

# SUSTAINABILITY & SOCIAL

EFFECTIVE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION FOR MEANINGFUL IMPACT

## Fertile ground

**Sustainability is increasingly a priority for consumers, and social media is fertile communications territory for brands and organisations who can contribute to the cause in credible ways.**

**This paper explores the ways in which a sophisticated social strategy can deliver sustainability communication that's dynamic, interactive, and responsive to evolving consumer concerns.**



## The context

Amidst urgent calls from scientists, experts and activists, sustainability has become a dominant talking point on the mainstream global agenda, affecting all spheres from politics to pop culture.

As a result, people are thinking more about how to make a positive impact through their personal actions, including the businesses they support and the products and services they use.

**82%**

Of consumers want more practical information from brands on sustainable living.

**86%**

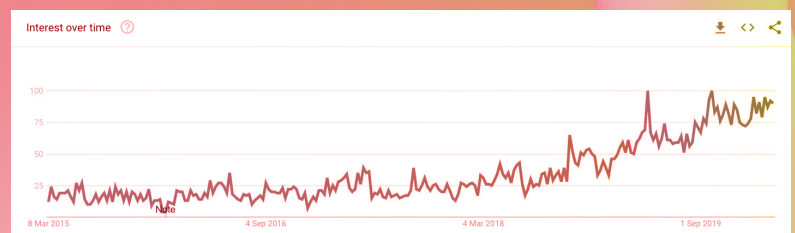
Of consumers say there's not enough information on products to help them assess sustainability impact.

*Source: Wunderman Thompson New Sustainability: Regeneration; Source: McKinsey State of Fashion 2019*

Consumers believe brands have a strong role to play but are craving better quality information to guide their daily decisions from product research through to purchase, usage and sustainable disposal.

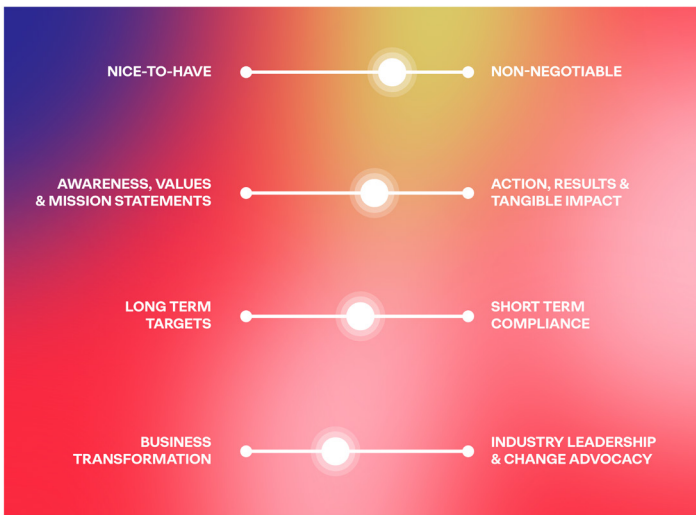
## *What does this mean for brands?*

Sustainability is no longer just good for the planet – it's good for business too. Google reflects a consistent upward trend of searches for "sustainable brands" over the past five years as demand continues to grow.



*Source: Google Trends for "sustainable brands"*

And so, the dials are shifting for how companies need to respond on sustainability.



CAUTION

# Do not greenwash

Social can never substitute good, sustainable business practice, but it's a great channel for brands to convey genuine efforts.

## How to harness social for effective sustainability communication

Whether a brand is starting out, or looking to build on an existing strategy, social offers a range of dynamic solutions.

We'll delve into a selection of four key steps:



### Tell your story

Good sustainability communication is built from quality information and proof points, expressed in a distinctive way to connect with its intended audience. It should prioritise immediate actions and tangible results over distant targets that may be perceived as empty corporate speak.

Businesses on the path to sustainability don't need to wait for the end destination to start communicating. Consumers understand that sustainability is a journey, and ongoing communication along the way demonstrates sustained and genuine commitment.

Sustainability storytelling is also most effective from the inside out. Reflecting sustainability as an authentic component of company values and culture is more compelling than a one-off campaign. Businesses that preach green values but fail to practice them internally risk backlash down the line.

Category leaders regularly leverage certain tactics and themes in different combinations to bring their sustainability efforts to life on social. We call it the Social Sustainability Toolbox and it's a good starting point for businesses looking to structure and craft their storytelling.

Studies suggest that organisations perceived as green enjoy a stronger reputation<sup>1</sup> and higher brand value<sup>2</sup>, and though some brands are making great progress in adapting business strategy for a sustainable future, too many are missing the opportunity to communicate it at consumer level.

Many companies already possess a wealth of content in the form of CSR activity and communication, but this is typically developed in a silo for corporate stakeholders.

Social, as a space where much discovery, information and conscious-shifting dialogue takes place, is able to express these stories in a human and relatable way and connect them to receptive audiences of potential customers. It's also the first port of call for self-identifying eco-consumers who actively research sustainable brands, products and services.

**Question:** Which of the following online sources do you mainly use when you are actively looking for more information about brands, products, or services?



