

# **Sustainable Branding:** **A Comparative Analysis of** **Industry-Specific Approaches** **in Advertising**

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Account Planning

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# Executive Summary

Environmental issues in the 21st century have been a constant topic of conversation relating to politics, economics, and broader social issues. To compensate for the planet's decline in clean air and accelerated rates of global warming, the business world has developed strategies to ease the minds of environmentally conscious consumers. Industry-specific approaches in advertising vary in strategy but can be closely connected through the use of marketing products and services as eco-friendly. Industry-specific advertising approaches vary in strategy but can be closely connected through marketing products and services as eco-friendly.

This consumer insights paper delves into the ideas behind green marketing, the negative impacts of greenwashing, industry-specific advertising strategies and examples, consumer demographics and psychographics, and a focus on ESG (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance) and the social impacts of green approaches to advertising.

After conducting a comparative analysis of industry-specific approaches to green advertising, relevant recommendations for these approaches have been determined. With an increase in companies creating false narratives about the sustainability of their brands in recent decades, ethical approaches to sustainable branding should be at the forefront of any strong campaign. Companies must prioritize transparency and education regarding product ingredients, sourcing, and production methods, including sharing sustainability progress. Engaging in greenwashing can harm the brand's reputation and consumer trust making it crucial to set realistic goals and avoid ambiguous language. It can also be determined that companies should communicate sustainability efforts tailored to resonate with target audiences.

Furthermore, companies should analyze the financial and societal benefits of sustainable practices to develop an understanding of their impact and drive brand growth. Overall, after exploring sustainability in advertising, we can conclude that despite its challenges investing in eco-friendly practices can help your company or business gain a competitive edge and achieve new levels of success.





# Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to better understand how to effectively use sustainability as a strategy to increase brand value. Problems in sustainability occur when companies use tactics like greenwashing which misleads the public to believe that a company or business utilizes environmentally friendly practices when in reality they are not. This topic is important to study because greenwashing and unethical environmental practices are taking away consumers' trust, as well as devastating future generations, and the health of our planet. Without a healthy planet, you can't have a healthy business (Unilever, 2023).

Sustainability enhances advertising and marketing efforts by setting a company apart from its competitors and making its products or services more attractive to consumers. It also helps brands by creating a more authentic brand image, consumers will be more willing to create long-lasting relationships since they value them. However, there are some concerns when sustainability in advertising is not used ethically: for example, when companies overstate their sustainability efforts, make false claims in advertising, or focus only on one or two initiatives (Steinhausen, 2023). If sustainability is not addressed properly consequences like global warming and a population decline.

When businesses and the government practice sustainability, it creates a ripple effect on individuals and communities to do the same (Coursera, 2023). A sustainable market helps align economic and financial incentives, as well as standards and regulations to promote universal access to a large inventory of affordable and sustainable products (Toyota, 2018). An example of a brand that hasn't used sustainability properly is Sun Bum, who claimed its product was reef-safe when it was damaging the ecosystem (Balasubramanyam, 2014). However, with the resources available today, companies should be proactively implementing long-term sustainability goals to avoid being called out for greenwashing.

Environmental, Social, Governance, or ESG helps connect the landscapes of finance and business. It's a tool used by investors to help determine how companies implement solutions to environmental issues as well as corporate social responsibility (CSR). However, it comes with difficulties due to values being a hard characteristic to measure. One major problem companies face is not from the sustainable actions themselves, but rather the messaging that is being used for target audiences. According to NYU Stern's recent research, companies can confidently implement sustainable practices while also improving consumer loyalty and brand image, among many other factors that will benefit them and our planet in the long run.

This paper will discuss the complicated landscape of ethical advertising, focusing on crucial aspects such as green marketing, the prevalence of greenwashing, and the critical need for sustainability in various industries. It navigates the difficulties of consumer expectations, industry practices, and the ongoing ESG controversy, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities faced by advertisers in today's socially conscious marketplace. The authors also provide recommendations to advertisers and the steps they need to take in order to address and correct green washing and practice ethical green marketing.

