

**SUSTAINABILITY**  
*communications*  
**NEED TO GET REAL**

**Ogilvy** CONSULTING



# INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing increase in conversation around action on sustainability issues from corporates, brands and the media - the environmental and social issues being addressed seem to be worsening, not improving.

At **Ogilvy Consulting**, we wanted to understand why.

Using our partner the comparative text analysis platform of our partner, **Relative Insight**, we have analysed the last 12 months of sustainability communications from the UK's five most talked about brands, alongside the general population's online conversations, and media commentary.

We uncovered a **disconnected conversation**.

Firstly, on the issues being discussed and secondly, on the ways in which they were being talked about.

It seems that corporates and brands have focused on the long-term, discussing issues within their operations at a supply chain scale, with the media following suit, leading on high-level agendas, sustainability targets and corporate investments.

Yet for the public, the sustainability conversation is focused on the

day-to-day and the immediate future - on what to wear, how to recycle and sustainable ways to eat.

It seems that everyone is having separate conversations, speaking a different language, when discussing the same issues. We believe this disconnect is dividing us, at a time when the global community must come together to act.

We call this the: '**Action-Connection Dilemma**'.

To fix it, we believe that **sustainability communications need to get real**. That corporates and brands need to find better connection points between their efforts in daily life, to lead to positive behaviour change in the public.

Through the application of behavioural science in communications design, we can make this possible - and we expand on this at the end of the report.

After all, it is our thoughts and words that become our actions.

**By Jamie Hamill, Alessia Calcabrini and Alex Kibblewhite**

- 01* **INTRODUCTION TO OGILVY CONSULTING**
- 02* **OUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**
- 03* **REVEALING ‘THE ACTION-CONNECTION DILEMMA’**
- 04* **HOW SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS GET REAL**

# CONTENTS

*01.*

# INTRODUCTION TO OGILVY CONSULTING

OGILVY

**WE BELIEVE  
BUSINESSES  
CAN MAKE AN  
IMPACT THAT  
MATTERS.**

**Ogilvy** CONSULTING



WE HELP CLIENTS  
ANSWER THEIR  
*most important*  
SUSTAINABILITY  
CHALLENGES

How can we **integrate sustainability into our brand** in a genuine way?

We have a good record of sustainability but we're not getting credit for it – how can we **become known** for all all that we are doing?

We know sustainability is important but it's not a core focus for us – how can we **make sure we are doing the right thing?**

How do we best **communicate** all of the steps of our ESG policies to all of our stakeholders?

6

How can we get staff or customers to behave differently or to **choose different products?**

How can we **demonstrate the positive impact** that we are making on the environment?

# WITH A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

By understanding the *psychology* that fundamentally underlies both individual and business decision-making, we are able to get to the heart of sustainability challenges.

Helping corporations and customers to *bridge the gap* between what they know to be important and the way they choose to act.

Allowing us to *design and deliver* strategies that unlock sustainability and business impact.



## *Subtraction Blindness*

People systematically overlook subtractive changes, such as ones to improve sustainability.



## *Drop In The Ocean Effect*

We undervalue the power that we have to make a difference.



## *Present Bias*

We prefer outcomes that are closer to the present when considering potential trade-offs.



## *Social Norms*

The actions of others fundamentally impacts our own decision-making.



## *Cognitive Dissonance*

When we hold two or more conflicting beliefs, one necessarily becomes held less strongly.



