Our Actions Tell A Story

Oatas co-founder and designer Mitch Shaw discusses the mission and potential of his powerful new sustainability tool.

Interviewed by Silvia Purdie, Place Consultancy, March 2023.

What motivated you to build the Oatas sustainability software?

Companies and organisations are telling a sustainability story whether they know it or not. Their actions speak about their values, through their impact on the environment, in the community, and on the people engaged in that organisation. Some organisations communicate a positive culture and a positive response to the environment. Other stories are of a toxic culture and a negative environmental impact. What story do you want to tell, to your customers, stakeholders, and the general public? And if story is so important to your brand, your mission and what you stand for, what tools will help you with that? What will help you define a plan, set goals and look for ideas?

Three years ago our Upstream team went looking for tools for equip businesses strengthen their impact. We found a focus on data. But the feedback we got, especially from small to medium companies in New Zealand, was that they struggle to access sustainability data. They can't employ specialist staff and they don't have the systems in place. It felt too hard, and it was easier to give up. These businesses wanted to plan and report on sustainability but they did not know how. People asked us, "How can we tell our story?"

We grappled with what we could do. What if there was a tool that organisations of any size could use that would articulate what was important to them, their stakeholders and customers? If that tool existed, what would it do? Our answer became: story. Everyone can tell a story and describe what matters to them and what they are achieving. Data is important but story is far richer, more accessible and inspiring. We decided to create a software tool that allows people to write stories and to look for solutions that connect and convert into stories. Plus it also needed to weave in data components to add objectivity and assist with reporting. That became our mission, and now Oatas is being launched: Our Actions Tell A Story.

What is Upstream?

Upstream is a Christchurch-based social enterprise begun by a couple of youth workers back in 2018. We are a charitable trust. My colleague and I were passionate about fundraising for programmes for children and youth at risk, but we were getting tired of fundraising in traditional ways. We had been successful in winning business sponsorship, and it's great that companies will give away a slice of their revenue towards funding things they care about. But sponsorship is typically a tiny percentage of business turnover, less than 0.1%. We started to ask, what about the other 99.9%? A large chunk of that is spent through

procurement, purchasing goods and services through the supply chain. What if we could generate charitable income through that process?

Most businesses want to contribute in positive ways to their community. And if given the option we found that they would choose a supplier who was making a positive contribution. Upstream has grown into a supply chain directory (online at www.upstream.co.nz) listing suppliers who donate a small proportion of their income for our charitable mission of supporting children and young people. This generates charitable income through business's normal work. It is a very integrated approach that enables wider social good through the regular financial systems of businesses. And we were able to network and link people together. Our role is to find a buyer and link them to a supplier who is doing good, as well as being a good supplier.

After a few years helping companies find innovative ways to do good for the community, we found ourselves looking for the next step. Environmental issues were becoming increasingly urgent to address. We wanted to build on the community engagement and wellbeing focus of Upstream, and find ways to innovate in the sustainability space. The vision for Oatas emerged as a tool for us to broaden the advice and the solutions we provide. For us it is a natural weaving together of social values, ecological values and business values. We want to tell a greater, wider story, not just about profits and strategies but also about community and the environment, and how organisations value their own people.

What does Oatas include?

A unique feature of Oatas is its very holistic approach. It's not just a carbon calculator. It does include a carbon calculator, but it is far more than that. We have included charitable and the social procurement aspects, and we working to add more aspects as well, such as honouring the Treaty of Waitangi and cultural diversity.

When people hear 'sustainability' they think of the need to report on carbon emissions and divert waste. Carbon and waste are 'Step 1' and 'Step 2'. These are priorities, but if that's all we do it's too narrow. Sadly, New Zealand is not a world leader in sustainability. Globally the move is to integrate several other key components into reporting. International standards are raising the bar. How are we avoiding slavery in our supply chain? Fresh water is amazingly precious; are we taking good care of it? The Oatas team wanted to create a tool which will help companies tackle the breadth required by global standards.

It quickly becomes obvious that these diverse outcomes are intertwined. If you reduce your waste you also reduce methane and carbon. One action can link to multiple outcomes. The community aspect is central to us. If we have healthy people working with a healthy mission, with a passion to do good, that promotes a healthy community which leads to a healthy environment. Business sustainability is core to management and the values of the company. Equally it flows back the other way; if we have a healthy environment we have a healthy community, using water well and minimising waste and air pollution. That means healthy people contributing to your organisation.

That's why Oatas is wide. We have grouped strategies under three umbrellas: Environment, Community, and Your People.

Environmental impacts are grouped into key outcomes: carbon emissions, waste management, energy management and water management. Plus we are working on an

outcome around ecosystems, which will include biodiversity. Oatas will help you to measure, tell stories and look for solutions.

In the community space Oatas covers supply chain, charitable and community engagement. This means telling the story around your intentional decisions around ethical supply chain, such as using SMEs or local suppliers and creating social procurement outcomes. Your community response might include the charitable trusts or schools you engage with.

