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The Efeca guide to communicating about sustainable commodities



Guide to sustainability comms

Sustainability is an essential part of doing business.

As discussions around climate change gain momentum, it's become increasingly clear that organisations need to take responsibility for their environmental impact. From identifying areas of their operations which need to be greener, through to showcasing an innovative plan to achieving Net Zero - there is a growing pressure on businesses to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability.

Communicating sustainability efforts is part of this process, and there is a growing expectation for businesses to showcase their sustainability credentials.

In this guide, we explore the what, why and how of sustainability communications for businesses – exploring the benefits, methods, opportunities and challenges facing organisations when it comes to talking about sustainability.

Communicating sustainability – why your business should be doing it

A business's reputation is everything.

Sustainability should be a core value, and one which informs operational decisions and influences work culture. People want to work with and support organisations who have a good reputation - and today, a company's approach and commitment to sustainability has a real impact on its reputation.

Building reputations

It's a widely accepted fact that something needs to change. Consumers are aware of the problems that climate change is causing, and they are turning towards businesses that demonstrate their sustainability credentials and are ethically aware. Regardless of whether a business is B2C or B2B, working towards improving their green credentials should be prioritised. It adds value to the brand, and showcases to customers exactly what the business stands for.

Communicating sustainable change is one of the most effective ways to positively influence opinion amongst team members, customers, stakeholders and investors.

Influencing industry

Communicating about sustainability has a far-reaching impact. Showcasing sustainability and implementing it across operations can spread awareness and drive real change across the business community and beyond. It highlights which areas of organisations can be unsustainable, and prompt other business owners to think about what they can be doing to do their part.

It essentially encourages businesses to follow suit – helping to promote the right business practices, while encouraging the development of professional relationships and creating better working environments.

It's worth remembering, however, that building the right reputation is a process. It begins when businesses start to identify unsustainability in their operations and take the necessary steps to make changes for the better.

Communicating sustainability – methods and opportunities

Sustainability is inherently newsworthy – and there are lots of opportunities for organisations to create positive stories and coverage about their businesses, across digital and physical media, as well as on company websites, and in direct communications.

PR

Sustainability, climate change and the environment are all hot topics that will be relevant for years to come. Journalists from trade, regional and national media welcome the opportunity to feature or commission pieces that discuss or highlight what a business is doing to make the planet a better or fairer place. This could be anything from an interview, a feature piece or news release that succinctly communicates your organisation's progress and garners publicity.

Trade publications often publish editorial calendars and feature briefs – listing the topics they are looking to cover.

Social media

Sustainability stories make ideal content for company social media platforms, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok. Posting regular and engaging updates that communicate what a business is doing with regards to sustainability and lowering its environmental impact are a quick and easy way to reach existing customers, grow a target audience and leave a lasting impression.

There is an art to this, and such posts should be considered and engaging for the intended audience. It's no use posting irrelevant or poorly articulated content – it won't get the message across. Businesses should think about their USP or unique angle when it comes to sustainability, and shout about it in a cohesive way.

Online

Another means of doing this is for a business to have dedicated section within their website, which features any sustainability accreditations they have or further information about environmental credentials and policies.

This is a great opportunity to link to other related webpages and organisations and shows a level of commitment that they have made to showcasing their credentials. It can also help to showcase relevant partnerships with businesses who share values on sustainability.

A company blog is another useful outlet. In addition to posting news and updates about relevant programmes, initiatives and progress, it can be a useful outlet for sharing thought leadership and opinion pieces designed to drive change.

The importance of events

Events are an integral part of sustainability comms and taking part can be very beneficial.

These range from multiday conferences and symposiums, through to specific holidays or dates that celebrate sustainability or aim to raise awareness about a particular issue or challenge that is adversely affecting the environment.

There are several ways that businesses can participate in events. They include posts on social media that showcase a business's participation and organising fundraisers. Another way could also involve financial investment and participation, in which a business could donate to the charity or organisation that is hosting a particular event or initiative. Other financial action includes being a sponsor of conferences and symposiums that are orientated around issues of sustainability and a greener future.

Other methods of participation can be more direct. For example, if a business has any sustainability success stories, or has done something that they are particularly proud of they could offer to speak at an event such as a conference – or even put one on themselves. This is a brilliant way of effectively associating their businesses with sustainability and give its name positive connotations. This, in turn, builds a favourable reputation, increases opportunity and encourages other organisations to do the same.

The problems of greenwashing and greenhushing

It's not enough for businesses to claim that they are sustainable. It needs to be a statement backed up by substantiated evidence, or through relevant accreditations and certifications.

Purporting to be environmentally conscious for marketing purposes or profit, without being so, is what is known as Greenwashing. It is a form of false advertising and is perceived as misleading to customers and other audiences. Whenever a company is unsure about a claim relating to sustainability, it is better to understate than overstate.