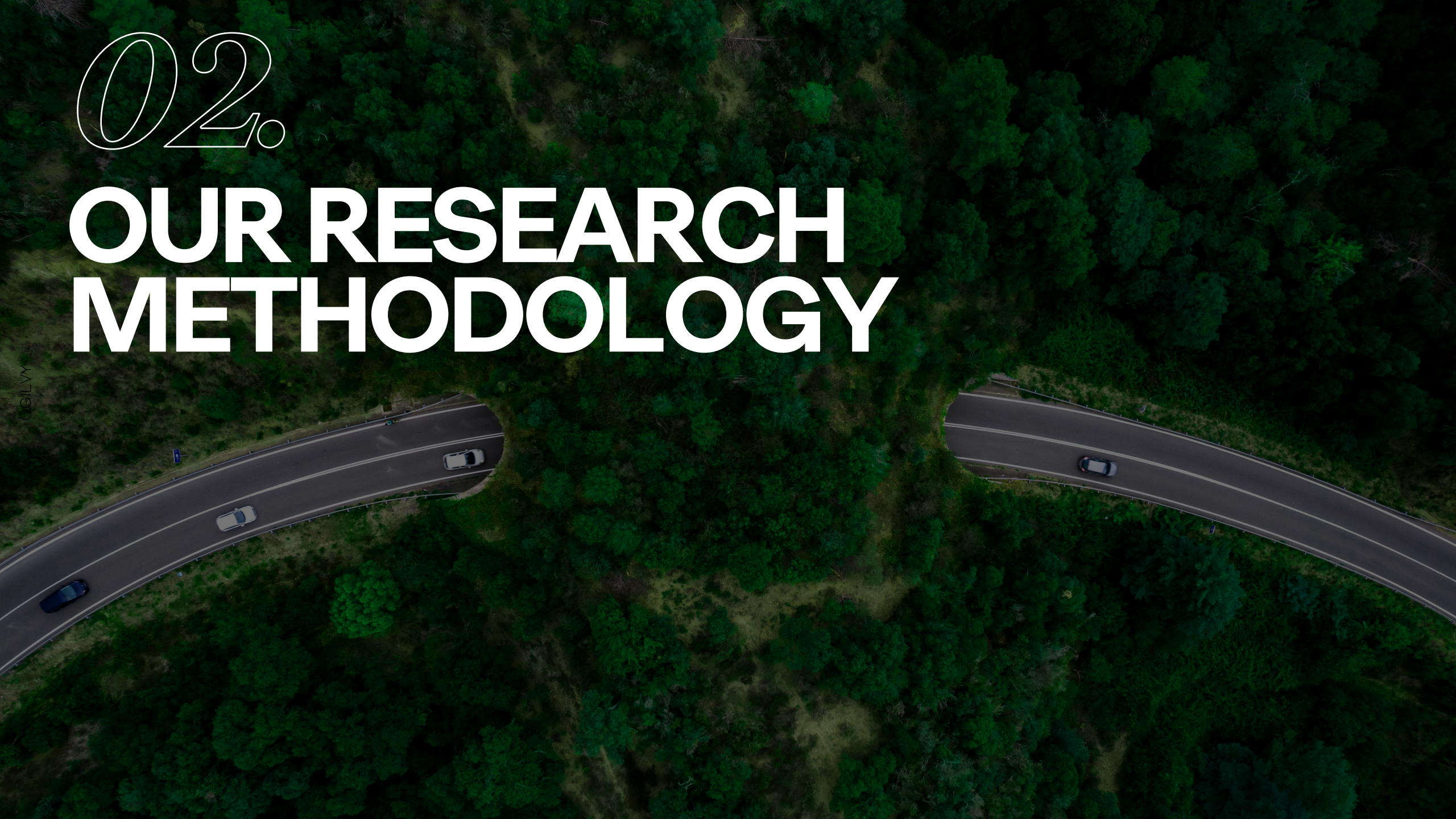
## *Defensive Decision-Making*

Many decisions are taken because they are rationally defensible in a business sense.

02

# OUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CGILVY





# DESPITE A GROWING CONVERSATION AROUND SUSTAINABILITY ACTION, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES ARE WORSENING

**2.0x** Use of specific words around sustainability have become **2.0x** more likely in the last 6 months alone.

The following words have been used more frequently in conversations amongst the general public:

ENVIRONMENTALLY **x1.3**

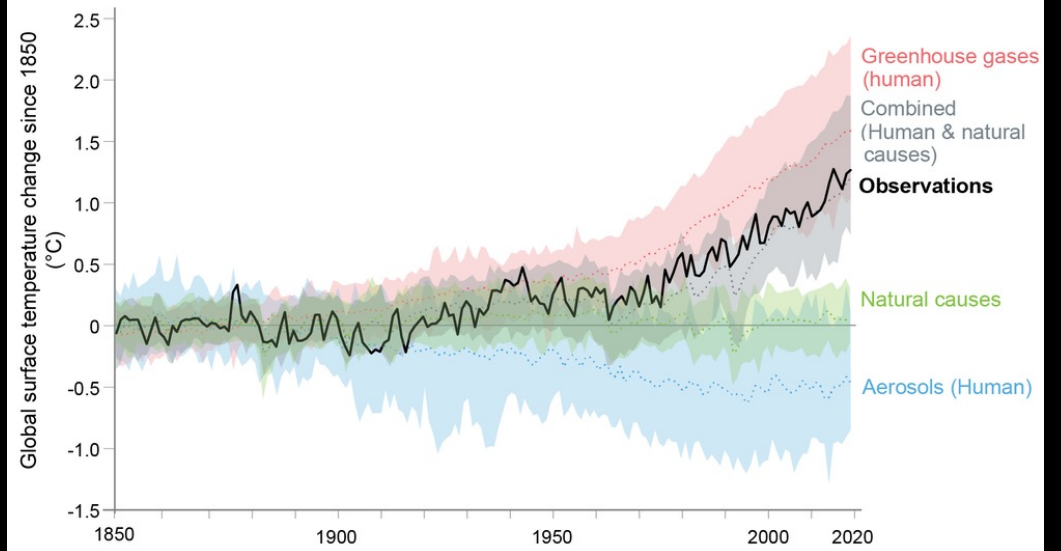
SUSTAINABILITY **x2.2**

SUSTAINABLE **x2.3**

Source: General Population | 6 months | Differences

The IPCC has declared that humans are unequivocally changing our planet

How do we know humans are causing climate change?



