



Barry Bassett, right, accepts the Hero of Net Zero at COP26 climate summit in Glasgow.

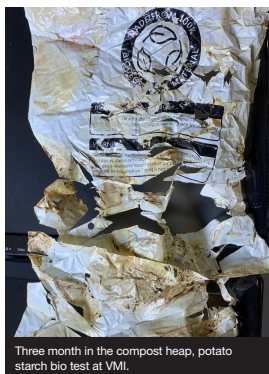
Sustainability good for business and vital for environment says Barry Bassett at VMI

Camera and lighting rental company **VMI** is leading the way in sustainable practices, embracing Net Zero goals, and transforming the TV and film industry through innovation and environmental responsibility.

VMI has become a beacon for how companies in our industry, no matter their size, can go the extra mile to achieve community and globally vital environmental goals. As we learn from following VMI's journey, it has been a process of small steps, attention to detail, and persistence all driven by genuine commitment to change – winning awards for its actions along the way.

The 44 year old company was effectively reborn back in 2008, after suffering a major uninsured loss and today rents cameras and lighting kit to the UK TV industry supporting

projects like ITV's Midsomer Murders, BBC's Blue Planet 3 series and Netflix's The Surgeon's Cut. While sustainability has been on its radar for many years, its charge to net zero only began in earnest in 2021.



Three months in the compost heap, potato starch bio test at VMI.

That year, VMI attended a special three-month long course on sustainability given by Imperial College where the company's leaders soaked up knowledge, in particular about the value of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL).

This concept, which emerged in the 1970s, is intended to transform the way businesses operate from one solely in response to their P&L to one that also accounts for its impact and success in corporate and social responsibility.

Having been invited as one of a cohort of twelve SMEs to join the pilot of the Better Future Plus programme run by Better Futures London in 2021, VMI Managing Director Barry Bassett decided to take on the challenge of going Net Zero.

"I could see that if we could reduce our negative environmental impact, then we could also build a more socially equitable company," Bassett explains. "As such, we are totally committed to becoming a Net-Zero company by 2030 and making the industry a better place for all."



VMI's AA rechargeable Batteries.



VMI's potato starch bags.



VMI's Splish pouches.

As an addendum to this, since 2021 VMI uses lower carbon cleaning products such as Splish which are refilled using pouches, sent back for refilling or to be turned into new products, resulting in zero plastic waste. These are also formulated using chemicals which aren't damaging to the environment.

When one of its suppliers (LeMark) suggested that a new gaffer tape was more environmentally friendly than the regular sort, switching over was a no-brainer.

"They advised that this new 'environmentally focussed' version is produced using an energy efficient manufacturing process to produce a high performance, professional matt gaffer tape which is 100% toluene free, has low VOC content and reduced chemical release agents."

[VOCs or 'Volatile Organic Compounds' are often found in domestic and industrial products which contribute greatly to atmospheric pollution potentially increasing health risks.]

"The most important thing though is that it is as effective as regular camera tape and the price is unchanged" says Bassett.

All these initiatives fed into a net zero roadmap devised in 2019 in which VMI pledged to halve emissions by 2025 and achieve total net zero by 2030.

Carbon Audit and Net Zero

Its first carbon audit was made in 2021 and made publicly available on its website.

"This way, we can demonstrate that we are taking real action to reduce our emissions annually and hopefully be on track with our net zero commitment," Bassett says.

"In doing so, we were proud to be recognised by the United Nations Race to Zero campaign, and join governments, businesses, cities, regions, and universities around the world that share the same mission but adding our commitment to the UK Climate Hub site, <https://bit.ly/473NQw2>"

Since 2020 was such a peculiar year for everyone during the pandemic, VMI used 2019 as its base year to measure its carbon emissions and savings. "Most important, we also want to share all of our findings with all other rental companies, to inspire others to follow our lead."

Widening the net (zero)

Having established a company roadmap to net zero, Bassett began to discuss the issues with colleagues at fellow equipment supplier CVP and manufacturing multinational Vitex and converting them to the cause.

Using his position on the board of the

Low hanging emissions

Among the first actions it made to tackle CO2 emissions was to reassess its use of tungsten, a traditional form of TV/film lighting still in use today. Ironically tungsten replaced even more dangerous carbon arc fittings.

"In reality though, tungsten lighting fixtures ought to be called lighting heaters, since 96% of the energy used is output as heat, leaving only 4% to produce light," Bassett explains. "This made them immensely inefficient and not at all compatible with modern sustainability ideals, so on these grounds, we decided to retire all of our tungsten lighting in late 2021."

