

Professor Michael Braungart, founder of consultancy EPEA Internationale, has been working for 20 years now to encourage companies to combine 'good' science, concern for the environment and ethics in producing the goods they sell. This has led to a set of principles he has grouped together under the title Cradle to Cradle. This name reflects the idea that, at the end of a product's natural life, we should turn it into something new rather than just throw it away.

Saints alive – we can all walk in Tiger's footsteps

Since 1987, EPEA has granted Cradle to Cradle certification to 600 products. The main qualities these products have are that they consist of components and materials that—far from producing harmful waste—are beneficial to human beings and to the planet.

Concern for the earth is, of course, very much at the forefront of current corporate strategy: everyone from oil producers to large retail chains has highly publicised environmental commitments now. But, having started preaching this message two decades ago, Professor Braungart must qualify as a visionary. And the visions continue.

He loves the shoes made by cult Mallorca-based footwear manufacturer, Camper and quickly slips off one of the pair he's wearing to say, "See this? It's made to be completely 'compostable'. You can wear it out and then put it into the ground safe in the knowledge that it's going to make the soil healthier because there are biological nutrients in the chemicals Camper uses."

This is the kind of contribution a Cradle to Cradle shoe must make, and even the biggest shoe manufacturers will have to work hard to convince the professor that they are striving to

To encourage the public to buy and wear recycled shoes, manufacturers should throw footwear worn by sporting superstars into the mix.

Products that make the grade

EPEA grants Cradle to Cradle certification to manufacturing companies around the world to help them measure their own achievements in producing 'environmentally-intelligent' designs. The organisation insists that certification will also help the buying public "pursue a broader definition of quality".

This means buyers could have confidence that the products they choose are using environmentally safe and healthy materials, designed to be used time and time again or, if they go into the ground, to benefit to the soil. Manufacturers' use of energy and water, and their strategies for social responsibility also come into it.

Products achieve different levels of accreditation—transitional silver, silver, gold, and platinum—depending on the number of criteria they satisfy.



be a force for good. Nike, for example, has provided $20 million in funding for his research programme so far. He pays tribute to the company's generosity and to its awareness at some levels of the importance of making better (in the Cradle to Cradle sense) products, but he is still outspokenly critical of Nike's take on things overall.

Principally, he feels that a fixed focus on fashion, with fast turnover of 'buy-use-throw-away' products cannot be in keeping with Cradle to Cradle. "At Nike, 50% of all costs go on marketing," he says. "The products are designed to become ugly after 18 months so that consumers will want to throw them away and buy the next pair. It's stupid; it's like punching your customers in the face and then begging them to come back for more."

He has an answer: by all means buy the new Nikes, but when you do, you should hand back your old pair so that the sportswear manufacturer can recycle them. This is another reason for using high quality, beneficial materials in production, consigning what the professor calls "that stinking stuff" to the past.

Sweating assets

And speaking of stinking stuff, this plan, unfortunately, faces a serious stumbling block in the lucrative US market, where sales of sports and casual shoes are worth around $22 billion a year. People in the USA, according to the EPEA founder, tend to turn their noses up at the thought of recycled shoes owing to the amount of other people's sweat they might have accumulated over time. But there is a Braungart rejoinder even for this.

He points out that, for centuries, the faithful have flocked to claim a piece of the clothing of saints. "And who are the modern-day saints?" he asks. "Why, sports stars. So all Nike has to do is recycle 100 pairs of ordinary shoes and add in one pair that Tiger Woods has used. People will go crazy to get some of his holy sweat in just the same way as people keep relics of a saint's garments."

He talks about the alternative to re-using these materials in new products; it's around us all the time already—waste. Waste management has become a huge industry, with a total estimated value of almost $270 billion (for industrial and municipal waste in the 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries alone, which excludes burgeoning waste producers such as China and Russia). These figures come from a 2006 report that one waste management company, Veolia, commissioned.

"We make cheap, toxic products that generate all this waste," Professor Braungart observes, "and then invest billions in waste management to cope with it. It's crazy."

Footwear manufacturers should work in partnerships with leading chemical companies,

he argues, so that they can make non-toxic shoes, products, he says in his blunt way, that are good. "Toxicity is an absence of goodness, just as darkness is an absence of light and cold is an absence of heat," he continues. "So we need innovation. Fortunately, there are young scientists in the chemical companies that are desperate to bring good new ideas to market."

One immediate result that he believes could come from this is shoes that require no socks, including more formal shoes. With 20 grammes of chromium in every kilo of leather going into footwear at the moment, he argues that shoes without socks are practically impossible; the toxicity of the shoes irritates the skin too much.

Manufacturers need to start choosing chemicals that can do good for the body and for the environment, not just chemicals that are slightly less bad than the ones they used to use. This will allow companies such as Nike, adidas, Puma and all their competitors to stop selling shoes, and start selling "insurance for healthy feet".

Textile producers and garment manufacturers are in the same boat. If, as he suggests, over half the children in Europe aged seven and over suffer from an allergy of one kind or another, more companies need to invest in research that will allow them to produce clothes that help sufferers live with their conditions.

The combination of clever scientists and visionary brand managers can deliver this, but the vision must extend all the way along the supply chain. Braungart worries that too many scientists feel they have to apologise for producing chemicals, apologise, almost, for being scientists in the first place.

We are overcompensating, he insists. Having treated the planet so badly for so long, we are now in danger of shying away from working in a way that can make the air, the soil and the sea cleaner and more productive. Ants offer a good example, according to the professor.

"The biomass of ants is four times that of humans," he explains. "Ants' calorie consumption is equal to that of 30 billion people (almost five times the current world population). But ants don't harm the environment, and we don't have to either."

To prove that it is possible to manufacture 'beautiful' Cradle to Cradle products, EPEA will run a special exhibition for the manufacturers of certified goods in Frankfurt, on November 12-14, 2008. There will also be a conference at the event for delegates to learn at first hand about the changes manufacturers have had to go through to achieve Cradle to Cradle status.

For the movement's founder, these companies are entitled to feel proud of being part of this group. They know that being less bad is not enough; they are a force for good.



Professor Michael Braungart, founder of EPEA and of the Cradle to Cradle movement.

EPEA Internationale

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