Sustainability communications in a nutshell

Green marketing and sustainability communications: over 600 hours of reading, distilled into a 10 minute summary. Save time and access valuable insights you can apply straight away.

Part of the Sustain-affinity Series
To save you wading through the reams of information (and waffle) out there, as part of our ‘Sustain-affinity’ programme, we’ve taken over 600 hours of research, from thousands of journals, articles, books and conferences, in addition to referencing years of experience successfully delivering for some of the world’s most respected brands, to bring you a summary of the good bits. We’ve captured these under key themes, grouped by the way customers see it. After all, as communicators, the largest but most overlooked thing we can do is put ourselves in the customer’s shoes – whether that ‘customer’ be prospect, valued client, employee or another stakeholder.

You're busy, right?

We know the feeling – yet there’s new research and testing taking place all the time – highlighting strategies to make communications in this area even more effective.

Look out for the easy action summaries throughout.
Whether you’re launching an internal recycling programme or convincing prospects to buy your latest gizmo, the ‘what’s in it for me?’ question will always, in some form, be at the forefront of our audience’s minds.

LET’S GET PERSONAL…

Even the deepest green segments are not exclusively philanthropic, they still have their individual drivers to be satisfied – a mortgage to pay, food to put on the table and all of life’s other everyday demands, just like everyone else – we must appeal to their values whilst solving their everyday problems more compellingly than any alternative.

Although the benefits of energy saving lighting are used to the point of cliché, it demonstrates the simple point well – taking it mainstream. The Energy Saving Trust revealed that we could save nearly £1.4 billion a year on electricity bills and 4.5 tonnes of carbon by changing our existing light bulbs to energy saving bulbs. This in itself isn’t a compelling reason for action – it’s too far removed from the everyday, too grand – the individual struggles to see their part in this or the personal benefit in doing so. Going on to say that a single bulb, available from the local shop, saves over 9 times its cost the first year and lasts generally 10 years, averaging £50 saving per household per year, starts to have more appeal. People need to see how sustainability affects them and how it can benefit them personally – our worlds are generally fairly limited in scope and scale.

This works for almost any message in sustainability, e.g.

- Health benefits of a parent feeding their young family organics
- Employees recycling to form a revenue stream/cost saving – which affects their annual bonuses
- Looking both successful and considerate, e.g. driving the latest Tesla electric sportscar.

Customer asks...

What's in it for me?

Positive Message...

a single light bulb CAN SAVE £50 PER YEAR Lasting on average 10 years
Our research suggests that marketers need to segment consumers further than just demographics and psychographics, for sustainability communications to have appeal.

UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY
Twenty years ago, one big green message may have had some generic appeal to segments of the market but it doesn’t cut the mustard any more. Making our messages more personally relevant through detailed segmentation, more benefits laden and conquering the typical objections that can come with some green messages, gives individuals more reason to act. Our research suggests marketers need to segment consumers further than just demographics and psychographics for sustainability communications to have appeal. Clarity Sustainability developed a segmentation that focussed on a wider range of motivators; to identify what might motivate the different characteristics of consumer and business segments, and what barriers may prevent them from making sustainable choices.

Having this information helps us to target, tailor our message and bring out the relevant benefits that correspond with their core motivators, both rationally and emotionally.

THE LONG-TERM, SHORT-TERM CONUNDRUM
Ok, so it’s short-term thinking that created a need to refocus on sustainability in the first place, but to really resonate, our core messages must be close enough geographically, topically or in duration that people can relate to them. Sainsbury’s ‘20 by 20’ sustainability plan for example, chose the year 2020 as its target to be far enough for changes to be made yet still close enough to create the urgency to take action now. A host of research, including that by organisational theorist and marketing professor Shelby Hunt, has identified the competitive advantage of adopting sustainability strategies and shown that setting long-term and short-term goals is a must for success.

What can we do?
- Understand the drivers that motivate action for your segments
- Tailor messages and benefits to be personally relevant to the audience
- Balance long-term and short-term sustainability goals
- Create strategies for long-term relationships with customers.
The Global CSR RepTrack 100 Report showed that CSR is seen as important to consumers, but also highlights that there is a general lack of trust in brands and the claims made in this area. Awareness in sustainability has increased to the point that a wider range of segments are actively searching for information on the sustainability credentials of products, services and companies before purchasing. Making your claims authentic and meaningful has never been so important for the reputation of your company. This is an opportunity for you to act now and respond to these needs, and an opportunity to differentiate through going the extra mile. In 2007, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) saw the amount of environmentally based complaints for adverts quadrupling. This made green credentials a big issue and, in response, the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra) created The Green Claims Guidance to help businesses make authentic sustainability claims. The guide aims to set a platform for businesses and consumers to have trust in green claims and forms a basis for regulating the claims. We have published our own interpretation of the guidance before but, in essence, it is to keep claims clear, specific and very well substantiated – particularly if a point of comparison is being made.

