

Profile

BACKGROUND INFO ON INNOVATIVE BRITISH COMPANIES

Compare Your Footprint

We meet the man whose carbon footprint calculator aims to do much more than improve the environment

KEY FACTS

Compare Your Footprint is an online carbon calculator that allows companies to enter their own data and find out how they rank against their industry peers.

LOCATION

Wimbledon

FOUNDED

2017

EMPLOYEES

Five (for parent company Green Element)

WEBSITE

compareyourfootprint.com

RIGHT William Richardson set up environmental consultancy Green Element in 2004

It's a provocative question to ask a man who's just set up a carbon footprint measuring service – and it gets the friendly contempt it deserves. "Hasn't all this fuss about carbon footprinting died off?" I ask William Richardson, who's been advising businesses on how to become more environmentally friendly for more than a decade.

"It's fallen away in your eyes – as in someone who's not in the industry – because it's just happening," he said. Us journalists have lost interest in carbon footprinting because "it's just something you have to do now," as much a part of everyday business practice as recording a profit and loss in your company accounts.

Suitably chastened, I pipe down and listen to how Richardson decided to help companies benchmark their environmental records against one another – and how he eventually plans to use the service to give the unemployed a foot on the jobs ladder.

Green shoots

Richardson set up his environmental consultancy, Green Element, in 2004, with the aim of helping as many businesses as possible to go green. With no detectable trace of irony, Richardson says the business has "grown organically" for the past decade, hiring its second employee around five years ago and now climbing up to five staff.

Before Green Element can help a firm become more environmentally friendly, it first needs to know how much damage it's doing to the planet in the first place. Hence, every client has its carbon footprint measured. As the business got better at benchmarking, and with over a decade's worth of data to fall back on,

Green Element could show its clients how they compared to their peers in the same industry. That went down very well

with Green Element's customers, and so Richardson began to explore the possibility of making the benchmarking service a business in its own right.

"We were starting to squirrel away all this data and it was becoming quite cumbersome," he said. "We were doing everything through Excel spreadsheets and I was thinking 'this is absolutely ridiculous'. I was seeing how much time it was taking us, through timesheets, to manipulate all this data and put it into the reports."

Richardson did some research and soon arrived at the conclusion that the data should be piped into an Access database – not because he was fantastically enamoured with Microsoft's package, but because Access is the near-universal format that can be sucked into so many other databases if, further down the road, a more bespoke solution is called for.

"I employed a guy who was looking for work, who was one of our finance director's next-door neighbour's sons," he said, this time clearly favouring word-of-mouth over one of Microsoft's other products: LinkedIn. "He came to me and said I'm really looking for work, I don't know how to get into the environmental sector – I've got a PhD in database management. I said, 'well, actually, that's weird...'"

Despite his PhD, Richardson's recruit wasn't entirely au fait with Access, but it soon worked out. "This kid had Asperger's [Syndrome] and he told me quite quickly, and the reason why I mention it is because when I said it to him [I wanted to use Access] the first thing he said was 'oh, I've never used an Access database before but I think I could probably work it out'. Having spoken to him for a couple of hours, I just thought actually, you know what, sod it, I think you probably will."

Richardson's gut instinct wasn't wrong. Matthew spent six months working to build what is now Compare Your Footprint's database before taking a job at Microsoft.

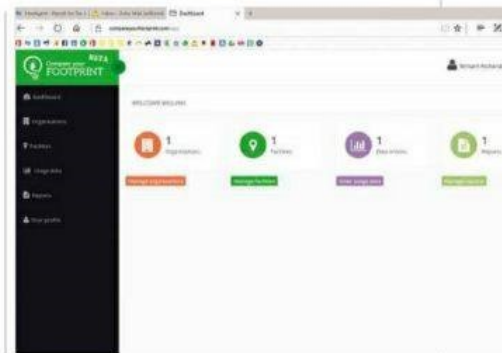
Green with envy?

At the time of writing, Compare Your Footprint had only been up and running for a couple of months, but Richardson says there's a healthy appetite for the service.



ABOVE Compare Your Footprint allows firms to benchmark their emissions against those of their rivals

RIGHT Data can be easily gleaned from a company's utility bills and invoices



Firms are asked about their water usage, waste tonnage, business and freight travel, paper usage, IT procurement

As we mentioned earlier, measuring your environmental impact is now a standard part of a company's annual reports, with companies keen to demonstrate their green credentials to shareholders, clients and customers alike. Indeed, with scrutiny on supply chains greater than ever before, many smaller firms

are now having to prove their environmental cred if they want to work with firms such as the supermarket chains.

Compare Your Footprint requires businesses to enter as much data as possible about their operations. Firms are asked for details of their water usage, waste tonnage, business and freight travel, paper usage, IT procurement. The basic data can often be gleaned easily from utility bills and invoices, but if companies want to get a true representation of their environmental impact, they can feed "absolutely anything" into the database.

"If you were sending a package from Maidenhead to Beijing, and it's on a particular kind of boat, then that particular boat, size of package, weight of package would have its own emissions factor and you can put that into our database," Richardson explained. "You put in all the variables and out will pop the end result. Every other

carbon footprinting tool that's online currently is much more basic than that."

One reason why companies might be prepared to go to the effort of inputting the data and paying the £300 fee for the report is that ability to benchmark themselves against their rivals, potentially allowing a firm to boast that it's the most environmentally friendly business in the accountancy sector, for example. "I wouldn't be surprised if that's the driving factor," Richardson concedes.

But given the potential reputational upside, how does Compare Your Footprint verify that the data firms are entering is accurate? He admits the company "isn't able to verify every single report" entered by customers, but he says it has enough experience to spot anomalies in the data. "If you've seen hundreds of them, there will be one or two that stick out. Nine times out of ten you'll find that something's been added wrongly, and we'll go back to them and say: 'we don't understand where you got this number from, would you mind telling us how you got this number and the calculation behind it?'"

Giving back

Richardson isn't only motivated by the opportunity to help companies improve their environmental record, he's clearly enthusiastic about doing good in other ways too. Before we've even got to the nuts and bolts of how Compare Your Footprint works, he's eager to share his plans for what happens if his nascent business becomes successful, plotting what he's going to do with the profits before he's even made any. And we're not talking about a huge house or a tropical island next to Richard Branson's.

Once the company has recouped its research and development costs, the plan is to donate an hour's work to an environmental charity for every report sold. Compare Your Footprint will maintain a database of school leavers or jobseekers looking for work experience, and will partner with charities who can put these people to work. Customers will get to choose which charity they donate their hour to, and once that charity has amassed eight hours' worth of donations, Compare Your Footprint will pay a jobseeker to go and work with them for a day.

"We'll go to that charity and say we've got eight hours work now, can we put you in touch with this person who's got the skillset you're looking for, and you can use them on any project you want," said Richardson.

The company already has a couple of charities signed up for the scheme, and it eventually hopes to have ten from which its customers can choose in a dropdown menu at the end of their report. Richardson estimates that the cost of running the charity scheme will be around £14 per report, with £10 of that cost going towards the jobseeker's hourly wage. Eventually, however, he wants to offer an entire day's work to the charity for every report sold.

"Because we've done most of the [database] work already, I can afford to do something like that," he said. "Having come across so many people that are looking for work, and so many charities and not-for-profits that are looking for staff that can't normally afford it, I see it as a win, win, win for everyone." **BARRY COLLINS**

What about you?

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