# Green Marketing

## What is Green Marketing?

Green marketing is the practice of creating a brand based on sustainability and promoting products and services that are eco-friendly. In recent decades green marketing has become a prominent marketing strategy for various large companies. During the 21st century, there has been a heightened interest in environmentally responsible behavior, due to the current environmental threats facing our planet (Correia et al., 2023). The overall benefits of investing in green marketing include increased consumer loyalty, positive brand reputation, and positive environmental impacts.

Some of the largest manufacturers of green marketing in today's market are Johnson & Johnson, Toyota Prius, Jamie Oliver, Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's, Method Products, Whole Foods, Patagonia, and Timberland. The major factors driving the growth of the green marketing market are applications such as health, food & agriculture, natural resources, and industrial processing ("Green Marketing Market," 2023).



## Greenwashing

The popularity of green marketing strategies by companies across various industries has not been without its negative implications. The main consequence of the influx of green marketing campaigns in recent decades is “greenwashing.” Greenwashing is a type of marketing spin in which a company or organization uses deceptive advertising to persuade the public that its products, services, and or policies are eco-friendly. To gain a competitive edge and appeal to an environmentally conscious audience, many companies have utilized green marketing despite not having evidence of their sustainable practices.

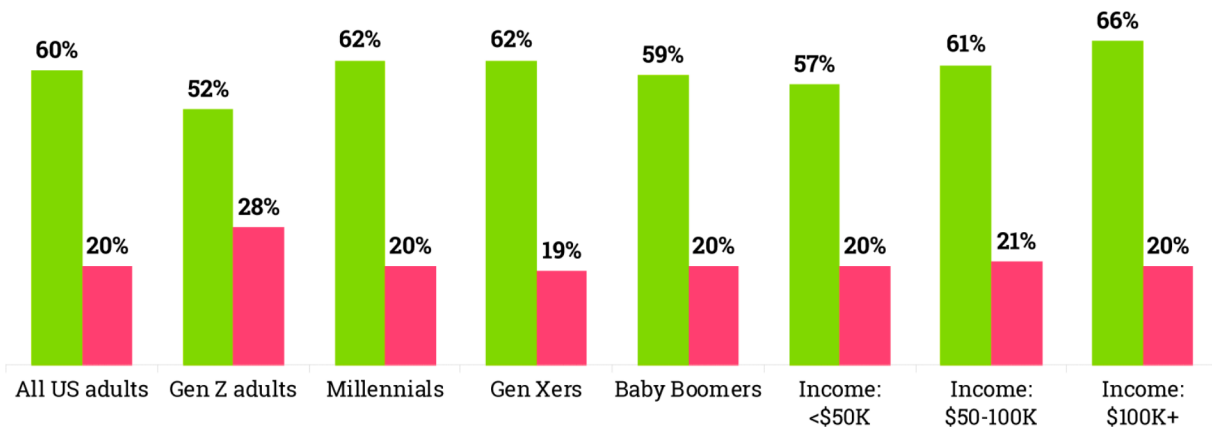
Greenwashing can affect a company’s credibility, profitability, and often result in ethical harm (Szabo and Webster, 2021). The bar graph below depicts the attitudes of different generations towards green marketing and their trust in brands’ sustainability claims.

### Trust in Brands' Sustainability Claims

"Shares who said they generally trust that products or services marked as sustainable are actually sustainable"



■ Yes, definitely / Yes, probably ■ No, definitely not / No, probably



Published on MarketingCharts.com in October 2022 | Data Source: Morning Consult

Based on a July survey of 2,210 US adults / Excludes "don't know / no opinion" responses

As shown above, adults of Generation Z are the least trusting of brands’ sustainability claims. Recent studies show that younger adults are more skeptical of companies that use green marketing strategies because of their deeper concern for climate change and unsustainable practices. Generation Z also has a large social media presence, making them more likely to keep up with social media news giving them a higher awareness of when a brand or company is exposed for false advertising or greenwashing (Lupis, 2022).



## Environmental Impacts and Sustainability

Green marketing encourages companies to develop sustainable practices and minimize negative environmental impacts. Sustainable practices include eco-friendly packaging, promoting energy-efficient practices (using renewable energy sources in production), and emphasizing transparency (to avoid miscommunication and greenwashing) (“Green Marketing,” 2023). The main con and biggest challenge in green marketing is balancing profit and sustainability. Implementing sustainable practices can initially increase production costs leading to financial burdens, which is why companies must find a solution to make these practices financially feasible (“Green Marketing,” 2023).

