

Solitaire Townsend



Name:
Solitaire Townsend

Position/occupation:
Co-founder and Chief Executive of Futerra Sustainability Communications.

Residence:
Camberwell.

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Solitaire is the co-founder and CEO of Futerra Sustainability Communications, one of the largest worldwide communication agencies specialising exclusively in sustainable development. She is responsible for Futerra’s mission – to make sustainable lifestyles so desirable that they become normal. “Six years ago London was the only city where an agency such as Futerra could have been born, and it’s still the best city in the world to do what we do.”

Sustainability experience

For Solitaire the concept of sustainability is a personal one, “ I grew up on a council estate in a poor physical environment and know how important a good environment is for well-being. It’s difficult to respect yourself in an environment that is disrespected and people still don’t understand this fundamental link between environmental and physical well-being. Small changes make huge differences.”

Sustainability is Solitaire’s professional life, she never works on an account that doesn’t directly contribute to environmental or social sustainability. She came to London to study a Masters degree in sustainable development with Forum for the Future, which provided a “crash course in sustainability” in London, and over the last 10 years Solitaire has been communicating sustainability to a wide diversity of audiences – school groups, communities, Chief Executives of major corporations, company staff, Londoners. “For me, being a London Leader means delivering the sustainable city vision and making it accessible and enjoyable for everyone.”

Solitaire has high aspirations for her current team of 25 staff and the company will shortly

be opening offices in both New York and Beijing. This worldwide growth clearly demonstrates the appetite for sustainable development and the importance of communication in making changes we can all understand.

Founding Futerra has opened up some fantastic opportunities for Solitaire. “I couldn’t name just one highlight, being asked by Tony Blair to speak at the launch of the UK Sustainable Development Strategy in 2005 was not only an honour, it really demonstrated the growing recognition that communication is key to our sustainable future. Being part of the recent ‘Lights off’ campaign with Capital Radio was also a real sign of the changes happening in our city and that’s something that really encourages and motivates me.”

“I’ve also volunteered for Envision, a charity that works in London schools to support young people to develop the skills, awareness, confidence and motivation to make positive changes. I was asked by my student group if I enjoyed my job in sustainability and being able to answer, unequivocally, ‘yes’, was a brilliant feeling. This was the first time these students had heard a positive response about someone’s career and that really brought it home to me!”

Solitaire is proud of the advances London has made in recent years in tackling climate change and raising awareness. “I was invited to Beijing to design a climate change communication strategy for five Chinese cities because the UK is seen as an innovator in terms of sustainability. We still have so far to go though and strong leadership is going to be fundamental to our continuing progress.”

The sustainability challenge

“For me sustainable development doesn’t mean maintaining the status quo – it means positive disruption, improving the environment and quality of life. Because maintaining the status quo is not motivating and will not bring about the change we need. Definitions of sustainability are not always useful. It means different things

to different people but communicated in the right way it's important to everyone."

Solitaire believes that the biggest challenge facing London is tackling climate change. "London is historically old and an unplanned city and in some ways this makes it very robust, but it also means it's not built for the heat and water challenges that lie ahead with unmitigated climate change. Climatic instability is therefore a huge challenge – not necessarily technically, but how we decide to face it, with a whimper or a roar."

"If I were to pick three things that must be addressed in order for London to become more sustainable the first would be food. Food consumption is huge in London but food is not something people think about at the moment, not where it comes from or how it's produced and prepared, nor how it's disposed of, and this has to change for us to live more sustainably. Secondly, the rich. London houses some of the wealthiest people on the planet and London has to engage its wealth in discussions of sustainability. If we ignore London's status as the financial capital of the world, in terms of financial systems and infrastructure, individuals and City bonuses, or the footprint it has on the rest of the world, then we cannot be sustainable. The third is what I call 300 languages. There are this many languages spoken in London and every community has its own visions and needs to be engaged in sustainability. Every literal translation of the term sustainability is different. Leadership is crucial when for many people the only commonality with their neighbour is the fact they are Londoners."

Solitaire believes that everyone can make changes in their own lives to be more sustainable. "People can really come together over issues and this is certainly true in London. The 'bystander effect' is the big hold back, we need to decide to be special and not to be a bystander in order to make change happen."

Solitaire's top tips for a more sustainable lifestyle:

- It doesn't hurt!
- Give your children any cash they save off household energy bills
- If you are able, transfer to a green energy tariff
- Know your neighbours, even if it's just one
- Buy a bright coloured sticker and put it on your mobile phone charger so you notice it in the morning and unplug it
- Have a no waste week where you don't throw anything away – it's really rewarding, demonstrates how much waste we're all responsible for, and helps you lose weight!
- Go to the park

The best thing about living in London: The buzz – the sense of excitement that comes from being in a world city, the best world city, and the ability to "get things done". "I love being able to walk through such a cultural centre such as the Southbank, to the City and the financial capital of the world, through to London's fantastic parks and markets. It gives me a real high and it's impossible not to feel special living in London."

The worst thing about living in London: The size of the city means you can't drop by on your friends and it takes a long time to reach people you care about. "You have to be careful and work hard not to be lonely in London, despite there being 8 million people around you." Other things include the transport and the poor ability of the city to deal with the heat. London can also be exhausting and sometimes dangerous but you get this in any large city.

My London in 2050: I hope and expect to still be in London in 2050. "I think it will be shockingly the same, and extraordinarily different. I think the buzz will still be the same but logistical, tactical and technical aspects of living in London will be different. I hope it still looks like London but for example, whilst there will still be lots of restaurants, owners and diners alike will understand where the food has come from, why and how, and instead of buying a bottle of water there will be refilling stations with drinking water for you to fill your own container."