Source: IPCC Sixth Assessment report

# WE WORKED WITH RELATIVE INSIGHT TO ANALYSE CONVERSATIONS TO HELP FIND OUT WHY

Relative Insight is a text analysis platform that extracts value from words.

Relative's platform combines AI-powered natural language processing with advanced comparative linguistics to analyse any source of text data and drive enhanced contextual understandings of target audiences, competitors and trends.

By comparing any amount of qualitative data, Relative Insight reveals differences and similarities in how people and brands speak, and this methodology is used to glean unique insights in a fast and scalable way.

This approach reveals what makes data sets - and the audience groups, brands or products they represent, unique and similar.

Using *Relative Insight's* platform, we analysed the last 12 months of **sustainability communications** from:

**THE UK'S FIVE MOST TALKED ABOUT BRANDS**

**THE GENERAL POPULATION'S ONLINE CONVERSATIONS**

**MEDIA COMMENTARY**



03.

REVEALING THE  
*'Action-Connection  
Dilemma'*

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**WE DISCOVERED A**  
**DISCONNECTED**  
*conversation*

# CORPORATES, BRANDS & MEDIA

**LONG-TERM**

**BROAD AGENDAS**

**OPERATIONS FOCUSED**

**TARGET DRIVEN**

**TECHNICAL VOCABULARY**

**VS**

**NEAR-TERM**

**NARROW ISSUE**

**LIFESTYLE FOCUSED**

**SCEPTICAL ON PROGRESS**

**DAILY LANGUAGE**

**GENERAL  
POPULATION**

**WE CALL THIS THE**  
*‘Action-Connection Dilemma’*

# Businesses speak to large-scale operations and their impact...

## COMMONLY USED WORDS AND PHRASES

indicate that businesses focus on their impact, with conversation focused on *supply chains*, *raw materials*, the *circular economy*, *emissions* and *social standards*.

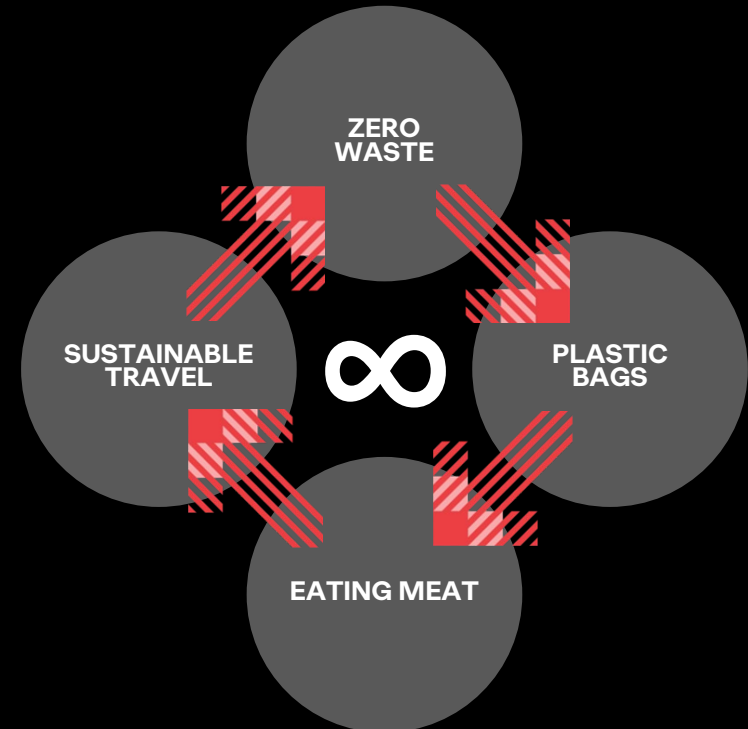
### Topics



Source: Brand Web Copy vs Gen Pop | Differences | Phrases

# ...GenPop focuses on the daily, immediate and tangible

GenPop were **infinitely** more likely to discuss **zero waste**, **plastic bags**, **eating meat** and **sustainable travel**. This means these topics were mentioned repeatedly by GenPop, but not at all by brands.