How are these claims any different from the rest?

Research around CSR has found that reporting can increase relationships with consumers if the consumer can identify with the claims that the company is making. A Millward Brown study looking at corporate reputation found that around 20% of sales are influenced by corporate reputation and 10% of a company’s influence can directly relate to perceived environmental behaviour. These percentages could mean multi-millions of sales are influenced by the investment into sustainability programmes. Those that implement sustainability throughout the organisation and include it in corporate missions have better relationships with customers, as well as employees. And have also been proven numerous times to provide, on average, greater returns to shareholders than those who do not.

The flip side is that the Carbon Trust found the number of people who would reject brands that don’t make any efforts to measure and reduce the carbon footprint of their products and services has doubled to 45%. That’s nearly one in every two shoppers! Obviously there is a difference between what people say and what they will do in reality, as proven by the short-lived boycotts for some of the major brands avoiding taxes in the UK, however it is showing a shift in public sentiment. People are getting increasingly savvy, little by little, to detecting lack of effort and greenwash.

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Setting benchmarks, measuring performance and taking action (plan, do, check, act) are the cornerstones of authentic improvement. Being able to communicate both the positive and the developmental aspects of your sustainability efforts shows transparency and a commitment that you aim to keep improving. Purely good news is the outright salesmanship that will trigger the sceptical inclinations of many segments.

TELLING A COMPPELLING STORY

Everyone likes a good story, so create an emotional attachment with your audience around the value of the company’s sustainability actions. Toms Shoes is a great example of a company that is built around a compelling story. The motivation for starting the business came from the founder witnessing the number of children in Argentina who were without shoes. Toms shoes now donate a pair of shoes to underprivileged children for every one they sell. This is an example of how demonstrating your social responsibility and showing the cost it has on the business can increase authenticity and trust with customers – and it is very clear about being a for-profit organisation, doing good whilst in the course of business – showing quite how closely the two goals can be aligned. Such a story builds personality in bucketloads, prompts the sort of viral repetition that is gold dust to social media and sets the brand on a fast track for success.

What can we do?

- Make those claims bullet proof, through substantiation
- Make sure your sustainability activities relate to core business values
- Use storytelling and compelling messages to communicate and engage people
- Tell people the good and the bad for full transparency
- Benchmark and measure to build commitment and implement improvement
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We can help consumers change their purchase and consumption behaviours in favour for sustainable ones by providing them with the compelling alternatives that add more value, whilst remembering the trade-offs around price, cost, quality and convenience.

**MAKE SUSTAINABILITY CONVENIENT**
Understanding the barriers consumers may face in adopting sustainability will allow you to identify opportunities to guide them towards more convenient solutions. By supporting people and making it easier and more convenient to be sustainable will increase their confidence and trust in the brand. In a simple example, if cycling to work is being encouraged as a more sustainable alternative to driving, then make sure the benefits are clear and that it is convenient to do. Show them safe routes to take, offer support and make sure there is infrastructure in place as well as facilities to lock up bikes and wash and change. The Netherlands has done this successfully and, guess what, cycling is all the rage.

Rather than focus on just sustainability concerns, we can help consumers by understanding their perceptions of purchases. Ken Peattie, who focuses on sustainability marketing research, created a model that takes a consumer focus by looking at how much of a compromise sustainability purchases are seen to be and how much confidence they have that it’s addressing a real issue. Reducing compromises and clearly communicating the sustainability issues being addressed, along with the consumer benefits, will increase confidence and trust.

**GET PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE SOLUTION**
Involve your stakeholders in creating ideas for sustainability initiatives, prioritising this for developing the business cases. Online communities and the latest craze for crowdsourcing can be used as an insight for innovation. You are able to uncover what is most valuable and meaningful to them – the ‘what’s in it for me?’ in the language they’re familiar with. Empowering stakeholders in this way can lead to added benefits such as brand advocacy, increased trust and customer retention.

The goal is making it easier to be sustainable and making it part of a desired lifestyle choice.
What can we do?

- Make the purchasing decision process easier
- Think about how to make it easier during the purchase, use and post-use phase
- Provide easy to access information; educate; support; infrastructure
- Get consumers involved in coming up with solutions
- Aim to change the frequent, habitual behaviours to sustainable alternatives
- Understand the social context and what social norms influence behaviours.

