



Shine a little light

Hurdles are just steps along the sustainability journey.
By **LESLEY SPRINGALL**

Sharing ideas on sustainability is a matter of principle for State of Grace's director Deb Cairns (left) and business partner Fran Reilly

WHO WOULD have thought there would be objections to cremating cardboard coffins? But when alternative funeral firm State of Grace started up, none of the crematoriums wanted a bar of them.

Director Deb Cairns says it was very frustrating for the fledgling business. Cardboard coffins are a low-cost, environmentally friendly and simple option for families, she says. But none of the crematoriums could give Cairns a good reason for their objections.

"We had a variety of answers from they create too much smoke or too much ash, to they are an OSH hazard." None of these answers were logical, given that crematoriums were happy to cremate wooden caskets, often with mattresses stuffed with shredded paper.

Cairns and her business partner Fran Reilly persevered, sending off surveys to crematoriums around the world asking if they had any problems with cardboard coffins. None had, but that still wasn't enough. Then they attracted the support

of Auckland Regional councillor Sandra Coney, who helped the company organise emissions testing. Only then did some of the crematoriums begin accepting cardboard coffins.

Charitably, Cairns adds that initial reluctance may have been due to State of Grace's youth and status as an untested, niche player.

Since it looks like the company is sticking around, and more traditional funeral companies are now copying some of its practices, support is growing. But changing entrenched mindsets can be difficult, says Cairns, especially if you don't want to compromise your principles.

One of the main hurdles companies face in becoming sustainable is a lack of understanding about what really matters. It's not about developing a new green widget, but rather thinking differently about everything you do, says Peter Salmon of design strategy company Moxie Design.

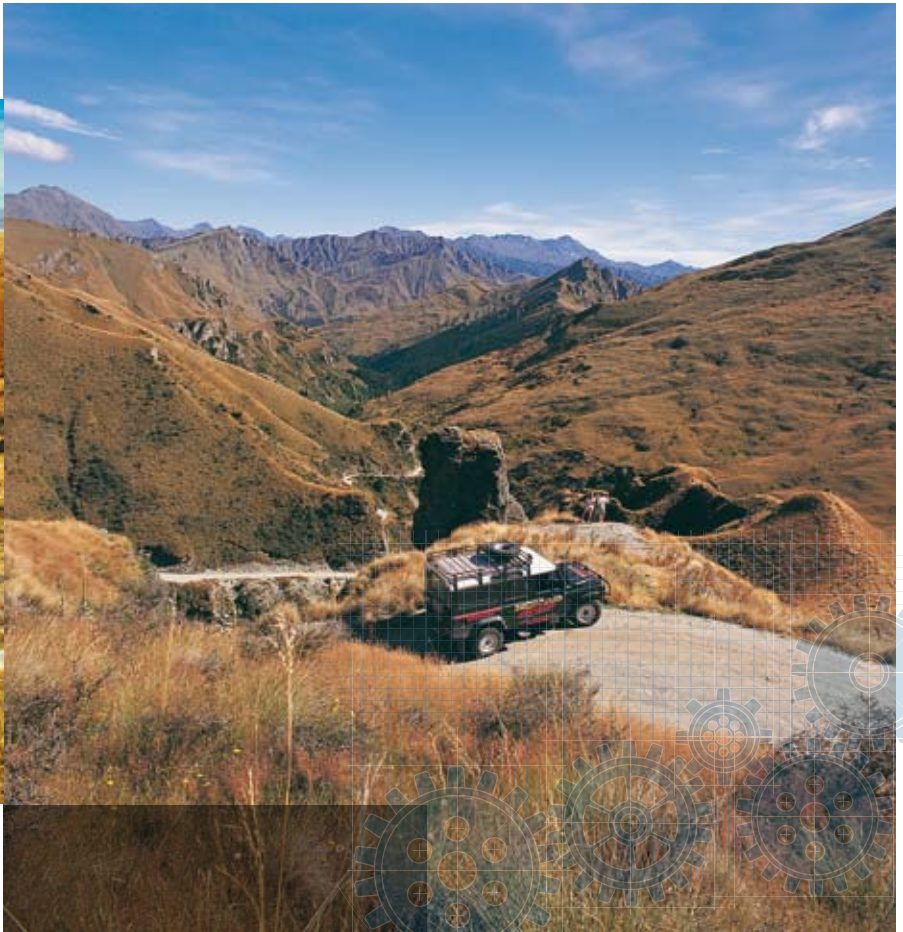
"We should be asking better questions. Like, does anyone actually read annual

