

Red wine, white wine, rosé.
And now green.

The wine from the grapes in this vineyard travels
half way round the world to reach your glass.

So how can a wine importer claim to have
no net impact on the environment?



Twenty years is probably long enough for a business to establish its credentials. Compared with the average start-up company which is likely to disappear before its third birthday, any enterprise that can claim to have been in the same trade for two decades is due for its long service award.

The fact that Vintage Roots Ltd, of Arborfield in Berkshire, launched into the niche organic wine sector back in 1986 at a time when the jury was still out on the merits of such products, makes the company's survival all the more remarkable.

With a 'charter' to supply and promote the benefits of organic wines and a range of other organically produced drinks, Vintage Roots clearly supports a business culture in which concern for the environment is paramount.

As Lance Pigott, one of its directors, observed, "The company has traded since its inception solely in wines that we believe are of the highest authentic quality, originating from low impact producers who actively sustain and enrich their environments."

Apparent contradiction

There is surely a contradiction in finding a wine importer espousing the case for low environmental impact producers when virtually every bottle has to be transported to the UK by road or sea.

Since remote regions such as Australia and South America are major sources of wine for Vintage Roots' list, it would be easy to see the company making a growing contribution to carbon emissions every year that the business expands.

That point had not escaped the company's management. Pigott noted that "We recognise that in the very running of our business, we have some adverse impacts on the environment, and that we too must be responsible for reducing that impact."

A business selling wine is clearly more than a warehouse full of wine cases. Vintage Roots maintains a sales and administration office alongside the warehouse at its premises a few miles from Reading: the operation currently employs fifteen staff.

The company's activities are supported by four delivery vehicles and a fork lift, and it uses packaging materials in addition to a full range of office supplies. There would certainly appear to have been scope for change in many of those areas.

Carbon emission implications

Vintage Roots' other director Neil Palmer noted an important factor in the energy equation. "We need to travel both within the UK and internationally to source the wines we carry.

"As a result, we are responsible for the importation of a range of wines from around the world. The carbon emission implications of that transport and travel commitment figure prominently in our strategy."

Developing an eco-friendly business which operates profitably in the price-sensitive alcoholic beverages market has created some interesting challenges for the Vintage Roots team.

The business is based on the principle of trading only with certified organic suppliers, and encouraging sound environmental performance across those vendors' products, goods and services.

Lance Pigott again. "Within that framework, we are developing our offering of Fairtrade organic wines & beverages. Where possible,

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we use other ethical and green suppliers for all our business needs, from banking to the energy we use to boil the kettle.”

The objective has been to minimise the company's carbon footprint and offset whatever carbon consumption cannot be eradicated by any other means. As a result, Vintage Roots is trading as a carbon neutral company with a DEFRA recognised supplier of offset services.

Given the nature of the company's business, that process is relatively complex. Vintage Roots offsets carbon emissions against all of its wine imports worldwide using accredited schemes, with the 'benefit' being taken up wherever possible in developing countries.

Carbon offsetting is not a cure for global warming

The Vintage Roots team is a strong supporter of carbon offsetting. This is a way of compensating for emissions with an equivalent carbon saving: offsetting involves calculating carbon output and then purchasing 'credits' from emission reduction projects.

Neil Palmer is adamant that carbon offsetting is not a cure for climate change. “We believe, however, that the process helps raise awareness of the issues and doing something is always better than doing nothing. Offsetting money will go towards projects - not just tree planting - that provide investment in clean technology and local projects. As these are often in developing countries, they immediately reduce emissions and improve lives.”

The company has taken the decision to offset against all its wine imports, a step which Palmer believes makes Vintage Roots the first wine company in the UK committed to this course of action. “As part of the process, we have calculated the distances that our wines have to travel, and have used published emissions calculations to show the carbon footprint of each journey. Drawing on data published by DEFRA, we were able to conclude, for example, that moving one tonne of cargo on a large ship results in one eighth of the emissions created when moving the same tonne by truck.”