For instance, the clothing company Patagonia uses friendly materials in its products and often promotes its products as sustainable. The company is known for having a line of pricy items due to its commitment to environmentally friendly practices. Companies must decide if the positive environmental impacts of green marketing practices outweigh the cost of investing in sustainable practices. Ultimately, green marketing must be founded on actual environmental activities to avoid greenwashing (Ramakrishnan, 2023).



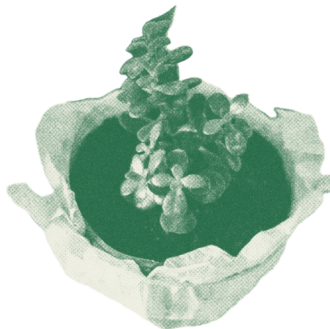
# Specific Insights Into Sustainable Advertising Failures

## Food Industry

Various packaging materials contain chemical compositions that influence the safety and quality of the food we consume (Claudio, 2021). Despite being perceived as a more sustainable option, even glass packaging poses risks due to the presence of harmful chemicals. Recent research conducted by Environmental Geochemistry at the University of Heidelberg, Germany revealed alarming levels of lead in glass water bottles, surpassing those found in plastic water bottles by 26-57 times (Claudio, 2021). Despite this, companies advertise packaged water as a sustainable choice for hydration.

## Beauty Industry

Many beauty brands market their products as “clean”, containing endocrine active substances. While consumers are encouraged to use sunscreen for cancer protection, certain chemicals in these products pose a threat to the environment and human health. The brands Supergoop, Sunbum, Australian Gold, and Coppertone contain endocrine disruptors and claim to be reef-safe. However, they still contain chemicals that contribute to reef bleaching. While these companies may replace one harmful ingredient, they fail to thoroughly assess the environmental impact of all ingredients. The beauty industry is full of products and brands that claim environmental cleanliness by merely substituting one chemical, rather than overhauling the entire formula for safety.



## Fashion Industry

The fashion industry churns out over 100 billion clothing items annually, a trend that has exacerbated climate change and positioned the clothing sector as a significant contributor to environmental issues (Nhangkar, 2022). While some leading clothing companies have shifted towards more sustainable production methods, others such as H&M and Zara, have faced allegations of greenwashing (Nhangkar, 2022). Nearly 90 percent of H&M's sustainability claims were found to be innaccurate (Westwater, 2021), leading to numerous class action lawsuits filed by disillusioned consumers. The surge in legal actions has prompted the Federal Trade Commission to reavulte its policies and hold the fashion indistry accountable (West, 2023).

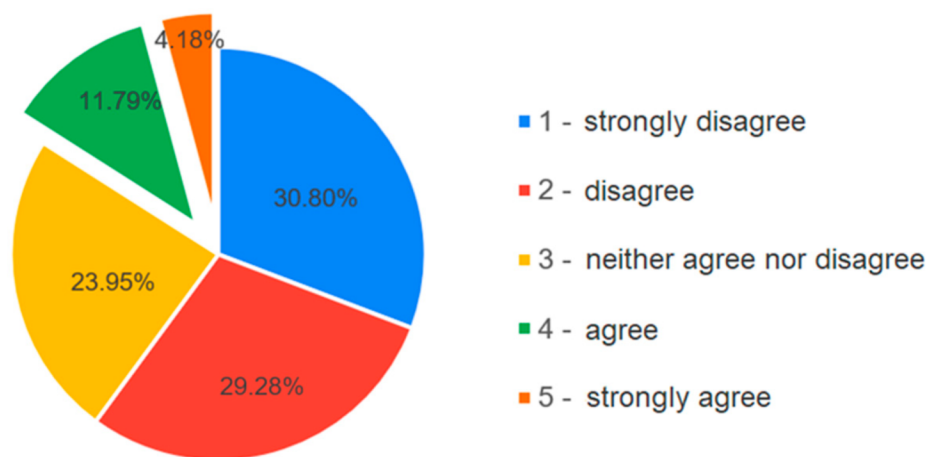




## Regional and Cultural Differences

In the modern landscape of consumerism, sustainability has proven to be a significant concern for a large portion of the world. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the environmental and social impact of their purchasing decisions, gravitating towards sustainable and eco-friendly brands (Aflac, 2016). While the demand for sustainability is apparent, the approach to effectively engage consumers can vary greatly based on their demographics and psychographics. Companies not only must meet sustainability standards but also create an authentic relationship with their customers. Seventy-five percent of consumers prioritize sustainability, with 62% actively seeking sustainable products (Ruiz, 2023). While these statistics provide important insights into consumer values, it is important to recognize the diversity of the consumer's preferences based on demographics and psychographics.