Source: General Population vs Brand Web Copy | Sustainability | Differences

# A key focus in media is the journey businesses are on...

News articles are keen to emphasise the **journey** that businesses are going on, with focus on the changes being implemented

## Phrases

SUSTAINABILITY JOURNEY

x14.5

## Topics

x1.8 MODIFICATION

x2.1 HELP

LEGISLATION x5.6

Source: News | Sustainability | Differences

# ...Yet GenPop are frustrated at what they perceive as greed and inaction

Consumers are more likely to portray **frustration** as they feel businesses do not have the planet's best interest at heart

## Topics

SELFISH x3.9

RECKLESSNESS x10.4

GREED x12.8

Source: General Population | Sustainability | Frequencies



## Businesses call attention to their sustainability strategies...

Businesses are keen to stress the **sustainable provenance** of ingredients and products and **17.9x more likely** to discuss this area than any other group

*We are committed to **sourcing** 100% of our bananas from **rainforest alliance***

”

***Sourcing 100%** of our own-brand fresh, frozen and canned seafood **sustainably**, using certified fisheries and farms*

”

*We're **sourcing responsibly***

”

Source: Brand Web Copy | Sustainability | Differences

## ...GenPop see their choices being restricted

Gen Pop more likely to discuss **sustainable food choices**; opting for total **plant-based diets** or **reduced consumption**

*Agree we need to **eat less meat**, but I like to think there is still a place for **sustainable** animal farming*

”

For **sustainability** and health reasons I have made choices not to eat red 🍖 or any meat except 🐔 chicken, I don't buy chicken often either. cod fish, tuna and eggs, 👍

”

I want to try doing a bit of **#veganuary**. I'm not going vegan as I eat& enjoy animal products, but want to reduce my meat intake for **environmental reasons**. I need high protein sources ideally sustainably- packaged! please give me your recommendations. thank you!

”

Source: General Population | Sustainability | Frequencies

# DESPITE INTEREST, THE PRICE OF PRODUCTS & SERVICES IS BARRIER TO ACTING SUSTAINABLY

GenPop were *x2.5 more likely* now than in the last 6-months to cite frustration at the price barriers they face to purchasing 'sustainable' good or service.

*Chose to **feed my family** or **hit some abstract emissions target**.  
I know what I'd **chose**.*

*I find it so hard to find decent clothes that are **sustainable as well as affordable** 🧑 ♀ the **struggle is real** x*

*Vegan processed foods like Quorn are more **expensive** than **cheap** processed meat. It's **not affordable** or sustainable to all folks*

*I understand that they're trying to be more **eco friendly** and more **sustainable** so that might make them **more expensive** but it feels like **beyond a joke** with the way they **price** things :/*

*I'm just **shocked at the ticket prices**, when it would cost me far less to drive there and back but I can't justify the carbon footprint. my point is **people need to be incentivised** more to travel more sustainably.*

**WE BELIEVE THIS ~~DISCONNECT~~  
DIVIDES US, AT A TIME WHEN WE MUST ALL  
COME TOGETHER TO ACT**

# WHEN ACTIONS DON'T CONNECT, THEY ARE SEEN AS MISINFORMATION

GenPop is *x5 more likely* to feel there is misinformation being circulated in conversations about sustainability.

## Topics

UNETHICAL

*x4.4*

FALSE

*x5.6*

*It's our offspring we can't **abandon** to the whims of corrupt parasites*

”

*I find the 'they' sentences **quite naive** in assuming that once the incumbents (oil companies, corrupt politicians, monoculture agribusiness etc) are **overturned**- whether democratically or not- whoever replaces them will swiftly\* do the best thing\* to create a **sustainable world**.*