Being totally transparent is key to reducing the risk of greenwashing. For businesses, this involves taking honest action when moving toward sustainability by setting achievable, actionable goals, producing verifiable reports and tracking data. It also means learning about the regulatory landscape to know what claims can be made factually and accurately.

Whilst making false sustainability claims is bad practice, another equally damaging issue is greenhushing. This is when businesses underreport their sustainability credentials to both their customers and stakeholders. It's the opposite of greenwashing, but being hesitant to report sustainability limits a company's sustainable development and opportunity to inspire positive change.

There are several reasons why companies choose to stay quiet, including the fear of being criticised for not doing enough or being accused of greenwashing. This is exacerbated by the unattainability of many certifications and accreditations to smaller businesses, which are either expensive to obtain or have certain criteria which exclude certain organisations.

Ways to avoid greenwashing and greenhushing include being honest and truthful about the initiatives being undertaken and progress that is being made, and continually making efforts to communicate this.

The value of statistics

Communicating sustainability is important, as is the need for it to be supported by clear data and verifiable evidence.

This is where statistics and figures become very helpful and are a foundational starting point in sustainability comms. It gives a business something tangible to talk about, and provides interesting content to refer back to for social posts, blogs, press releases, agendas and more.

It also helps businesses to defend against damaging accusations of greenwashing, while providing a benchmark to showcase progress.



The problem with palm – communicating sustainability

When people think about sustainability issues and the impact of producing agricultural commodities, the first crop that usually comes to mind is palm oil.

Palm oil is a highly controversial topic – so it's essential that it's communicated and discussed in the right way.

Palm is a crop that has historically been perceived as evil - renowned for destroying land and contributing towards high levels of deforestation and environmental damage. However, this isn't necessarily a fair portrayal, as when sourced and farmed responsibly, it can be a truly sustainable choice.

Often, businesses choose to sidestep the palm issue by going 'palm oil free' – and base their sustainability comms heavily around this change. Although this may be the right thing from a PR perspective, it may not be the best move from a sustainability perspective.

Palm oil is the world's single most efficient vegetable oil crop. You can produce more oil per acre of land growing palm - palm oil makes up 35% of the world's vegetable oil, on just 10% of the land used to grow vegetable oil crops.

In most cases, switching to an alternative, such as soybean, coconut, sunflower or rapeseed, transfers the problems associated with palm production, or makes them worse. Other oil crops require between 4 and 10 times as much land, and as a result, can have an even greater impact on the global issues of deforestation and habitat destruction. We need to ensure we use all vegetable oil crops sustainably – but these statistics show the particularly critical role that palm oil, when produced and consumed responsibly, has to play in meeting growing global demand.

The development of sustainable palm oil

The last decade and a half has witnessed significant change in the palm industry.

It was incredibly difficult - if not impossible - to obtain truly sustainable palm 15 years ago. However, thanks to initiatives such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) is now widely available.

RSPO is a not-for-profit organisation that has developed a set of environmental and social criteria which companies must comply with in order to produce Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO). Industry, civil society and government are taking action in the UK and beyond – the UK Sustainable Palm Oil Initiative (SPOI), facilitated by Efeca, encompasses the UK Roundtable on Sourcing Sustainable Palm Oil, an industry-led group spanning the UK supply chain and working collaboratively to develop sustainable supply chains of palm oil. The UKSPOI is also working to balance the narrative around the use of a commodity that, when produced and consumed responsibly, has a vital role to play in meeting the growing demands of global food and non-food industries. Communication is an essential part of this effort.

These types of initiatives have driven positive change and this is evident through tangible results. Today, deforestation is slowing down significantly; in Indonesia, the world's largest producer and user of palm oil, 2021 saw a continued decline in the rate of primary forest loss for the fifth straight year. This is set amongst the backdrop of strengthening voluntary and national certification standards, and an increasing number of palm oil companies embracing No Deforestation, No Peat and No Exploitation (NDPE) policies.

Such accreditations and commitments are fantastic tools for businesses to use when communicating sustainability, as it substantiates their claims and demonstrates they are taking a proactive approach towards lowering their environmental impact.

At Efeca, we provide technical guidance, expert advice and facilitation support to industry and government on sourcing of sustainable palm oil, and other commodities. For example, we provide similar support through our facilitation of the UK Sustainable Soya Initiative and UK Soy Manifesto.



Talking about palm oil

The general consensus from the NGO community is that a blanket boycott of palm oil is not the answer – supporting sustainable palm oil is the best way forward to prevent negative environmental and social impacts in the industry. Almost 100 conservation organisations, including WWF, Conservation International and the Sumatran Orangutan Society, have published a statement to this effect. Sustainable palm oil was also highlighted as a solution to ending global deforestation by Sir David Attenborough through the Earthshot Prize.

The media is waking up to this fact. A few years ago, the simplistic narrative that ‘palm oil = bad’ was widespread, but, thanks to campaigns from major environmental charities and organisations including the WWF and Chester Zoo, this is changing.

