at GE. He has committed GE to doubling its R&D in clean technologies from \$750 million to \$1.5 billion and expects to double his revenues from \$10 billion to \$20 billion from those same clean technologies. He's not doing it for altruism. He's doing it because he's heard his customers say, we want the clean technologies.

Anita Roddick of the Body Shop used to talk about the second bottom line. Is that what you mean?

Well, my view on this is that the triple bottom line, done right, comes together in one truly superior, totally ethical, better financial bottom line. It's financial, social and environment. This is John Elkington's phrase. He has pioneered the notion of three bottom lines, which is great. But I really do believe that beyond the triple bottom line lies that one truly superior, totally ethical, financial bottom line that will hopefully attract companies everywhere to a better business model. I think more in terms of a three-stage rocket. The payload is profits.

You make a very powerful business case for taking this route.

Well, in our experience the business case is crystal clear. Our costs are down, not up. We have to dispel the myth that there's a trade-off – a choice. It's a false choice between the environment and the economy. Our products are the best they've ever been. When our product designers

In our experience the business case is crystal clear. Our costs are down, not up. We have to dispel the myth that there's a trade-off – a choice. It's a false choice between the environment and the economy.

began to approach product design through the lens of sustainable design it opened up a whole new world. It's been a wellspring of innovation. Nobody could have anticipated it. It was a total surprise. Because of that, our products are innovative and they're the best in the world in our category. Our people are just galvanised around this shared higher purpose.

I'll tell you a quick story. I mentioned the consulting business. One of our first clients was a big international company that sent 15 of its top management people to us here in La Grange, Georgia, to a carpet factory for a cultural immersion experience! They were in a conference room that's deliberately out in the middle of the factory, where you can see the products and the processes going on all around you.

There was one woman among those 15. And she did not want to be there. She was belligerent, sceptical, disruptive; she challenged everything and clearly did not understand why her company was spending this time and money to send 15 people to this little rinky-dink carpet factory in Georgia.

During the mid-morning break everybody had to find their way to the restrooms by going through the factory. So she finds the ladies' room and on her way back encounters a fork truck driver who has this big roll of carpet on his fork truck. She stops him and says: 'What do you do here?' And, so help me, his response was: 'Ma'am, I come to work every day to help save the earth.' It just stunned her. She then began to draw him out, to ask him more questions. After a couple of minutes of this he said: 'Ma'am, I hate to be rude, but if I don't get this roll of carpet to that machine over there in the next minute our waste figures and our emissions figures will go completely out of control. I've got to go.'

She came back and sat down. No one knew that this had happened, but our person running the meeting said that when she took her seat, she was a visibly different person. She sat there very quietly, not saying anything. And she then began to challenge her people. Why aren't we doing this, why aren't we doing that? And then she told the story of her encounter on the factory floor. She said, 'I've never seen anything like it before to demonstrate alignment from the very top of an organisation clear to the factory floor.' Then she says, 'The only word I can think of that describes it is love.'

So you can see the galvanising effect this has had on our people and the way our people have taken on this higher purpose.

The final element in the business case is certainly as important as any of the others and that is the goodwill of the marketplace. It has just been astonishing. No amount of money we could have spent on advertising or marketing would have created the goodwill that this single initiative has.

So does this approach help with marketing your products, do you think?

We have been very, very careful and actually reticent to put much in the hands of our sales force because we didn't want to raise too many expectations. For the first eight, nine years we wouldn't even let our sales force talk about it. We just said, look, you go and do your job and every time you make a sale you can be sure that the work being done in the factory is going to be reflected in the product you sell.

But in the last few years we have begun to put the marketing literature together to help the sales force present what we're doing. At the end of the day, people deal as often with the company behind the product as they do with a product. And so it's too valuable *not* to incorporate somehow into the marketing, and present that face of the company to the public.

Do you think one of the problems is that there has been a certain amount of greenwashing, where people mount initiatives just to show that they're doing something when they're not?

That happens all the time. That's the typical competitive response, a knee-jerk reaction. You know: 'We're losing position in the marketplace, we've

got to do something.' What you get is greenwash, using 'green' in a way that's transparently self-serving.

Is it a case of carrot or stick to get companies to change?

What I hope to do in Interface is create such a powerful example that no-one can ignore it; so it draws other companies to the example. I suspect that we're going to have regulations that begin to create a more insistent stick, particularly with regard to climate change. With a change of administration in Washington, almost certainly something's going to emerge to deal with climate change. If it doesn't, then it really is over.

So you'd be quite keen to see that emerge?

Well, I think that businesses in general, much larger businesses than ours, are looking for a level playing field; and regulation in a way creates that. Just give us the goal and leave it to us to get to it. The goal, of course, will eventually be translated into a cap on emissions, which will be ratcheted down, down, down until companies everywhere are where we are today, at 82% reduction.

How are we going to resolve the different competing needs of nationalism and globalism to come up with regulations, and who will police them?

Well, I presume it's going to be one nation at a time, each doing its own thing and there's going to be a huge amount of negotiation, the give and take, the push and pull. It's a many-sided issue. It's an equation with so many variables. And I don't know. I'm not smart enough in the political sense to know how it all gets done. I do know, though, where it all has to end up. It has to end up with an 80% reduction in greenhouse gases in absolute terms. Or maybe more. We've got to get the emissions down below the earth's absorption or sequestration rate so that we can begin to reverse the trend – not just reduce the upward trend but turn it downward and drive it *below* where we are today, at a CO₂ concentration of roughly 387ppm, to 350ppm or less.