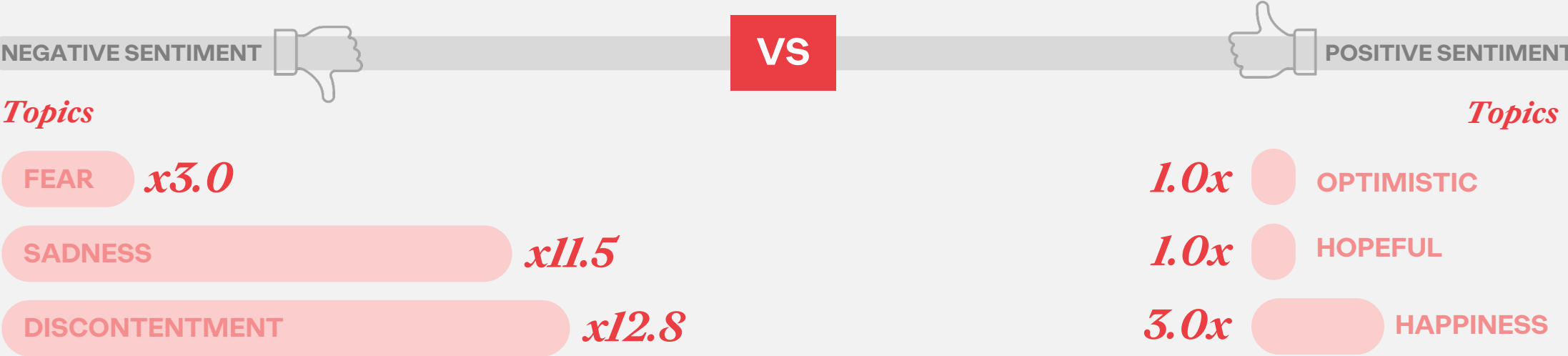
”

*Free it from all the **green crap**.*

”

# WHILE SADNESS OVERRIDES HAPPINESS AND HOPE IN SENTIMENT

Topic and vocabulary analysis reveals an overwhelming negative sentiment amongst GenPop when discussing sustainability issues. Negative emotional responses to sustainability issues arguably prevent the enabling conditions needed for change.



Source: General Population | Sustainability | Differences

HOWEVER, THE DATA POINTS TO  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUSINESSES TO  
BETTER *connect* WITH CONSUMERS

# SUSTAINABILITY IS A CLEAR CONSIDERATION FACTOR IN PURCHASE DECISIONS, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S SEEN AS 'EASY'

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*It's so nice when #sustainability is made easy. just found out my go- to shampoo now comes in bar shape, with 0 plastic packaging. imagine if we didn't have to think about switching like this for all of the products...*

”

*I've also **prioritised** and linked all the **sustainable/ethical brands** but not the fast fashion ones*

”

*Eat meat only 1/2 times a week, buy essentials more **sustainably** (clothes, disposable items like soap) and cycle more!*

”

# THERE ARE STRONG CALLS FOR BOTH LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP, CREATING SPACE TO STEP UP

Conversation calling on leadership within sustainability issues has become more likely, with criticism (and some praise) for both governments and businesses, calling for action.

## *GenPop use of words*

LEADERSHIP

*x2.0*

LEADERS

*x2.1*

*Super **disappointing** to hear **leadership** of a large institution yesterday invite discussion around sustainability & change w practically **0 action to change**, just' discussion 🙄🌱🌍  
#sustainability#action#change  
#leadership#leadershipmatters*

”