Another obvious carbon saver was to cut down on fossil fuels used for company travel. Since 2021, VMI only sanctions European business travel by car or train. Instead, its travel policy promotes video conferencing, bike and rail and gives staff a bonus leave-day if they had not flown privately during the previous 12 months. Furthermore, Electric Vehicle (EV) charging

bays, have been installed, for electric vans and staff cars at both branches.

Next, VMI turned its attention to all aspects of their business processes and was surprised by just what it could remove from its everyday routine and outlay with minimal or no actual impact on either working habits or the bottom line.

Among the company's internal sustainability policies, it now requires meals and drinks paid for by the company to be 70% vegetarian (saving approx. 480 kgs of CO2e based on current employee count and purchasing levels).

When Bassett learned that VMI's waste collection company (Biffa) was implicated in sending plastics to the Far East, he changed providers and became a nil waste company virtually overnight. An audit by new waste contractor Collect My Waste certified that none of the waste collected from both VMI sites in London and Bristol were sent to landfill. All old ink and toner cartridges at the company are disposed of in a responsible and sustainable manner also.

Association of Studio and Production Equipment Companies (ASPEC) Bassett also advocated for change. ASPEC exists to ensure high standards of health and safety by encouraging correct working practises and counts major global names like ARRI, Panavision and Movietech as members.

"Initially, members were resistant to discuss and adopt sustainability measures," Bassett recalls. "The excuse would be that they were too busy, even if some did agree that the issue needed addressing."

Never one to take 'no', or 'maybe', for an answer, Bassett managed to persuade ASPEC to include sustainability on its agenda as a priority focus, after which several members, including ARRI, began to actively look at their own sustainability program.

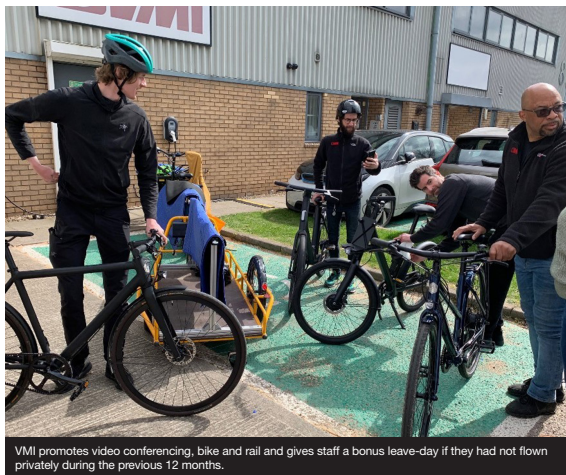
Bassett then took this net-zero initiative to the entire UK camera rental industry. The vehicle for this was a Lighting and Camera Sustainability Group setup in the late 2010s by camera assistant Jason Henwood.

Although this fizzled out during COVID, Bassett decided to resurrect the group after lockdown. The aim was to share best practices and strategies in order to reduce carbon emissions collectively.

Bassett explains, "We set up a new sustainability group in late 2021 to build on the excellent work of Jason Henwood and to involve all UK rental companies who were interested in sustainability. The goal was simply to share everything that we had learned that worked and also didn't really work and collaborate openly in order to build a more sustainable industry."

Almost immediately following the first meeting in November 2021, several other rental companies also switched from using single AA disposable batteries for radio mics, to rechargeable ones. This was deemed a risk, as the cost of cells is small but the risk of poor sound from flat batteries for radio mics is high.

"The important development was improved cell technology, better charging capability and better charge capacity



VMI promotes video conferencing, bike and rail and gives staff a bonus leave-day if they had not flown privately during the previous 12 months.

measurement," says Bassett. "This gave VMI the confidence to switch to rechargeables, saving the disposal of 1,600 batteries a year and something we were pleased to share and see several others follow suit."

The Camera Rental Company Sustainability Group now has its own website and publishes everything publicly that we have discovered about making our industry more sustainable. It includes a considerable number of UK rental companies including ARRI and Panavision, as well as trade bodies such as Albert and BECTU and meets four times per year, to swap advice about what works and as importantly, what does not.

"Our goal is to share knowledge and best-practice to help reduce carbon emissions in our industry and our new website will allow all members to update and make new posts, thus democratising decarbonisation for our industry."

<https://www.rentalsustainability.tv/>

Powered by renewables

VMI offices have been powered solely by 100% renewable electricity since 2016 and today uses Octopus Energy as its sole energy supplier, who provide electricity and gas from 100% renewable sources.