Before buying an item of clothing, I search for information about the fashion brand's sustainability policies, practices, and reputation but this is not a key factor in my decision.



Different regions have different attitudes towards sustainability which shows how complex consumer behavior is. For example, Chinese and Brazilian consumers show a higher likelihood of adopting sustainable practices when compared to countries like Japan and the United States (Ruiz, 2023). These differences show the importance of tailoring marketing strategies to specific cultural contexts. Psychographics also play an important role in understanding consumers and their motivations. While some consumers prioritize sustainability for ethical reasons, others may be driven by the desire for personal health benefits or social status.

## Long-Term Brand Value v. Short-Term Profit

Incorporating sustainability into business practices is not only morally important but can act as a strategic investment in long-term brand value. Companies may face pressures to prioritize short-term profits, however, research shows that sustainable practices yield significant benefit in the long run (Aflac, 2016). Implementing various environmentally sustainable measures can lead to cost savings and more effective operations, helping a company to stay competitive. A 2020 survey by IBM found that 57% of consumers are willing to change their purchasing habits to support environmental conservation efforts (Zoe Talent Solutions, 2023). This highlights the potential for companies to combine profitability with sustainability goals, creating value for both society and the businesses themselves. Prioritizing long-term brand value over short-term profit is important for a shift towards transparent and authentic communication. By aligning business strategies with consumer values, companies can create trust and loyalty between themselves and their consumers creating strong brand relationships.

## Consumer Craving for Authenticity: Creating Trust and Loyalty

Authenticity is critical for sustainable brand relationships, creating trust and loyalty between companies and their consumers. Consumers value genuine engagement and communication from companies and can distinguish genuine efforts from marketing ploys. Despite the recognition of the importance of corporate responsibility, many consumers are skeptical when it comes to companies' motives. While many consumers believe that companies pursue sustainability efforts for selfless reasons, a large proportion see it as a strategic tool for improving their public image (Afonso, 2012). This shows the need for companies to bridge the gap between perception and reality by showing authenticity in their actions and communications. To create authentic relationships, companies must integrate sustainability into core business practices, create transparency, and actively engage with stakeholders. By demonstrating genuine commitment to environmental and social responsibility, companies can forge meaningful connections with consumers, driving loyalty and advocacy.

# Connecting Sustainability and ESG

After evaluating a variety of industries, to which sustainable practices are not limited, marketers should begin to recognize that corporate sustainability can be examined from both a company and investor perspective (Whelan, 2023). Environmental, social, and governance (ESG), bridges this gap by linking financial value to social responsibility (Gigauri and Vasilev, 2023). This innovative approach to sustainable investing emerged in the early 2000s, (Fulton et al., 2012) and has become a leading strategy globally. However, ESG efforts have slipped on corporate priority lists due to tougher economic conditions (Day, 2023). In the US, the backlash against ESG and the 2024 presidential election poses hurdles (Malone et al. 2024). Whereas in places like Europe, this practice goes beyond a voluntary approach and is required by regulation (Whelan, 2023).

## The Impacts of ESG

The “E”, “S” and “G” in ESG stand for “environmental”, “social” and “governance,” indicating their roles in contributing to sustainability across environmental, social and governance landscapes. These elements include but are not limited to climate change, renewable energy, sustainable natural resources, organic agriculture, non-GMO, labor conditions, board diversity, corruption and conflict risk (USSIF, 2020). Renewable energy falls under the environmental category of ESG. Whereas ethical responsibility falls under the social category. Board diversity falls under the governance category. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a term used to describe how brands meet these expectations of society and is one of many tactics used by companies (Gigauri and Vasilev, 2023). Overall, CSR helps reflect the idea of ensuring sustainability in business practices and holds companies to higher standards (Delgado-Ceballos et al. 2023).



