

Kingfisher's CEO on building a sustainable home improvement sector

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Sir Ian Cheshire discusses certified wood, saving energy using an iPad and building kitchen counters from recyclable materials



Using sustainable wood in its home improvement products costs Kingfisher £20m a year, according to its CEO. Photograph: Kingfisher

Home improvement is by definition unsustainable, right? After all, you take large chunks out of your house and throw them in the skip. But in the 2014 new year honours list, Sir Ian Cheshire received a knighthood for "services to business, sustainability, and the environment". As CEO of home improvement giant [Kingfisher](#), Cheshire has made sustainability his trademark, arguing that it's inevitable and that the best [strategy](#) is to be the early bird that gets the customers.

"People talk a lot about greenwash, but I think the problem is greenhush", says Cheshire "Once we've done something, we should talk about it."

Cheshire highlights some of the initiatives at the Kingfisher Group, which has 1,082 stores in nine European countries, including the B&Q chain in Britain. "We're producing eco-friendly lightbulbs but also more complex things, like energy systems that let you control your energy use from an iPad. We're not talking just about lighting but also heating and security. That way you can turn on the heating in your house, or even just in one room, when you leave work, so you come home to a warm house but haven't had to heat it for the whole day."

Such cutting-edge technology will take the lead as the home improvement sector tackles sustainability. Financially squeezed home owners will no doubt also catch on to this energy-saving measure. "When it comes to saving energy and water, there's a lot that can be done even with an old house," Cheshire explains. "We took a typical old English home in Southampton and retrofitted it with all the products we could muster. That helped cut energy use by 70%."

But all that waste ending up in the skip as people renovate their homes may be the area where the home improvement sector can make the biggest immediate difference to the environment. As the Scottish government notes in its [home improvement guide \(PDF\)](#), a top principle of home renovation is not to waste existing materials. This, says Sir Ian, is an area where Kingfisher is working to develop

innovative ways of recycling, even upcycling, discarded materials, noting that the company has developed a kitchen counter work area that uses recyclable materials from Kingfisher businesses. According to Cheshire, Kingfisher has cut its landfill by three quarters, and in the future he wants all his company's materials to become fully sustainable and fully recyclable or recycled.

Another area that Kingfisher is planning to focus more on, he reveals, is collaborative consumption, which in the home improvement business translates into customers sharing tools with clusters of friends: "It's a more sustainable model than simply using tools and then disposing of them."

While recycling at home is laudable, addressing illegal and unsustainable logging is imperative for the home improvement sector. As much as 80% of logging in Indonesia and the Brazilian Amazon is conducted illegally. Kingfisher, Cheshire says, now uses 100% sustainable timber in 16,000 products. "All told, using sustainable wood costs us £20m per year, but we don't pass that cost on to the customers because we want them to choose sustainability over the alternative," he explains.

"Sustainability is where the development will head, and if we're there first, the customers will stick with us. Yes, there may always be companies that sell illegally logged timber, but the answer is not to be the cheapest. The answer is to be a premium brand, and sustainability is how you differentiate yourself." Kingfisher plans to be CO2-neutral, or even net-positive, by 2020, as it will replant more trees than it logs.

But there's no doubt that illegally logged wood, sold at a lower price, poses a threat to law-abiding companies. And ascertaining wood's origins remains a challenge. "In the world today, 87% of wood is certified as sustainable, and in markets like the UK the figure is 100%", says Cheshire. "The problem is countries like Russia and China. And the last 5% will be extremely difficult. We're talking about the wood in your hammer. The supplier may not know where it comes from, so you can't know whether it's sustainable."

Cheshire maintains there's a business case for sustainability, noting that even the Chinese government is waking up to the problem of environmental degradation. At the [World Economic Forum](#), he says, "there are some leading companies that are starting to think about how they can survive in a world that's focused on sustainability. WEF has a key role to play in encouraging leaders to think along these lines. Yes, it will be a cost today, but it will lead to profit tomorrow."

Which brings us back to iPads and home energy reduction, which, according to Sir Ian, is just the beginning: "I want Kingfisher to become a net producer of energy", he vows. "As a homeowner, you should be able to earn money from your house's ability to generate energy."

Link: www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/kingfisher-ceo-sustainable-home-improvement