An initial solar PV investment to London and Bristol buildings in 2022 was extended in 2023 to include 55KW of PV solar panels. This now generates so much spare electricity, that since May 2023, VMI actually became a net power exporter to the grid, even considering the not inconsiderable power needs of both of its buildings.

"So, between London and Bristol, we became a net exporter of 481KWh to the grid in May and June was even better, exporting 1.06MWh of power," Bassett informs.

VMI has also replaced all office lights with LEDs and installed insulation and reglazing in order to make the heating system more efficient.

Award winner

All this concerted effort and creative action caught the government's attention and resulted in VMI being invited by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial to the global COP26 climate summit (Glasgow) in November 2021 where it was crowned the Hero of Net Zero.

More than 160 SMEs entered the national competition, having made a commitment at the UK Business Climate Hub to achieve net zero by 2030. VMI won over the competition judges for taking responsibility for the film and TV kit rental

sector's environmental impact and spreading the sustainability message throughout the industry.

"We were incredibly flattered and really pleased that our efforts were being recognised, and hoped it would spread the word more widely about the benefits of companies making decarbonising efforts," Bassett said.

Bassett was previously recognised by Ealing council for his environmental efforts by being named as one of the borough's local climate leaders and a month after COP26 was named West London Company of the Year for its lead on climate change. Bassett himself was recognised as West London Business Leader of the Year 2022.

Describing VMI as a "crusader" the WLB judges said, "The passionate evangelism for practical environmental action that they started in their own organisation is now spreading to their competitors and suppliers too."

Potato starch bag test

VMI's sustainability journey actually began in 2018 when it received a negative comment from a customer questionnaire. There will always be the occasional negative comment mixed into the positives if companies solicit feedback on a service – and it is up to the company to act on it, or it thrust their head in the sand.

So when self-employed video producer Brodie Lea questioned why VMI was packaging gear like cables and batteries in single-use plastic, VMI decided to take note.

"Brodie's criticism struck a chord," Bassett admits. "Like all rental companies at the time, VMI had always wrapped inventory for

hire in plastic to protect it on delivery and to show that filters and cables had been checked. But could we do this differently?"

An alternative material from the firm's existing plastics supplier seemed a promising alternative. It incorporated an additive which made it biodegradable but Bassett was curious. He made his own test and found that 'biodegradable' is a matter of interpretation. The material they were using would probably take 20 years to break down completely. That may be good enough for some people but not for him.

Further investigation revealed that using tubing made from potato starch might do the trick. After another home experiment, Bassett was able to see for himself that these bags virtually disappeared after just three months of composting.

"We were really happy with this," Bassett said. "But since this material was much more expensive and would break down quickly, how much could we order before it became unusable? Order too much and the product could simply wither away before being of use – more information was clearly required."

With no guarantee on shelf-life, another test was required. A full year later VMI's test of the potato starch material stored in a non-humid environment material demonstrated beyond doubt that it would last.

The firm subsequently reverted to 100% biodegradable potato starch bags to seal filters and high-value cables, and they've been in use since October 2022.

Bassett adds, "It is also a poignant reminder, to ourselves as much as to others, that the decision to act on a perceived



Solar expansion at VMI's Bristol office.

criticism by a client – who only wanted the industry to do better – is a choice we can all make no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient it may seem at the time."

Recycling building materials

Everything that VMI now does has a sustainability focus. It has also learned that persistence does pay, if the first solution, or the second, or even the third, doesn't match up to what is required.

For instance, many executives will aspire to having a sustainable business but what about practically adopting sustainable techniques in an office?

Bassett was thinking about this in 2022 when VMI needed to move a shared wall in an office just a couple of metres in order to make room for one office smaller and a larger workshop. He was shocked when the quote, from the company's regular contractors, cost more than triple what he was expecting.

"I questioned whether going green was worth it," Bassett says. "But I also wondered if there was a sustainable option that would work for the planet and our budget at the same time."

"There was nothing unusual in the contractor's initial bill – except when viewed

VMI is an albert-certified Carbon-Neutral company

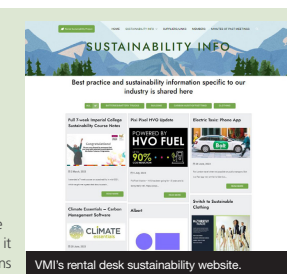
VMI's third and latest annual carbon audit for 2022 shows that it has halved its carbon emissions since 2019, two full years ahead of schedule from 213T CO2e to 121.4T CO2e. That's a reduction of 48.12% and a 43% saving from 2021.

