

Going Green is just the Beginning

Assessing the Sustainability of Your Practice

KATE CHASE RYAN, LMP

It's hip to be "green" these days. But what does this really mean? Does it entail big sacrifices or cost a lot of money? How green is "green"? And where do I draw the line? I mean, massage is pretty green already—and I do have to stay in business, right?

The massage industry is pretty inherently green. We offer a service that facilitates health and wellness, our work itself creates little waste, and we have a high enough hourly rate to actually make a living. But with a little digging it's not hard to find a few places where we could improve. Our empty lotion bottles and disposables such as drinking cups and paper towels are trash. We wash a lot of sheets. We drive to work. And how about massage therapists who get injured or don't have enough business to make a living?

While *green* is a loose term that can be used as a verb, an adjective, or a colloquial compliment ("Way to go, totally green!"), it's time to move from *green* to *sustainable*. But first, let's figure out where we are now—and where we want to go.

In 1987 the Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as that which "meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹ That's a pretty lofty goal!

How do we measure sustainability?

Let's imagine a client walked in and said, "I want to be totally pain-free and comprehensively healthy in three months. Can you help me?" If we could answer only yes or no, we would likely answer no. But we have enough experience to build a health history with the client and educate them about the process of moving toward wellness as at least a start to their request. We can do the same thing with our goals for sustainability.

Rather than feel overwhelmed by "comprehensive" health for the planet (which is fairly inconceivable at this point), we can measure, assess, and reassess our goals and progress.

With a full intake using tools like SOAP and special tests, we get out of the subjective information and into the objective information. Getting the "O" data helps paint a better picture of our client's health condition. And so does sustainability have tools to document baseline data as well—metrics.

In addition to assessment, sustainability needs a language. Rather than quality of life and activities of daily living, the overarching themes for our massage clients, the language of sustainability seeks to understand how we impact *people, planet and profit*. These three together are called the "Triple Bottom Line"² and look at the whole picture rather than just the traditional measure of business success: profit alone. One could say that the Triple Bottom Line looks at profit through the lens of sustainability as a holistic perspective rather than just a symptomatic one. When we use only one of the three to evaluate profitability, the others suffer. But with all three in balance, we can thrive.



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Let's consider some questions that help us take a proper assessment of *people, planet, and profit* through the lens of sustainability.

- For the People part of the equation, let's ask the question: How does this action/decision directly or indirectly impact me, my clients, and the field of massage therapists?
- For the Planet part of the equation, ask: Will this decision, action, or policy create an impact on the Earth that outlives my generation, and if yes, how can I lessen that impact?
- For the Profit part of the equation, ask: Does the profit I earn give me the leverage I need in my life as well as enough leverage to advocate for others?

Now for the fun part—take a few minutes to consider these questions and begin evaluating your own sustainability.

How does the location of your practice impact People, Planet, and Profit?

Are you located in a business or residential district? What is your carbon footprint for your commute? Is it easy for people to get to you? Can you and your clients take public transport? How you help your clients sustainably reach your location would be calculated into your sustainability score. Action item: List the bus routes to your office on your website or in your office to encourage more use of public transit.

How do the products you use or sell impact People, Planet, and Profit?

Are the topicals you use safe for your skin and your clients' skin? (If you're not willing to eat it, you should probably find something else.) Is your oil natural? What process was used to produce it? Are there any negative byproducts? What container is it in? Can it be refilled? Do you know who makes the products? Do these people make a living wage? Do you know how much waste the producer creates? Are their suppliers paid a fair wage? Action item: Call one supplier a week to discover more about their sustainability practices.

How does the cost of your sessions impact People, Planet, and Profit?

Do you make a living wage? Do you have enough working capital to weather a possible financial storm? Does your practice create hardship for your clients because the price is so high? Are you underpaid and might go out of business and compromise your ability to serve? How does your cancellation policy impact therapists, clients, and clinic profitability? Not staying in business isn't sustainable, right? Action item: Make a rock-solid cancellation policy that you can stand behind.

I'm sure you're starting to get the hang of this. For each question we would now consider all three factors in People, Planet, and Profit. Now here are a few more in-depth questions for your consideration:

If you work for someone (or others work for you) can you assess that working relationship through the lens of People, Planet, and Profit?

How does your compensation plan impact therapists, the clinic, and clients? Are you or your therapists paid for time they've committed to being “on the schedule”? Does the clinic correctly designate a therapist as employee vs. contractor? Action item: Speak with an attorney about your rights when working for someone else.

How does the energy usage in your practice impact People, Planet, and Profit?

How is the building heated—solar, gas, electric? Are the windows energy-efficient? Is the HVAC regulated by a programmable thermostat? How does the cost of utilities impact your expenses and budget? While you may not own your own building/space, your carbon footprint as related to energy would be included in your sustainability score. Action item: Upgrade all table and room heaters to newer models with timers that turn themselves off automatically.

Creating a solid framework

The questions we need to ask ourselves can seem endless, but don't get discouraged! One of the most important steps in evolving a more holistic process for evaluating Triple Bottom Line sustainability is to gather information while letting go of assumptions.

Just as in our practices, the project is to create a framework for success. Regarding People, you need to assess the people associated with your practice (including yourself). How long can you keep doing this? Are you mentally, physically, and spiritually sustainable? How does social justice factor into your work? Regarding Planet, you need to gather baseline metrics of your office's energy and water usage, the waste you produce, and the number of miles you commute. Then establish a goal to reduce your footprint in these areas. Finally, regarding Profit, you need to take a hard look at what profit really means to you. Where and how you spend and save your money also factor into your sustainability score.

More areas in your practice to investigate may include:

- **Ownership:** Vision, strategy, implementation, transparency, reporting
- **Facilities:** Energy, waste, janitorial, water
- **Human Resources:** Company culture, training, attrition, commuting, volunteering, community involvement
- **Office space:** Supplies, transportation
- **Marketing:** Expenses, materials
- **IT and Technology:** Equipment, e-waste

Think of this project as you would a client with injuries serious enough to warrant working together for a long time. In your heart, remember to hold space for success and full recovery. You'll be amazed at what's available to you with a framework for sustainability at the root of each decision you make in your business and your life!

¹ 1987 Brundtland Commission report Our Common Future.

² Coined in 1994 by John Elkington (the founder of a British consultancy called Sustainability). Nov 17, 2009 | From The Economist online.



—Kate Chase Ryan is an LMP and Certified Zero Balancer with a practice in Seattle. She is earning her MBA through Bainbridge Graduate Institute, the leader in Sustainable Business education. She consults with educators, clinic owners, and practitioners who are working toward sustainability. She is a certified SCORE™ (Sustainability Competency & Opportunity Rating & Evaluation) provider. You can find her on the web at www.bodyworkeconomics.com.