You said you're not overly optimistic. Can technology save us?

Well, technology's got to be part of the solution, absolutely. It's the contrast between the technologies of the first industrial revolution, which, by the way is still going on today, and the technologies of the new industrial revolution. The contrast will be pretty dramatic. The first industrial revolution technologies are basically extractive and the new technology will have to be renewable. The technologies are basically linear today, and in the future they've got to be cyclical. Today, they are driven by fossil fuels; tomorrow they must be driven by renewables. Today they are wasteful and abusive; tomorrow they must be waste-free and benign and focused on resource-efficiency.

What do you reckon the world will be like for your grandchildren?

Less unsustainable, we hope.

Looking into your crystal ball, in 10 or 15 years, can you see other businesses climbing the mountain?

Definitely. People ask me all the time, when you get to the top of the mountain, what do you hope to see? I say, aside from the fact the view is going to be wonderful, I want to look down that mountain in all directions and see other companies climbing right behind us because there's plenty of room at the top.

And, of course, you spend a lot of time spreading the message, don't you?

I spend a lot of time talking to people, that's for sure. People everywhere want to hear the story of Interface. I relinquished the CEO role years ago, so that I'm freed up from the day-to-day of the business and I can do this. I can talk to people. I made 150 speeches in 2007. Actually it was 108 speeches and 42 interviews. Put it this way: I never seek an invitation but they do keep finding me!

The cumulative effect of all of this has created enormous goodwill in the marketplace and prepared the way for our sales people to now lay the goods on the table. Here we are and this is what I can tell you about this product.

Its footprint has been reduced by half and the company behind it has reduced its footprint by half. So the cumulative effect of third-party endorsement, plus what our sales force is able to generate, has put us in a whole different place with regard to the public and our marketplace.

Getting more personal

What is it about you as a person that has brought you here? When you were very young were you very much into nature, for instance?

Well, as a kid growing up in a small town in Georgia, sure, I spent summers outdoors, but I was an athlete too. During the school year I was involved in football, basketball and baseball and I eventually went to college on an athletic scholarship. So I was not particularly a naturalist or a nature person growing up. Ultimately it was my five grandchildren who prepared me for that spear in the chest experience. In fact, I'll give you another anecdote. Have you heard of Yvon Chouinard? He's a founder of Patagonia, which makes outdoor wear.

Yvon was a blacksmith in his early years and he was a mountain climber and made his own gear. And his friends said, 'Look, your stuff's better than my stuff, would you make me one of those?' And that's how Patagonia started. It then moved into clothing and so forth. It's a very successful company and has been committed to sustainability longer than I have, going way, way back.

Well, I was invited to make a speech to Patagonia's supply chain. They had a green-the-supply chain meeting years ago and I went to California and talked about the Interface example. Then, over dinner one evening, I was sitting across the table from Yvon and he started quizzing me. He asked me, 'Do you climb mountains?' I said, 'Oh, no. No, I don't climb mountains. That's too dangerous for me.' He said, 'Well, what about fishing? Do you like to fish?' I said, 'Well, when I was a boy I went with my father, but since I've been an adult I haven't been fishing very much.' He said, 'Well, what about hunting?' I said, 'Well, yeah, I went dove hunting when I was 16 years old. I hit a dove, but it didn't die. I had to pull its head off. And since then I haven't wanted to go hunting.' He said, 'Well, what about hiking? Do you like to hike?' I said, 'Well, that's pretty strenuous, Yvon.' And in total frustration he said, 'Then why the hell do you do this?'

And I said, 'Yvon, I have five grandchildren.' He said, 'Oh, right.' That was a whole new reason for him.

That's a great story. So what would you say you are proudest of in terms of your work?

Oh, what Interface has become. This paragon of sustainability. And we're not done. We're only halfway there. And I hope to live to see the top of that mountain. It's a good thing I come from long-lived people.

We're only halfway there. And I hope to live to see the top of that mountain. It's a good thing I come from long-lived people.

Finally, do you have what you might call a defining moment in your life?

It was Hawken's book. In that chapter on 'The Death of Birth' he uses the example of the reindeer of St Matthew Island as a metaphor.

St Matthew Island, in the Bering Sea, was a deserted island except for a coastguard weather station. So somebody had the bright idea of putting reindeer on the island so that if the food supply ships couldn't get in there the men could at least shoot a reindeer for dinner. And in 1944 they put 29 reindeer on the island.

Over the years the coastguard abandoned the weather station, but one biologist stayed in touch with what was happening on the island. By 1963 the reindeer population had grown from 29 to 6000 reindeer. But he had calculated that the island could support between 1600 and 2300 animals. So 6000 was an overshoot in biological terms. On his return to the island three years later, though, the biologist found that the population had crashed to 42. From 29 to 6000 to 42! This was way below the original carrying capacity of the island because the environment had been so destroyed by the overshoot. Carrying capacity, overshoot, collapse. Three very important ecological concepts.

Well, I read that and I said, 'My God, that's a metaphor for humankind and the earth.' We are in overshoot already and getting worse, and this is what lies before us if we don't get it under control.