



SUSTAINABILITY: BUZZWORD OR BENEFIT?



YellowBrick.



Isobel Smyth
Consulting

What exactly does sustainability mean to businesses?

It is such a media buzzword, such a catch all for what is often a complex set of actions and initiatives that it is in danger of becoming meaningless.

For every business and organisation making headway on sustainable practices there is another jumping on the bandwagon; talking up a storm but failing to deliver. Tellingly, 'greenwashing' has made it into our everyday vernacular.

In the course of writing this article and in our daily lives, we have seen numerous expressions of sustainability claims by businesses. It is clear that environmental and ethical impacts are complex and often lumped together. Long term can either mean a business fit for the future to last the distance or aspirations for climate change, social change and more. Employee rights and benefits jostle for attention alongside transparently sourced ingredients.

Frankly it is a muddle. And it seems that often what we used to call CSR has been hijacked and repurposed to represent something more 'on trend'. Businesses are confusing their intentions and whilst sustainability is a core part of CSR – it isn't the only message.



This blurring of lines and inconsistency of approach makes engaging consumers a challenge

If we as marketers and business drivers are not clear about the sustainability measures and messages in our organisations and can't easily articulate the positive outcomes of the steps being taken, how on earth can the average consumer keep up?



Making it important and persuasive for consumers

The media is filled with reports of people moving towards 'more conscious choices'. There are some convincing stats around ethical consumption, which has soared in the past years to reach an all-time high during the pandemic. In the UK alone, ethical consumer spending has increased fourfold in the past 20 years to hit approximately £41bn according to the [Co-op's Ethical Consumerism report](#).

The [BBC recently cited an Accenture study](#) that has been globally tracking consumers throughout the pandemic. The [study](#) reveals a distinct segment of younger, more affluent consumers for whom sustainability is a key driver to purchase. But this is only a small proportion of the population. How do we gain traction with the rest of the world?

The issues are wider than single use plastic

The average person is not a sophisticated ethical consumer. We have seen in the course of our work that for many people sustainability mostly means avoiding plastic, opting for recyclable packaging, and perhaps boycotting products with palm oil. This drive to 'save the planet' has been successfully enforced and reinforced by David Attenborough and a raising of the agenda politically, and FMCG has seen some headway in this area.

But ethical consumption is not equally distributed; arguably the fashion industry lags far behind despite clear efforts, using misleading terminology and hiding behind labels and claims that could be misconstrued. Let's face it, the need to protect the planet and act responsibly in terms of global community is not new news! However, the appetite to take it on board more consistently is.

There is an opportunity now to educate on the breadth of the issues at hand and why this should be important to consumers.



The intention : action gap

People want to be seen to be doing the right thing. In research we see this all the time; people make claims that they are concerned and active, whilst in reality their choices are driven by economy or by specific product attributes. The practical and the emotional wins of buying 'green' may also be at odds, the battle that exists between head and heart.

This is a complex decision process that consumers navigate and what is true for one category (ethical consumption of coffee, I am doing my bit) may not apply to others (I want a clean oven even if the products are not good for the environment) and may be offset in their minds by another behaviour (at least I don't buy bottled water).

This 'personal sustainability offsetting' is at the heart of the conundrum. We may know it is right to choose the brand with the positive legacy at heart but if it doesn't appear to offer similar levels of benefit to current choices, how much compromise can we expect people to make?

Wallet watch out

Regardless of how ethical the operation, how clean the product process, how renewable the energy or ingredients or committed the consumer, whether we like it or not there is a global economic crisis going on and that cannot be ignored. People's ability to shop consciously may be impacted if there is a premium price tag attached, and now more than ever brands need to be able to clearly and succinctly articulate their advantages.



Demonstrating sustainability – a compelling dialogue

If you are going to great pains to make fundamental changes to your business to become more sustainable, demonstrating and communicating those actions in an easy to digest way is essential.

- 1. Be clear what you mean as a business about sustainability.** If you haven't got an elevator pitch that you believe in – you haven't got it right yet
- 2. Boldly state your aspirations and actions in terms that mean something to people not in your industry.** Measure and track them
- 3. Identify the most important thing to communicate to the consumers of your business.** Perhaps packaging and plastic is the biggest issue? Or sustainable core products as an ingredient and supporting farmers/minimising impact on the environment as a justification?
 - Which of your initiatives will make the biggest difference to your consumers when they are conducting 'personal offsetting'?
- 4. Build sustainable measures into the interaction with your products or services** e.g. use or disposal of packaging such as paper gin bottles
- 5. Reframe CSR.** The very terminology of 'responsibility' sounds reactive and like an obligation not a proactive approach to working practices between the organisation and the wider world
- 6. Authenticity in everything you do is still the mantra.** And be transparent in all of your dealings
- 7. Finally take the long term view and avoid passing on the costs of adapting business processes to the consumer.** This is an investment in the future of your business and the future of us all