Creative Zero, a sustainability consultancy recognised by Albert, scrutinised all VMI's measurements and also surveyed its staff for commuting methods, even checking whether the power used at home came from sustainable sources. The audit covers Scope 1, 2 and 3 of carbon emissions as designated by the Greenhouse Gas Protocol

and confirmed that VMI had indeed cut all of its Scope 1, 2 & 3 emissions over a 3 year period.

VMI aims to be Net Zero and not generate ANY emissions but as a stopgap measure, it took steps to offset all of its 2022 emissions with a nature-based Albert-approved offset scheme, which has been overwhelmingly voted for by VMI's staff.

VMI invested in a project to preserve the Brazilian Rainforest to avoid deforestation over a 30-year project lifetime and the payment made was calculated



VMI's rental desk sustainability website.

to offset the 121.4T of CO2e carbon emissions generated in 2022. In doing so it has become an albert-certified Carbon-Neutral company.



Electrical vehicle charging at VMI's offices.

through a green-centric lens,” Bassett says. “Taking another look it was clear that not only was the plan reliant on sending huge amounts of waste to the tip but that this was entirely unnecessary.”

It also helps to have a contractor prepared to adapt. In this case, the contractors understood the issue and agreed a revised framework with VMI.

The end result included reuse of electrical points and ceiling tiles. Remarkably, all plasterboards – bar one – were also reused. Even more remarkably the bill came in £10K cheaper.

“The room itself looks terrific and is exactly what we wanted but this whole saga, as trivial as it may sound on the outside, speaks to a wider approach that perhaps we can all take,” he reports. “Firms can be more mindful about circular principles of construction. In turn, Landlords also need to be part of this thinking, as do their agents and the funders.”

A circular economy involves developing more durable products to begin with, while streamlining the ease by which they can be reused and recycled over time. Applied to buildings, this means choosing a plan of action that maximises the lifecycle of existing materials to reduce or stop the supply of raw materials whether that's wood, steel or electrical wire or chemicals to make plasterboard.

“For anyone who wants to cut inventory costs, reduce their carbon emissions, meet sustainability quotas, and generally contribute toward reducing the world's greenhouse gas production, a circular economy that embraces the very fabric of the building could be a great way forward.”

Net-zero strategy

As should be evident from VMI's actions, the commitment to reach net zero carbon can have far more benefits than meets the eye.

For a start it helps the bottom line.

A recent Harvard study demonstrated that companies that have good ESG (environment, social, governance) policies are more curious and thus more creative. It demonstrated that curious, innovative companies make better returns and more money, so there actually is a commercial reason to adopt a net-zero strategy.

“Over time, as we've done more and more things – invested in electric cars and solar PV, whilst staying competitive – our staff have become much prouder of what we do, our staff turnover has reduced and our clients are more engaged as well. They prefer coming to us because of what we do in the industry for the environment and because they can see it is genuine and not window dressing.



“As a consequence, our revenue has increased, our profitability has increased; so, instead of it becoming a cost on the business, it has actually helped us to become a much more profitable company, which is actually also much better for the environment, too.”

The feel good factor

Bassett says VMI has learned to change over the years and, by striving to be environmentally responsible and good to its staff, the company has brought itself multiple rewards.

“Staff feel good about working for VMI and this aids staff retention. Not only are our staff proud of VMI and all of its environmental innovations, but they also share in its success, because I insist on sharing some of the profits with all of my staff, too. Our staff turnover rate today is the lowest that it has ever been.”

Engaging with all stakeholders on any climate crisis journey is integral to realising the change needed. One step in this for VMI was educating the entire team including management, on the basics of Climate Change so that they felt informed enough to speak about it, to understand the urgency and what they can do about it.

“I received an email from a young camera tech, telling me just how proud he was of what we were doing and to work for VMI. It's great for the local community, the environment and the world. There are arguments here – everyone wins and there are no downsides.”

Recent research has shown that 52% of youngsters won't take a job in an organisation that isn't adopting sustainable policies.

“If people stay, then you get much more out of them, you get much more experienced people, their productivity increases, you can invest more into them and, ultimately, we are only ever as good as the people that are within the organisation. And it has worked extremely well.”

Collective impact

These are all small steps but as the adage says ‘great oaks from little acorns grow’.

“We know that we cannot change everything everywhere all at once. We reluctantly acknowledge that diesel vans still have their place today with no obvious alternatives available now but we can start to make small changes. Lots of small, even incremental changes from many individuals and companies can have a big collective impact.

“We are looking to achieve that here and to spread the word widely, so that others can also take their first steps too. Of course, above all else, it is the right thing to do. We all have a responsibility to the local and the wider community and employers and people in general are all becoming much more aware of this.”

