



Handprints Over Footprints

Combining Social Impact with Environmental Stewardship to Create Net-Positive Enterprise

Objectives:

- Define what a Handprint is and why Handprints are important
- Learn how individuals and corporations can create Handprints
- Explore applications and results of Handprinting

What Is a Handprint?

The concept of “Footprints” has become commonplace in discussions of sustainability. Footprints are the negative impacts we have on the planet, usually put in terms of carbon emissions or water consumption. It is important to consider our Footprints, however, our negative impacts are only one aspect of how we interact with the planet. We also have the ability to create “Handprints.” Handprints are the positive impacts we can make happen relative to business-as-usual (BAU).¹ There are two ways to create Handprints:

1. By preventing or avoiding Footprints that would have otherwise occurred. This can include reducing the magnitude of Footprints that would have been created under BAU operations.
2. By creating measurable beneficial impacts that would have not otherwise occurred.

“Handprints: Positive impacts we can cause to happen relative to 'business as usual'.”

Becoming Net Positive

Handprints not only allow us to give back to the planet; when combined with Footprint reductions, they can also help us to become Net Positive. To become Net Positive, restorative

actions must be taken such that they outweigh the negative environmental impact of a product, action, or project; that is, its Handprints become greater than its Footprints. Creating such a Net Positive impact allows manufacturers and designers to take a restorative role in the environment, giving back more than they take.

Social Co-Benefits

Another dimension of Handprints is their ability to create social co-benefits. Social co-benefits are benefits realized in addition to the quantified emissions reduction Handprint. If the positive impacts are measurable in Footprint units, they are Handprints; if they are not measurable in Footprint units, they are co-benefits. For example, a manufacturer who supports Bike-to-Work days for their employees will create a Handprint in the form of emissions reductions from lowered car use. More frequent bike use by employees is likely to also improve their health and happiness outcomes. This is a social co-benefit.

An important subset of social co-benefits are social justice co-benefits. These are social co-benefits that accrue largely to historically oppressed groups. By pursuing social justice co-benefits, businesses have the opportunity to align themselves with ongoing conversations around social and environmental justice.

How to Implement Handprints

1. **Measure the BAU Scenario** | Calculate the BAU Footprint scenario for the product or building using a life cycle assessment (LCA). An LCA measures the footprint of a product across various environmental impact areas (e.g., carbon emissions and water consumption).
2. **Identify and Implement Opportunities for Impact Reduction** | Use the LCA to identify key drivers of the product or building's negative impact. Implement Footprint reductions in those areas where feasible.



3. **Build a Net Positive Impact** | Create positive impacts (Handprints) in direct relation to the product or building's negative impacts (Footprints). Conduct an LCA to measure the Handprints in the same units as their corresponding Footprints.

Handprinting Parameters and Considerations

Handprints must be:

- **Measurable** | Handprints can be measured in the same units as their corresponding Footprints (e.g., kg of CO₂-equivalents).
- **Performance-Based** | Handprints can be tracked to determine if they are having the intended impact, or if they are causing any unintended impacts.
- **Additional** | The impact goes beyond BAU activity.
- **Recent** | Handprints must have occurred in the past three years, otherwise they are considered part of BAU activity.

Additional Handprinting Considerations

Aside from the absolute requirements of Handprints, manufacturers and designers should also consider whether potential Handprints are:

- **Affordable** | Build Handprinting costs into the product and company's long-term strategy.
- **Relevant** | Consider how potential Handprints fit into the context of the region and the organization in which the product or building is being created.
- **Scalable** | Handprints should be able to scale with their corresponding Footprint to maintain a net positive impact.
- **Multi-Dimensional** | Consider whether a Handprint in one impact area may cause unintentional impacts, whether positive or negative, in another area.
- **Ripple Effects** | Explore Handprints that can self-generate positive impacts (e.g., the cost savings from more energy efficient lightbulbs can be used to fund new Handprints, creating a ripple effect).

Why Pursue Handprinting

Customer Expectations

According to one study, "82% of Americans believe corporations have a responsibility to reduce and offset their carbon emissions."² Luckily for businesses who do pursue climate change efforts, "71% of U.S. adults say they're more loyal to companies that take an active role in protecting the environment."³ Therefore, by implementing Handprinting, companies can meet the expectations of their customers while also garnering loyalty from them.

Corporate Responsibility

Businesses have an inherent responsibility to address the climate crisis. According to one study, publicly listed companies are responsible for 40% of current greenhouse gas emissions.⁴ This shows that publicly listed businesses play a significant role in exacerbating climate change, however, it also shows that these businesses are uniquely positioned to help tackle it. By pursuing Net Positive operations, businesses have the opportunity to prove their ability to change the tides and take on a restorative role in the environment.

Benefits for Business

Investments in sustainability don't have to come at a cost to a company's bottom line. In fact, one meta-analysis from NYU found that 58% of "corporate" studies focused on operational metrics showed a positive relationship between ESG (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance) and financial performance.⁵ Additionally, in 2022, 94% of investors used ESG rating products at least once per month.⁶ This suggests that ESG performance influences businesses' ability to access capital. This data shows that that, although Handprinting may involve increased costs in the short term, in the long term they can significantly improve the company's financial performance.

Keeping Up With the Competition

Many businesses are catching onto the benefits of considering sustainability as part of their company strategy. In 2020, a whopping 92 percent of S&P 500 companies published a sustainability report.⁷ As more companies join in, those who don't will face increased scrutiny from investors and consumers alike for their lack of transparency. Luckily, the path to Net Positive operations provides a structure for companies to pursue increased transparency while also securing a positive reputation. The first step toward Net



Positive, the measurement of business-as-usual emissions, can help companies collect valuable data that can be included in a sustainability report. The subsequent steps of Footprint reduction and Handprint creation can also help companies show a commitment to being a positive actor, thereby improving their reputation.

Case Studies

Camp Glenorchy

Camp Glenorchy is an Eco Retreat located in Queenstown, NZ.⁸ The site received Petal certification through ILFI's Living Building Challenge in 2018. The facility has been able to reduce energy consumption per guest night by 70% over a BAU facility. To achieve this, the camp's buildings were designed to utilize passive heating, cooling, and ventilation systems. These reductions, along with the construction of a resilient micro-grid, have allowed the camp to support their own energy needs, along with those of their community. This helps to increase community energy resilience and decrease reliance on fossil fuels, thereby creating a carbon handprint outside of the requirements of the Living Building Challenge.

Humanscale Float® Table

Humanscale is a designer and manufacturer of ergonomic products for the office.⁹ Their Float® Table is a minimalistic, easy-to-use standing desk that fits seamlessly into traditional and at-home offices. Humanscale has pursued a variety of Handprints to help create a Net Positive impact with their products, many of which resulted in social co-benefits. Through tire pumping events, drivers benefitted from free tire assessments and drove away with safer tire pressure levels; through campaigns that saved energy, individuals were able to save money on their electricity bills; and through supporting tree planting initiatives, national forests, which are valuable for a multitude of reasons, were reforested.

Mohawk

Mohawk Group is a commercial flooring company which has created many Handprints through their Living Products and Living Buildings.¹⁰ Through their partnership with Change the Course, they will balance 8,000,000 gallons of water to the Middle Deschutes River, Lower San Pedro Wildlife Area, and the Upper Rio Grande. This effort is supported by the carpet collections that are part of Mohawk's Waterways Project. All collections within this project have a net positive impact on our

waterways, thereby creating a water Handprint greater than their water Footprint.

“Let us create positive Handprints together.”

Sources

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