Source: GlobalWebIndex Q2 2019

Companies who can demonstrate tangible action and commitment have a rich opportunity in Social to win over new customers and secure loyalty as we continue the trajectory towards sustainable living as a new normal.



## Social Sustainability Toolbox

### Milestones

Communicate progress over time to build a track record of transformation

### Process

Transparent, humanised storytelling to reveal how products are made sustainably

### Leadership

Increase credibility through business leaders who can convey a strong point of view or participate in dialogue

### Lifestyle

Inspiring lifestyle content and useful tips position a brand or product as a seamless fit for sustainable living

### Partnership

Well-chosen collaborations fuel talkability and build credibility by association

### Product

showcase sustainable product developments as signals of progress on the journey

### Circularity

Highlight how circularity informs the business, including waste-minimising initiatives

## Find your Audience

### Who are we speaking to?

Social media enables brands to serve messages to audiences who will be most receptive, or who are most important to convince.

The dialogue has progressed to the point that sponsored sustainability content, if well executed, is not seen as boastful or performative. Social's sophisticated targeting capabilities and CRM integration opportunities enable brands to communicate sustainability stories sequentially, building a more invested consumer support base over time.

The ability to target and tailor communication is particularly important for brands who need to communicate in different global markets. For example, our social audience analysis shows that sustainability interest levels are highest amongst the 23 – 36 age demographic for North American markets, whilst the most susceptible age range for Japan and India is 56-64.

Content can be tailored and targeted for different market contexts, as well as different consumer attitudes towards sustainability.

### How should we deliver the message?

Social channel mix should be a strategic choice informed by communication objectives and audience approach. Elements of a sustainability story can come to life in different ways across the extensive range of content and engagement opportunities that social channel spectrum offers.

For instance, human impact storytelling and visually rich lifestyle content can live best on Instagram or Pinterest, whilst YouTube or podcast platforms can access niche interest audience segments with high engagement potential who are open to exploring topics in depth.

## Build your reputation

Reputation and public relations strategy should be carefully considered when setting up social sustainability communications. This can inform decisions such as whether to create dedicated sustainability handles or integrate the storytelling into existing brand and ambassador channels.

Established brand platforms can leverage their existing communities to support sustainability initiatives, whilst the personal platform of an internal sustainability expert is more likely to build authority and connection with sustainability key opinion leaders.



## Speaking of influence

Smart influencer strategy can greatly accelerate sustainability reputation-building efforts. The sustainability movement and online dialogue is propelled by influential personalities across different categories, from energetic youth activists to subject matter experts, celebrities or media workers.



Brands should be highly selective, collaborating with the communities, categories and profiles that best align to the communications task at hand.

## Reputation safeguarding

Given the often-sensitive nature of sustainability dialogue, brands should prepare for how to manage the response to their efforts. Key capabilities to have in place:

- **Social listening:** monitor sustainability-related conversation around the brand to track the progress of reputation development. Over time marketers should analyse the most prevalent conversation themes and sentiment, as well as the voices and communities responding to the brand. Competitor activity can be tracked in parallel, offering valuable insights that can help to differentiate the brand's sustainability story.
- **Community management:** Dedicated community managers, armed with well-thought out response guidelines and a risk escalation plan, should monitor and respond to relevant consumer conversation. Brands that can tap into community dynamics and provide compelling answers to audience questions and reactions will increase the impact of their sustainability communications.

## Drive action

Beyond content consumption, social platforms offer increasingly rich opportunity for audience action, from participating in challenges to supporting initiatives or instant purchase.

This is highly relevant for brands looking to play a role in consumers' changing lifestyle habits.

A recent example: tapping into the rapidly rising trend of reselling and recycling apparel, Levi's® launched the Levi's® SecondHand initiative, an online store for pre-owned denim, in October 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Social supported the launch with a clearly articulated ask to consumers (drop off your old jeans and shop SecondHand to help keep denim in circulation and out of landfills) along with a follow-up program of Instagram Live conversations between renowned sustainability activists, leaders and educators.

Social can also be infused with principles of behavioural science to encourage lifestyle change. Concepts like social proof (demonstrating the positive behavior of others<sup>4</sup>) or chunking (presenting information in forms that are easy to process<sup>5</sup>) are a great fit for the social environment.

So, targeted social communication can nudge audiences along a journey to action, whether the objective is facilitating sustainable behavior change linked to a brand's purpose, or guiding consumers down a purchase funnel for sustainable products.

## *Let's get started*

In the near future, the most loved, trusted and successful brands will be those who have demonstrated meaningful and ongoing contributions to building a sustainable future.

Social has a critical role to play in connecting people to these unfolding stories of progress. More than just another channel in the marketing mix, social can turn one-way sustainability communication into an interactive ongoing dialogue with communities of engaged supporters. Fuelled by real-time social intelligence, a smart social sustainability communications plan empowers businesses to convey their message whilst staying responsive to consumers' evolving needs and priorities.

In summary, sustainable business strategy coupled with great creative thinking and dynamic social execution can produce highly effective sustainability communication that delivers efficiency, authenticity and positive impact.

**For more inspiration, data and case study examples download our Social & Sustainability webinar or contact us and let's work on it together:**

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