Think about the entire product lifecycle

The FSC found that only 20% of people trust sustainability advertising claims, yet 50% fully trust labels or packaging showing an opportunity for you to communicate to consumers at the time of purchase. Providing clear information, including those on product labels, can help make sustainability decision-making much easier, to help people with the ‘in-use’ savings of the product or service. For products that consume energy, such as a car or washing machine, this can be a significant part of the overall impact. By targeting the use phase, we can help customers understand the direct impact their behaviours have on the environment and educate them about sustainable alternatives and the benefits it can have to their lives.

UNDERSTAND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABILITY BEHAVIOURS

Robert Cialdini specialises in social norms research and has proved through many studies that people can be influenced by the behaviours of others, especially the ‘significant’ others that are close to them or whom they model the behaviour of. This approach is now being used for influencing pro-environmental behaviours. A lot of examples of social change have been carried out using social marketing techniques such as the Truth campaign, which was successful in making smoking undesirable to teenagers, by exposing the big truth about tobacco’s marketing practices. This campaign was able to reposition smoking from being a social norm to something widely unacceptable.

Many organisations have found using a ‘green champion’ or community figurehead to show good examples of desired behaviours can be a very positive way to influence. Competitions, especially with an incentive, between people/sites/countries/functions, are another successful tool in our arsenal, bringing sustainability efforts into everyday focus and creating enough repetition for them to seem normal over time.
LET’S MAKE SUSTAINABILITY FUN!
By getting creative, adding some theatre and making the topic of sustainability more fun, messages will gain cut through, be received more positively and more likely to be remembered. This will create a positive association with your organisation because it is often reaching them on an emotional level that rational sustainability reporting or products often wouldn’t. Interactive media, such as games, are a good way to engage people and make learning about sustainability more fun. This can help people retain and recall information about sustainability as well as the product, service and company they engaged with. Clarity recently installed the E.ON ‘Exploring Energy’ experience at an educational visitors centre – when you watch the users there, you can see how they soak up information in a ‘drip feed’ whilst having fun with their friends, in a way they rarely would engage so much within the classroom. And of course this provides a great basis to tap in to pester power and promote sustainability behaviours at home.

EDUCATE AND DEMONSTRATE TO HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND
Research by the FSC asked consumers what barriers they face in engaging in sustainability. 51% of respondents said they don’t know how to do more and a massive 80% of participants felt it is the responsibility of companies to fix the problem. This shows a clear need and opportunity to provide more information to help guide consumers to be more sustainable and help them understand how their actions directly link to sustainability issues.

Fun and tapping into the real needs of the target audience provides an opportunity to influence their education on these issues, without patronising them and, in turn, build relationships.

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FSC research

Serious messages don’t have to be boring. Put yourself in the audience’s shoes, how would you best respond to this information?

People have different levels of understanding and knowledge about sustainability issues so using simple, jargon free language, will make sure people are not put off or excluded from the conversation. Offering bite-sized easy to digest nuggets, rather than reams of technical information, can help people understand, without scaring them off.
• Use creativity and design to make sustainability information more interesting and exciting
• Communicate in a fun and entertaining way to engage people and encourage the message to be spread
• Use simple, jargon free language that is to the point
• Understand who it is you’re talking to and what tone will be most effective.

Ariel’s ‘Turn to 30’ campaign, in partnership with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), helped educate consumers by showing them they can still get good results using a lower temperature, which can also help lower their energy bills. This campaign resulted in approximately 1 million UK consumers changing their behaviour and saving 60,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually, which is 41% energy savings. Ariel’s challenge was not only to educate consumers that they could get good results at low temperatures, but to also show the direct links between energy saving and climate change, to help consumers better understand and encourage behaviour change.
By taking the consumer’s perspective on sustainability and being able to respond to their needs, you can differentiate yourself and minimise risks. Communicating in a way that is credible, authentic and aims to create long-term value for customers will increase trust in your brand. By having a better understanding of what motivates consumers to engage in sustainability helps make people’s lives easier by making sustainability convenient and alleviating the perceived barriers.

Using meaningful and relevant communications and showing consumers the direct links between their behaviours and sustainability concerns can show the benefits that sustainability could have on people’s lives and that of their families. We can help make sustainability a more convenient and desirable lifestyle choice by focusing on what our target segments really care about, as well as what is the most sustainable thing to do, in every sense of the word.

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Concluding thoughts
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These findings are a brief overview of the trends in current research in this complex area. We are working on more bite-size summary guides that explore each of the noted aspects in a lot more detail – if this is something that would aid your role, simply sign up for our e-newsletter or email us at hello@think-sustainability.co.uk to be kept informed.

Get in touch. We’d love to hear from you: think-sustainability.co.uk

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