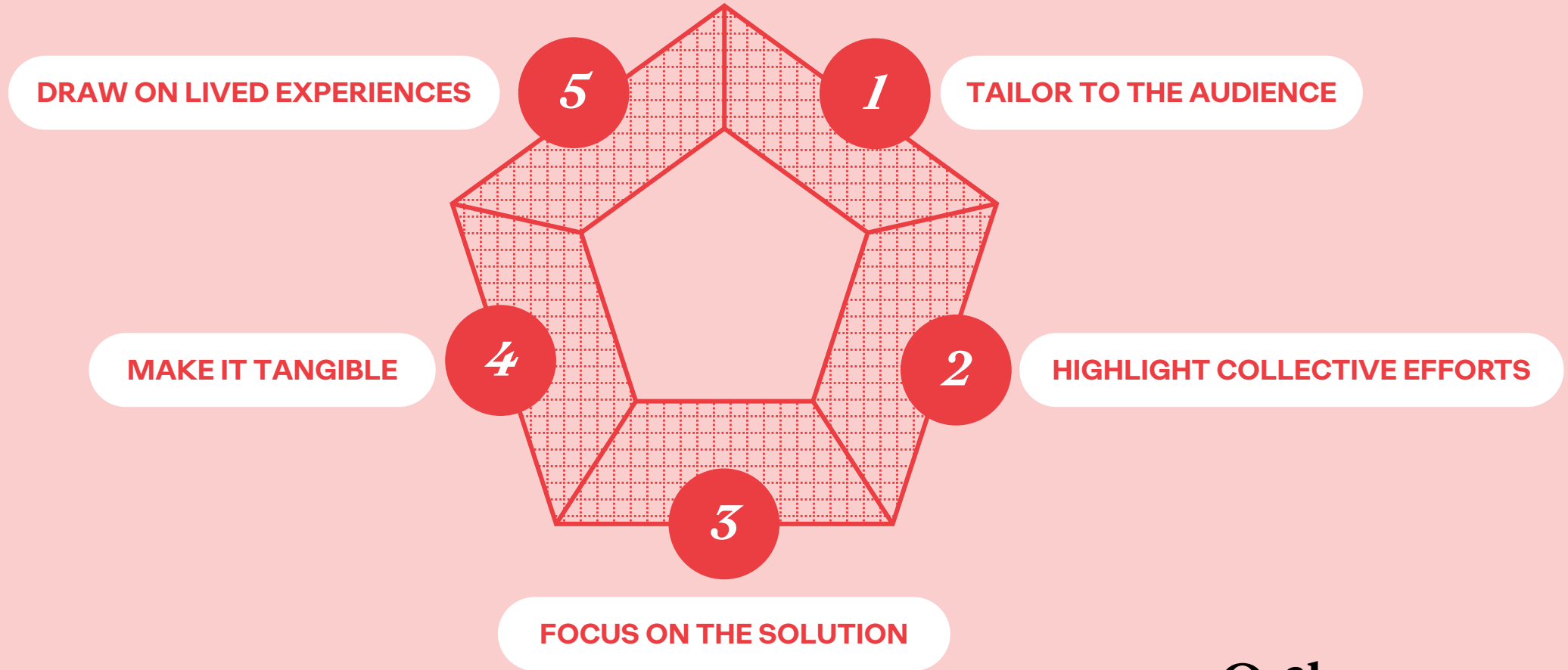


04

# HOW SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS GET REAL

TO SOLVE THE  
*'Action-Connection Dilemma'*  
BUSINESSES MUST FIND BETTER  
*connections*  
BETWEEN THEIR EFFORTS  
AND DAILY LIFE

# BEHAVIOURAL STRATEGIES TO HELP GUIDE COMMUNICATIONS DESIGN

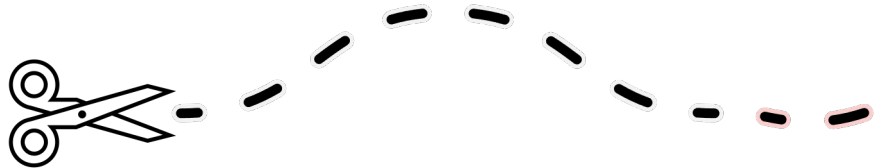


# *If your actions aren't connecting...*

People react differently to information depending on how it is presented.

By using alternative descriptions of the same problem, we can change people's understanding of it and response.

Finding this 'connection' to daily life, as our research highlighted, is essential.



## ***Re-frame the conversation***

All information exists in a frame, whether unintentionally or strategically constructed.<sup>1</sup> To be most effective, messages should be aligned with your audience's worldviews and decision-making styles.

## ***Adjust your tone***

How much people care about the issue influences how assertive your message should be. If the individual already cares about the cause, an assertive message will motivate them. If they do not, opt for more suggestive appeals, as assertive messages could put them off.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Consider the right messenger***

Authorities, peers and convert communicators can be highly influential based on the audience and issue at hand. Testing is key!

**1.**

**TAILOR TO YOUR AUDIENCE**

1. Kusmanoff, A., Fidler, F., Gordon, A., Garrard, G., Bekessy, S. (2020). Five lessons to guide more effective biodiversity conservation message framing. *Conservation Biology*, 34. 10.1111/cobi.13482.  
2. Kronrod, A., Grinstein, A., & Wathieu, L. (2012). Go Green! Should Environmental Messages be So Assertive? *Journal of Marketing*, 76(1), 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.10.0416>

# *When people feel disempowered...*

People feel disempowered when they feel that their ability to make a difference is insignificant, like a drop in the ocean. The overwhelming negative sentiment from Gen Pop in discussion of sustainability issues shows this in action

Additionally, if we lack trust in other people's cooperation, it is easy to look at the issue with an "us vs them" mentality - why should I do the effort if no one else does?



## ***Show how others are cooperating***

Showing people how others like them are behaving can help them overcome the perception that their individual actions are insignificant and increase reciprocity.

## ***Highlight the changing norms***

If a sustainable behaviour is not yet part of the norm, highlight how norms are beginning to change.<sup>3</sup> Learning that others are *starting* to adopt new sustainable behaviours can help people reconsider the barriers that had previously hampered them from doing them – if people are changing, I can and should too!

## ***Commit together, publicly***

Helping people commit to sustainable behaviours publicly can increase their sense of accountability and allows them to signal desirable qualities to others.<sup>1,2</sup>

2.