Today, there is space for more nuance in the conversation, and businesses shouldn’t be scared to talk about palm oil. Instead, they need to educate consumers, and to clearly communicate the benefits of responsibly sourced palm in driving real change.

This starts with understanding the realities of the current landscape, and the progress that has been made on palm. It also depends heavily on choosing the right, sustainable solutions!

Businesses that have transitioned to certified sustainable palm oil should shout about it – but all sustainability claims should be supported by evidence and statistics, or backed by specific accreditations.



Sustainability comms in practice

When done correctly, sustainability comms can do brilliant things for a business.

There are many organisations from a wide range of industries that are leading the way when it comes to effectively communicating their green credentials.

Daabon group – multinational online approach

Daabon is a business focussed on responsibly produced products such as palm oil, bananas, avocados, coffee and limes. Sharing their green credentials and continually striving to elevate their commitment to reducing their environmental impact is part of their day to day operations.

In addition to regular blog posts, video content and social posts surrounding sustainability, and microsites for dedicated regions around the world, the company also publishes white papers and guidance documents aimed at specific industries. It also has a dedicated learning resource at <https://palmtoday.org/>.

The company clearly promotes its relevant accreditations and certifications, including RSPO, Rainforest Alliance, POIG and Soil Association. The company has actively made sustainability part of the global brand, so customers and stakeholders immediately know that Daabon is a global leader in sustainable agriculture wherever they encounter the brand.



Soapworks – PR

Soapworks is the UK's premier manufacturer of soaps, cleansing bars and solid hair care. The company was founded by former Body Shop entrepreneur Anita Roddick to bring employment to Easterhouse in Glasgow, and has a strong history of sustainability and ethical business.

Soapworks invests heavily in using their products for the greater good and inspiring positive social change, partnering with charities and NGOs across the globe to provide bar soap to vulnerable communities within Glasgow, throughout the UK and overseas.

It also invests in communicating about sustainability – in a campaign to celebrate the 26th Climate Change Conference (COP26), the company launched a new, sustainable soap bar.

Soapworks were able to successfully communicate their green credentials far and wide and raise awareness about the sustainability benefits of bar format in personal care.



Klarna – financial services

Financial Services provider Klarna is trying to positively influence consumer behaviour through the development of The Klarna Carbon Footprint Tracker.

This was a feature to its service that give users access to carbon footprint insights. To do this, they partnered with Doconomy to give shoppers an average kg CO² value for each purchase – successfully introducing CO² at a global scale and raising awareness about the issue to their vast and diverse demographic.

Klarna.

KTC Edibles – certified sustainable palm oil

KTC Edibles, one of Europe's leading suppliers of edible oils and fats, has been actively looking to drive its customers to more sustainable solutions.

As part of this process the company committed to using only certified sustainable palm oil in all its products, and launched a range of certified sustainable, Identity Preserved palm oil products, offering full traceability back to the plantations.

To support the launch of these products, it developed a new oils and fats website with a dedicated sustainability section. The company runs an ongoing PR campaign, providing thought leadership and opinion pieces on sustainability to key industry titles.



Moving forwards

So, how do businesses begin their sustainability comms journey?

Investment and commitment to sustainability are key. Business owners should start by first familiarising themselves with current legislation or regulatory information, and read around key issues such as Net Zero and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

This provides a foundation from which to create achievable goals, such as reducing carbon emissions and can help guide organisations towards supporting certain charities that relate to, or are affected by their services or operations.

Efeca's Sustainable Commodities Resource Hub is a great place to start. This online platform is a central hub of information, tools and resources to help your business source sustainable and legal commodities – especially those that can be linked to deforestation and conversion of natural habitats, such as palm oil and soya.

Sustainable sourcing of agricultural and forest risk commodities is our area of expertise, and we believe it's important for businesses who rely on these products to highlight and communicate the links between them and climate change.

One way of doing this would be to draw links between our consumption choices of food and non-food products and the impact on the planet, or by connecting sustainable production and land use to the reduction of carbon emissions and global warming.

Procurement is central to this, so examining the supply chain and replacing outdated or inefficient practices is an excellent place to start. This allows you to identify the biggest sources of carbon emissions, and communicate with your audience what you're doing to change this.

Additional information can be found at
www.efeca-resource-hub.com

About Efeca

Efeca provides specialised advice on responsible sourcing, sustainable trade and use of agricultural and forest commodities. A Tropical Forest Alliance partner, World Economic Forum preferred supplier, a UN Global Compact signatory and Accountability Framework initiative coalition member, our team of technical experts has worked with a wide range of clients across public, private, finance and civil society sectors.

Efeca has accumulated broad experience working in over 30 countries, across agricultural and forest risk commodities including palm oil, soya, timber, pulp and paper, beef and leather (cattle), sugar, coffee, cocoa and rubber.