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From Greenwashing to Greenhushing

Five Guidelines to Embrace Sustainability and Prevent Missteps

THE TAKEAWAY

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(You can read the full article [here.](#))

As greenwashing moves even more into the spotlight with the proposed European Commission Green Claims Directive, brands will have to scrutinize the veracity and language of current environmental claims. Although many may be tempted to shy away from sustainability communications, especially eco-friendly buzzwords on packaging, there's no going back.

Once a brand steps on the pathway of purpose and sustainability, an expectation is set with people, whether they are labelled consumers, employees, investors or other stakeholders.

Today, it's essential that a brand demonstrate it is ceaselessly striving to deliver, even as standards for doing so increase.

When working with brand leaders, I have found the challenge in communicating green initiatives efficaciously lies in the concept that traditional marketing training may not always apply. Sincerity and transparency outweigh positivity, benchmarking against competitors and reflecting consumer desires in messaging. And adopting a sustainability mindset and ethos of citizenship across brand, marketing and communications teams is essential.

Here are 5 guidelines (that take into account elements of the European Commission Green Claims Directive) for CMOs, agencies and other brand leaders to help prevent greenwashing:

1. Develop your brand's sustainability point of view and narrative with transparency, not only positivity, in mind

- Consider if your purpose-driven and sustainability programs are focused on doing no harm – or on doing more good (do the math to identify if you're having a net positive, net zero or net negative impact in each area that's material to perceptions of your brand)
- Bring your audiences along the journey with you, communicating what's validated, evidential and realistic, not an idealized version of reality
- In the same way network and systems security companies sometimes consult with "black hats," cultivate a dialogue with activists and purists, seeking their perspectives and points-of-view on word choice, messaging and activities alongside those of your target market and other audiences

2. Validate all environmental claims by a matter of policy, ensuring they are truthful, accurate, backed-up by scientific evidence and do not mislead or exaggerate the benefits of a product or service

- Use specific, not vague or general, language supported by clear and prominent information on the environmental impact of the product or service
- Avoid using ambiguous terms such as "eco-friendly" or "green" unless your brand can demonstrate a significant environmental benefit when compared with similar products or services in the same category
- Refrain from using iconography on packaging or in other communications (regardless of their visual appeal) that may mislead people about your environmental impact (on a personal sidenote, I'm hopeful we'll develop a standard set of symbols or graphics)

3. Take a systems perspective* on sustainability and doing good that extends beyond your product and immediate area of responsibility

- Make sure “your house is in order” and you don’t have any environment, social or governance vulnerabilities across your organization
- Equate sustainability systems and stakeholder mapping with brand touchpoint mapping, assessing the materiality of all sustainability touchpoints and stakeholders and prioritizing the ones that matter most (being aware of the others helps brands respond more effectively in an unanticipated crisis)
- Only make statements that reflect lifecycle assessments that include the environmental and social impact of an entire product or service, including raw materials, production, use and disposal

*NOTE: A systems perspective is a living hypothesis of relationships/interdependencies and feedback loops, actors and trends. Like touchpoint mapping, systems mapping develops a collective understanding of the larger ecosystem in which your brand operates, pressure points that are material and opportunities for innovation, impact and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

4. Leverage your influence to inspire a sustainability mindset and ethos of citizenship with customers, coworkers and other colleagues

- Integrate sustainability training into brand, marketing and communications teams training and professional development
- Evaluate your investment into sustainability programs (including embedding ESG principles) versus communications and marketing
- Reach out across historical silos and unite people across marketing, sustainability, sourcing, production and delivery channels to cultivate greater understanding of material issues, amplify impact and create greater efficiency

5. Celebrate the progress you are making both internally and externally

- As the landscape of rules and regulations continues to shift, emphasize progress over perfection and, as cliché as it may sound, acknowledge you’re on a continuous journey
- Remember internal understanding and awareness of sustainability and a systems perspective is the first step on the pathway to taking action
- Measure outcomes and impacts as well as outputs to benchmark your brand’s progress and report them broadly so that all stakeholders are part of your journey

To learn more about preventing greenwashing and greenhushing, arrange a training session or get support integrating purpose, sustainability and ESG into brand development and organizational culture, [please reach out](#).