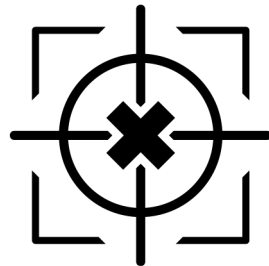
**HIGHLIGHT COLLECTIVE EFFORTS**

1. Pelozo, John, White, Katherine, Shang, Jingzhi (2013), "Good and Guilt-Free: The Role of Self-Accountability in Influencing Preferences for Products with Ethical Attributes," *Journal of Marketing*, 77 (1), 104-119.  
2. Baca-Motes, K., Brown, A., Gneezy, A., Keenan, E.A., & Nelson, L.D. (2013). Commitment and Behavior Change: Evidence from the Field. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39, 1070-1084.  
3. Sparkman, G., & Walton, G. M. (2017). Dynamic Norms Promote Sustainable Behavior, Even if It Is Counternormative. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1663-1674.

# *When problems feel overwhelming...*

When faced with excessively negative emotions, people tend to adopt coping strategies to avoid having to deal with them, ignoring the information, rationalizing, or denying it.<sup>1</sup>

Yet our research showed GenPop was x9.7 more likely to use the word 'solution' when discussing sustainability issues – suggesting a readiness for answers over problems.



## ***Use negative appeals with caution***

Be mindful of potentially counterproductive effects: could your negative communications cause people to feel unable to overcome the threat?

## ***Give agency, control, self-efficacy***

Combine negative information with actionable steps and solutions to help people overcome feelings of helplessness.

## ***And try to be positive!***

Positive emotions such as pride and optimism can motivate people to engage and maintain their sustainable behaviours over time.

**3.**

**FOCUS ON THE SOLUTION**

1. White, K., Habib, R., & Hardisty, D. J. (2019a). How to SHIFT Consumer Behaviors to be More Sustainable: A Literature Review and Guiding Framework. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(3), 22–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919825649>

# *If the issue feels abstract...*

Humans are easily influenced by their present emotions and immediate context. Yet, because environmental issues are not always immediately visible, they can often feel abstract and distant from ourselves.

As one person quoted in our research said:  
*'Chose to feed my family or hit some abstract emissions target. I know what I'd chose.'*

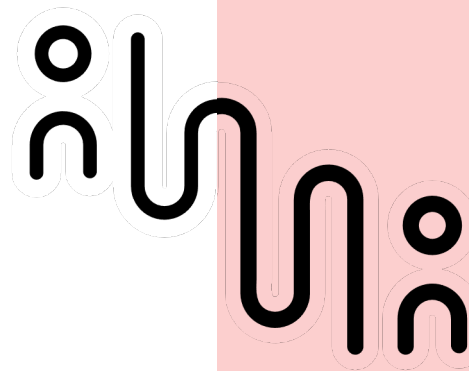
***This phenomenon is known as psychological distance.***

## ***Think about what the issue really means***

Psychological distance can make us feel disconnected from environmental issues. Comms can be used to bridge this distance by presenting consequences closer in time and to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Bring the future close***

Bring long-term impacts into the present, or, shift people's perspectives towards future motivations, by helping them imagine their future self or consider their legacy.<sup>2</sup>



4.

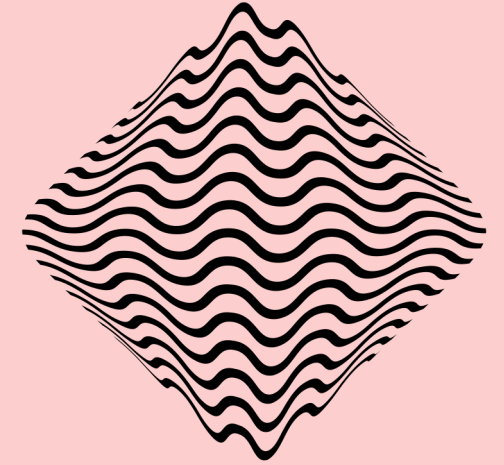
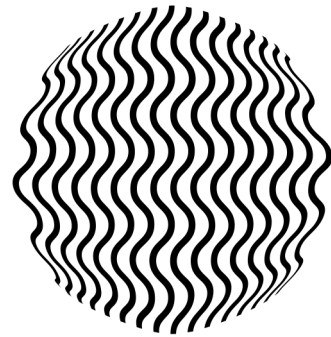
**MAKE IT TANGIBLE**

1. Van Lange, P., & Huckelba, A. L. (2021). Psychological distance: How to make climate change less abstract and closer to the self. *Current opinion in psychology*, 42, 49–53.  
2. Zaval, L., Markowitz, E.M., Weber, E.U. (2015), "How Will I Be Remembered? Conserving the Environment for the Sake of One's Legacy," *Psychological Science*, 26 (2), 231–36

# *When facts don't work...*

It is one thing to read a statistic, it is another to experience it first-hand. Our emotions, our environment, and our senses can all powerfully affect our judgements.