“No less important, we raise awareness of environmental issues among our team, and guide and encourage them to pursue best practice. Along the way, we employ what we believe are sound waste management practices, including compliance with the requirements of the Producer Responsibility Obligations regulations for packaging waste. The process is ongoing as we regularly review – and continually improve - our environmental performance.”

There will be an opportunity to reduce the company's consumption of carbon-based fuels further when Vintage Roots progressively upgrades its vehicles and can switch to Biodiesel. For the moment, however, the campaign to reduce energy consumption within the business continues. As with all enterprises seeking to implement change as a matter of principle, the good intentions should not be allowed to impact adversely on their ability to continue growing and remain profitable.

Continuing the process

Where major inroads have already been achieved, the company is trying to make further improvements. In the field of recycling, for example, the 84% figure which Vintage Roots claims to have achieved is nearly twice that of the national average.

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In the movement towards businesses reducing their carbon footprint, Vintage Roots is certainly further down that route than most other operations, irrespective of their size.

There is another avenue which Lance Pigott was keen to explore. "Choosing to buy organic wine rather than the conventionally produced alternative has a direct impact on carbon emissions and we would therefore recommend it strongly." That would be a reasonable suggestion from a director of Vintage Roots.

Any relevance to the real world of the SME?

However efficient the company might be in recycling waste and switching in due course to organic fuels, there remains the fundamental question of measuring, evaluating and then neutralising the effect of its 'wine miles'. The Vintage Roots directors argue that the carbon impact of moving wine into the UK is an order of magnitude less than the corresponding cost of flying in what they see as 'unnecessary' foods from distant locations.

It is perhaps worth noting that those airfreighted foods are satisfying demand on supermarket shelves. The 'food mile' is therefore not a factor that the majority of consumers wish to take into account when they are placing a pack of green beans from Kenya in their supermarket trolley.

Purchasers who perceive a benefit in organic beverages, however, are inherently more likely to assess the total 'proposition' including the carbon cost of transporting the wine. Recognising that this could be an important factor in their decision, Vintage Roots commissioned a study early in 2007 to reveal the true carbon footprint of all its wine imports, using one of the specialist companies in this lucrative field for consultancy.

Lance Pigott outlined the results. "The report demonstrated that a longer distance travelled by ship is not as damaging as lots of shorter trips by lorry or truck. Buying a bottle of wine shipped from Chile or S.Africa generates a smaller carbon footprint than a wine driven from Sicily or Portugal.

In the current movement towards businesses becoming less energy intensive and reducing their carbon footprint, Vintage Roots is certainly further down that route than most other operations, irrespective of their size. Whether the experience gained by the company can be rolled out across large swathes of the SME sector is another question, however.

Quite literally from the ground up, all of the wines sold by Vintage Roots have been produced on what the directors maintain are sound ecological principles. The fact that this has been the culture of Lance Pigott and Neil Palmer since they started the company in 1986 means that moving to the position they occupy today has been incremental rather than a more fundamental change of direction. Given that history, and the nature of its product range, it was perhaps inevitable that the business would become a pioneer in carbon neutrality as this strand of thought evolved.

Pigott accepts that the process has not been without some additional cost. Vintage Roots is an owner-managed private company and the decision to bear those costs is a matter for no-one outside its management. The majority of SMEs of any substance do not have the same flexibility, however: costs have to be justified in straightforward economic terms to other stakeholders who are looking to the bottom line and their return on capital. Implementing end-to-end carbon neutrality from scratch would incur greater costs than for Vintage Roots, and the likelihood of a commitment would reduce accordingly.

What the experience of the Berkshire wine importer does illustrate, however, is the diversity of the opportunities that exist for change: SMEs should be able to implement the most appropriate of these in their own operations.



Putting theory into practice

If you support the ethical stance of Vintage Roots, you may want to try some of the organic drinks that the company distributes in the UK.

Vintage Roots can be contacted through its site and online shop at www.vintageroots.co.uk or by telephone on 0800 980 4992