The Chinese proverb of a journey of a thousand miles starting with a single step never seemed more salient.

VMI

<https://vmi.tv/>

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Matt Payne

Lighting Cameraman

How did you get started in your career?

Farnborough College of Technology where I studied Media Technology and had links with Sky Studios. They would take three trainees each year for all departments including; cameras, sound, lighting, vision and VT. After sending a CV and showreel, followed by an interview and finally a camera test I was chosen as one of the three Camera Trainees that year. This was in 1999 and Sky Studios was a great place to learn the craft of camerawork. We had a large camera department with two Heads of Cameras, around ten Camera Supervisors, twenty Camera Operators and the three Camera Trainees. I was so lucky to be taught by Camera Supervisors from varying studio camera backgrounds including BBC, LWT, Thames and Teddington to name a few. As Trainees we were sent to Wood Norton in Evesham (the old BBC Training Centre) as well as in-house training. On busy shows we would assist and cable bash and on quieter shows we would operate under the watchful eye of the Supervisor. After a year we were ‘made up’ to Camera Operators.

What is your most memorable job so far?

My colleague Damian Watson was asked to Supervise the Coronation for Sky News. This included a studio at Canada Gate as well as an OB. Damian asked me to Supervise the studio while he looked after the OB. It was great to work with the Sky News team again and bump into Sky colleagues. Another job I must mention was the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton. We were outside Downing Street for the BBC. Robin Sutherland was Camera Supervisor and he asked if I would like to do the interview with the Prime Minister David Cameron on the morning of the wedding. Myself and a Sound Assistant were escorted through the doors of Number 10 to the gardens where we would set up and wait for the Prime Minister to arrive. You only had a limited time to do the interview as there were other Broadcasters waiting so there was a bit of pressure! Matt Baker was the presenter.

What item of kit do you always have with you?

Most of my work is on OB's now so a good set of waterproofs and boots are essential. ‘Buy cheap buy twice’ is so true and we have all done it until you have stood in the rain for 4 hours hours being soaked to the skin followed by a three-hour drive home! Buy a decent set which will cost you but it will last you a long time. My Ariat cowboy boots have been the butt of many jokes on the Tender but they are 100% waterproof and thermal. If they are good enough for the Cowboys of Montana then they are good enough for me! A good set of tools are essential; Apart from a decent Multi-Tool such as a Leatherman or Gerber a Head Bolt Spanner, Box and Flat Adjustable (nothing worse than starting a rig far from the tender and you have forgotten yours), Screwdriver Set, Allen and Torx Key Set,



Camera Tape and Sharpie, Lens Cloth and Shammy, Shower Cap (to cover the lens to keep dry) Croc Clips and a couple of 2p coins (can be used to tighten the screws on a Camera plate if you forget your Screwdriver and can help level a Pan Head!

What has influenced you the most?

I have always loved well crafted camera movement. This is one of the reasons I wanted to work on pedestals in studios. As a Trainee we were always taught there had to be motivation for a camera move and to avoid zooming! The eye doesn't zoom my Supervisors used to tell me. Some lovely dolly work can be seen on the Agatha Christie's Poirot series with David Suchet as the lead which used to catch my eye. The camera movement style complemented the beautiful Art Deco sets. More recently I have joined the UK Grip Branch as a Grip Trainee so hopefully can work towards learning that side of the craft to.

What is the best advice you have received?

Don't run when you can walk, don't walk when you can stand, don't stand when you can sit and don't sit when you can lie down! Can't remember who told me that! Also Call Time means time to start work and not for arriving for a chat and a coffee. All my old Supervisors told me that when I was a Trainee.

How do you create a good work/life balance?

This is a difficult one for everyone and when you first start out as a freelancer. At first we all had to take everything that came along but as you become more established and start to work on regular jobs and become part of a core crew you can work out your schedule more easily.

Who has encouraged you in your work?

I would say all of my old Supervisors some of whom are sadly no longer with us. They worked on the biggest prime time jobs in the ‘good old days’ and I learnt so much from them. Little tips that I find myself doing now nearly 25 years later.

What's the best advice you can give someone?

I studied Black and White Photography as part of my college course and my old Pentax K1000 with its 50mm F2.8 lens was a great way to learn about Composition, Lens Angles, Focal lengths, Depth of Field, Shutter Speed and Sensitivity which is all essential to Camerawork. From a general point of view learn as much about every department that you can. It will help you in your career going forward. There are a lot more jobs particularly in PSC where you need to be across everything. Be keen, read manuals, practice your craft, ask questions and don't be scared to ask for help if needed or