The third section is the internal people side of things, enabling you to tell your story about how you are training and developing your own people. How are you promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in your staff and volunteers? How are you thinking about their well being and growing your shared values, vision and mission? Intentional leadership and innovation budgets produce the best outcome for the human side of sustainability in your organisation.

We are still developing to increase the breadth of categories covered. But at this stage we are inviting people to sign up and start exploring what Oatas can offer.

Who is it for?

Oatas is for organisations who don't know where to start. They can start small with Oatas. It is also for those who have already made some progress but have got stuck - 'I don't know what to do next.' Oatas provides structure and solutions to include in a comprehensive sustainability plan. Companies that are already well down the track in some areas can weave that into the Oatas system; you don't need to waste time or start over. I hope that Oatas will strengthen your strategy into further areas of environment, supply chain, community, and your people.

So how does it work in practice?

The Oatas software enables you to report on what you have already done, and identify strategies and solutions to form a plan for what you will do in the future. It is easy and flexible to 'pick and mix' sections that are relevant to your organisation.

Oatas will be a massive time saver for you. We have found a thousand solutions which we have put into the database of ideas across all the outcomes. So if you are grappling with "what do I need to do to reduce diesel?" just type in 'diesel' and look through the solutions that we have researched for you. Oatas points to other organisations and companies in New Zealand who could execute solutions for you. Most organisations don't have a full time staff person working or this and don't know where to start, so this will save them time and enable their strategy. We have worked hard to ensure that all the hundreds of solutions are workable and described as clearly and simply as possible.

Each organisation or business creates their own private login, and you can log in as many users as you want. You own your own data and it's all private and kept safe for you. Plus you have the ability to share what you want to share. While you are building up your story you can share that internally. When you have parts that are ready to publish you will be able to select what to form into a pdf that can be posted to your website and used in your communications.

We have created a seamless flow between the three components of data, story and images. This enables organisations to celebrate what is already happening, describe that through narratives and photos, and measure what can be measured in data.

You invite visual story telling as well as words and data?

Our approach centres around story telling, so it matters that the stories are easy to read, visually interesting and laid out well. We wanted the reporting to help people feel proud of what they have achieved. So we spend a lot of time finding intuitive ways for the software to be used, and thinking about the lay out. Oatas gives you the ability to write your stories, upload your own images, or use our default images to save you time. Our data base of solutions are all colourful and easy to select in. Plus there is customisation for users to edit and make it their own.

Images are a vital component to storytelling, so Oatas provides the capacity for people to upload images. I think that gives it a really fresh, contemporary approach. Photos help make sustainability interesting to engage with, and invite people to read the text.

Is Oatas just a private tool?

Oatas provides an opportunity for people to feed in information like this as things change. We want our solutions to be current and stay up to date in a rapidly changing space. New facilities and resources are coming available. There are lots of good people out there, good organisations, good networks, good businesses doing sustainability. We are not replacing anything. And if anyone wants to recommend services and new options, we are all ears!

We also plan to add in a community area where people can connect, contribute, share ideas and solutions, ask questions, and save time from learning from others. We hope to create an Oatas network for mutual support in this important work.

So now you are launching this into the world!

We are on a mission. We want to help and serve and see impact. My team has been doing that in the community already for the last five years. With Oatas we are offering that even wider, hoping to save people time and help them articulate their story. We want people to use us and our networks, our ideas, innovations and our software, to benefit their business, their organisation, their community and the environment.

It took 18 months to build this tool. Now we are at first release, Stage 1. Stages 2 and 3 will be built this year and next year. We look forward to feedback from those using Oatas, which will help us prioritise how it grows. We have been living and breathing it intensively for the last 2 years. You stare at something so long and test and critique it over and over. Now, as people start using it, it's scary, to be honest. Will people even like it? What if it's not relevant or not helpful?! That's a fear but I do believe the other way!

What has developing Oatas required of you personally?

Three years ago I jumped into this full time, and that has involved a lot of cost but also lots of wins. I had never raised capital before, or set up a company with shareholders, or built software. It has taken a huge amount of investment, financially but also in time and energy, learning how to talk software language and get my ideas across.

Personally this has involved many long days and long weeks. I made it a priority to get home for their children at dinnertime and avoid working in the evenings, to protect my family and have a work life balance. That meant getting up very early to get the work done, often starting 4am. I am a night owl so that was tough. I don't think anything successful has been built without sacrifice.

Time to summarise: what is Oatas?

People tell me that the uniqueness of Oatas is our story telling. That is Oatas stands for: our actions tell a story. Oatas enables people to tell a strong story about what they are passionate about, what they believe in and the actions they choose to focus on. Data informs story, your experiences are stories, and your solutions convert to stories. The question is, what is your story? My hope is that this tool will get used, and continue to develop, so together we can be sustainable in better ways. This involves growing the capacity to analyse where you are, to find solutions, and then report those stories in dynamic ways. Those are the three core components of Oatas. I want to help organisations and companies do that well.

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