To help people empathize with environmental issues, we need to make them relatable at a personal level – or risk cries of ‘misinformation’, as GenPop are currently 5x more likely to so.



## ***Tell stories, over facts***

Instead of complex jargon, consider using narratives and vivid, authentic imagery that people can relate to. Focusing on a specific, identifiable individual, rather than a large, anonymous statistic can be more emotionally engaging.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Make it experiential***

Consider how you could create multi-sensory experiences, using art installations, retail or digital environments that help us feel more connected to the environment.

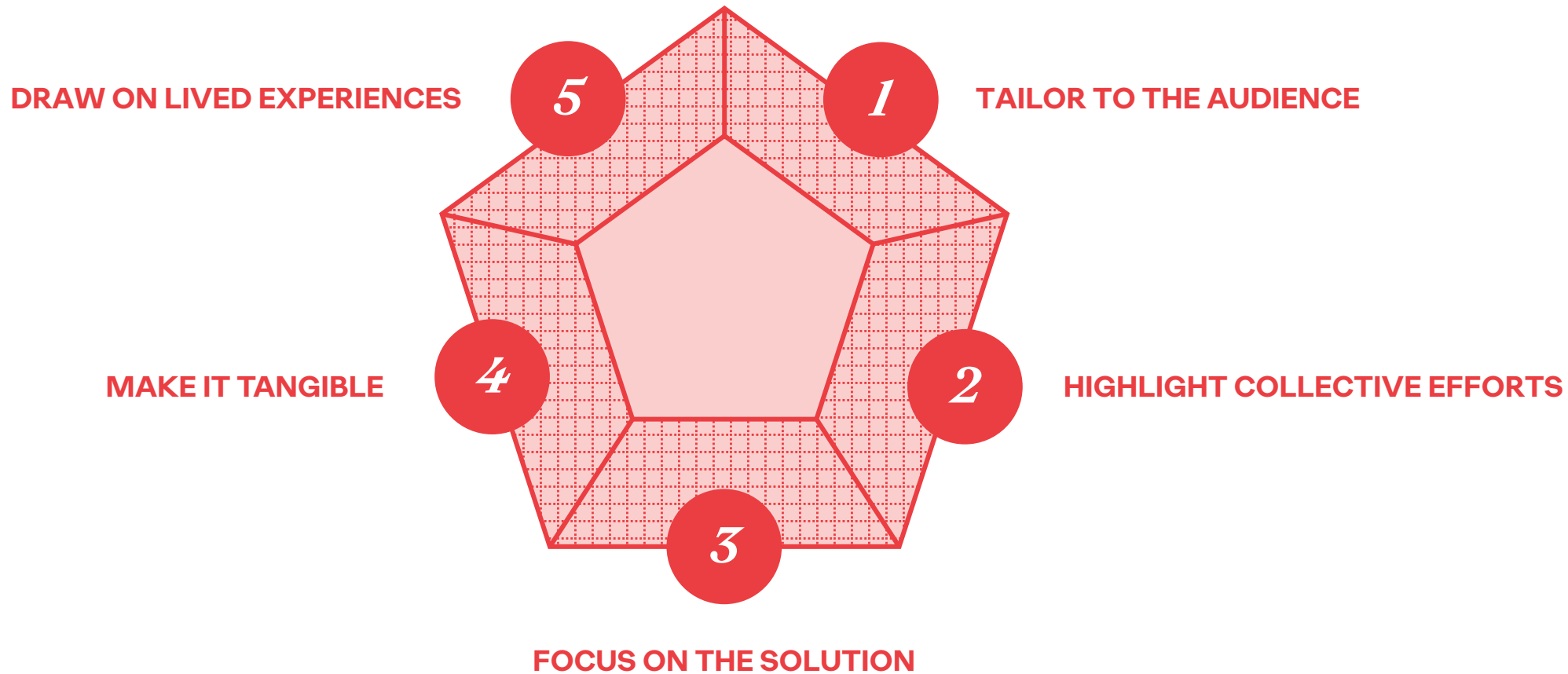
**5.**

**DRAW ON LIVED EXPERIENCES**

1. Loewenstein, G., and Jenni, K. (1997). Explaining the "Identifiable Victim Effect". Journal of Risk and Uncertainty, 14, 235-57. 10.1023/A:1007740225484.



# ADDRESSING THE 'ACTION-CONNECTION DILEMMA'





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# WE'D LOVE TO WORK WITH YOU

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