reports? If not, why the hell are we printing them?"

Fundamentally it is about people, not about the environment, says Salmon. "Until you fix people's quality of life, you're never going to cure the environmental stuff. You can't tell me that a mum in South Auckland with two kids to feed is going to care about the Emissions Trading Scheme. She won't. You have to try to put her in a position where she can."

In New Zealand this lack of understanding goes right to the top, says Salmon, leading to a lack of leadership and support. People often see sustainability as a barrier or limit to what they can do. "But it's not about stopping; it's about improving quality of life and doing it in a way that means we can all do it, and we can continue to do it. It's about seeing the opportunities, seeing the shit coming down the pipeline and trying to navigate through it. But it has been positioned so badly, many people don't give a toss, they just see it negatively."

The National government's stance on the Emissions Trading Scheme is a classic



backwards example, he says. “I think this government sees it as something that’s optional because it’s political, but it’s not optional. There’s no bloody choice.”

Waiting for the establishment, your peers and the public to catch up with what you’re attempting to do is a familiar hurdle for David Gatward-Ferguson. Director of Queenstown tourism company Nomad Safaris — a Sustainable 60 finalist — he says it’s hard to claim sustainable status when your company business model depends on driving tourists around in diesel-guzzling 4WDs.

Nomad Safaris does what it can, says Gatward-Ferguson. It makes its own environmentally friendly cleaning products, it takes flak after tackling developers intent on turning Queenstown and its surrounds into sprawling apartment blocks, and it helps the Department of Conservation trap stoats and pull out wilding pines.

But the biggest hurdle is that reliance on diesel. The company wants to use a truly environmentally friendly biodiesel alternative, but it is unavailable in Queenstown. And it can’t make its own due to regulations surrounding paying passengers. “There’s such a lot of hypocrisy in the whole thing and that’s why we’ve always kept away from the eco-tour label,” he

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says. “The consciousness of the New Zealand people is very, very slow.”

For CarboNZero-certified winery Yealands and commercial cleaning company Clean Planet, the waters are further muddied by greenwash, otherwise known as a deceptive use of green marketing. Often the public are too quick to believe claims without seeing if there’s any substance behind them or, worse, have become so sceptical they don’t believe anyone any more, says Pete Mann, Yealand’s operations and sustainability manager.

Clean Planet’s Russell Werry says education is a key part of his company’s sales

process, but it is slow going. “People do wake up when they realise the facts and figures and they look at standards and what’s behind the claims.”

Being carbon neutral isn’t just about being green and getting the marketing kudos that follows, says Mann. “It’s about continuous improvement. It forces us to save money and drives innovation.”

The problem with becoming a first mover on sustainability is that often the innovators put in the most effort, at the most cost. Yealands has worked out how to bail its vine prunings to use as fuel for a special boiler sourced from overseas, hopefully saving more than 22 tonnes of LPG a year.

“If people follow our boiler project, they’ll be able to do it significantly cheaper because we’ve already made all the mistakes and worked out how to do it. If something is a success, being first has great marketing potential, but it will cost you,” says Mann.

State of Grace shares its ideas with competitors in the funeral industry. The company wouldn’t be living up to its ideals if it didn’t share that knowledge, says Deb Cairns.