## The Opportunity: Sustainability Improves the Bottom Line

Companies have recognized that profit-driven missions with little or no regard for society are not the best route, as information about unethical behavior spreads rapidly, and are more often utilizing ESG-based goals. However, corporate managers across many industries – from manufacturing to apparel – are facing a wide range of negative ESG issues. These issues are emphasized by the radical transparency that social media provides, the growing expectation among millennials across the world that corporations be good citizens, and the abdication by the government of their responsibility of taking care of societal goods (Whelan, 2023). Research by NYU Stern suggests that by implementing environmental initiatives and developing products that meet the consumer need for better environmental performance, companies can increase their chances of success in the long-term.



# Recommendations

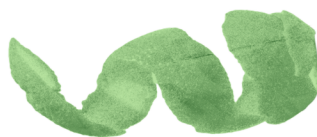
## 1. Be transparent and educate consumers

Be honest and transparent about your product ingredients, sourcing practices, and production methods. Engage with consumers through transparent communication and educational initiatives. Sharing information about your journey to sustainability, challenges, and progress to establish trust between the brand and the community. When a brand establishes trust, consumers become more loyal to the brand and sales increase. These strategies can differentiate your brand from those in the market and contribute positively to environmental sustainability and the establishment of trust.

## 2. Don't make false claims and set reasonable goals

Avoid green marketing strategies if your product or service is not rooted in sustainable practices. Making false claims about your business can lead to greenwashing and harmful backlash; it is better to use an alternate marketing strategy if utilizing green marketing creates a false narrative. It is also encouraged that you avoid greenwashing by association, meaning do not associate your business with a broader environmental movement if the product or service you are promoting is not environmentally friendly. Avoid cherry-picking data and using green images or colors unless your business uses proven sustainable practices, further avoiding accusations of greenwashing. Lastly, using vague language about your business's commitment to sustainability such as "natural" or "organic" without any details to back up these claims can prompt consumers to question the credibility of your brand (Yonkers, 2023).

Ultimately, investing in eco-friendly product production and sustainable practices is highly recommended to increase consumer loyalty and maintain a positive brand image, but companies should avoid green marketing if they do not have the means to create a green brand. Companies should set realistic goals and adopt eco-friendly practices one step at a time, improving the possibility of becoming a fully sustainable brand in the future.



### 3. Create Storytelling with Purpose

When advertising green marketing claims, it is important to make those claims through a story that resonates with target audiences. Consumers don't respond well to scientific jargon like "biodegradable," so you have to position the messaging so that it relates to them. Instead, try a phrase like "our product won't end up back in the air you breathe and water you drink." Another example of this is using the term ESG, as it's associated with negative connotations. A solution is to replace it with the term sustainability, as audiences respond to it better. Rather, to successfully communicate ESG initiatives, brands should take a step back from confusing acronyms and instead focus on storytelling that showcases tangible impact – such as initiatives to increase access to safe drinking water or decarbonize operations – so consumers can visualize efforts that will in turn help advance the movement (Allison, 2023). Brands should also keep in mind that while telling a story, they need to avoid the political angle. Climate change is not a democrat or conservative issue, it's a human issue.

### 4. Quantify Intangible Assets and Values

After analyzing the data collected by the Stern Center for Sustainable Business, it's common for companies to not take initiative due to a lack of measurable resources. To combat this issue it's recommended that companies evaluate themselves using this four step framework. First, identify material and sustainability strategies and practices. Then, determine the potential benefits that might drive financial and societal value from sustainability-focused practices. Thirdly, quantify benefits derived from sustainability practices. Lastly, derive a monetary value for the benefits. This four-step framework is crucial for understanding how sustainable practices can help grow your brand.

### 5. Authentic Integration and Improvement of Sustainability Efforts

Companies should integrate sustainability into all aspects of their operations, from manufacturing processes to sourcing materials, marketing and distribution. The company must conduct an in depth evaluation of supply chains to identify areas that could benefit from improvement and implementation of sustainable practices. Companies should continuously evaluate and improve their sustainability initiatives based on feedback and technological advancements.



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