

SUSTAINABILITY

Authentic engagement

AUTHENTIC
ENGAGEMENT

Driving business growth

SUSTAINABILITY | Authentic engagement

Sustainability – Authentic engagement

There's a gold rush on but this time it's green. Over the next 20 years sustainability will be as strong a focus as quality was 25 years ago how will you approach it? Will you be an early adopter or play catch-up? Come across as authentic or a green-wash? Business want to do the right thing and be seen to do the right thing and whilst these are important in and of themselves what's really at issue is growth. Business growth will be in part determined by the perceptions of stakeholders, communities and customers. Direct commercial benefits are increasingly connected to embracing sustainability.

The recent uptick in concern for the environment has been as a result of increased campaigning creating greater awareness of the issues, prominence in the media and even the pandemic re-focussing us all on sustainability matters. That uptick means greater urgency in business engagement with positioning in relation to sustainability. Business are feeling pressure not only from clients and consumers but from government and supply chain partners.

A recent HSBC survey found:

86% of companies expect sustainability performance to boost sales

41% of businesses expect increased growth of up to 5% over the next year due to sustainability performance

28% expect sustainability to boost growth by between 5% and 10%

17% expect sustainability to boost growth in excess of 10%

We explore the most effective ways to ensure that your business presents its most authentic face to the world and achieves cut-through of your environmental messages in a noisy green space...



First things first.

In order to be able to define our environmental credentials to internal or external audiences there are some important areas for research and consideration. Here is our summary of the sustainability ecosystem.

What is sustainability?

The way that most companies enter the sustainability arena is via Energy usage, recycling materials, carbon footprint, water use and net zero emissions. These are the key indicators used by smaller businesses as they begin their environmental journey.

The companies that are most advanced in this area tend to use ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) standards which range much wider and bring with that all the concomitant costs and resource requirements. Whilst ESG certification is a very wide-ranging process of evaluating every aspect of your business there are other standards that focus on a narrower interpretation. The standards are accredited by a burgeoning group of organisations from the UN with their Sustainable Development Goals to the UK Department of the Environment through to the myriad of businesses and organisation that offer accreditation for a fee.

Evaluating Sustainability

The key indicator areas are:

- Energy usage
- Recycling of materials
- Diversity in all levels
- Executive salaries / compensation
- Impacts on local communities
- Carbon footprint
- Net zero emissions in operations across supply chain
- Water use
- Net zero emissions in own operations
- Diversity at board level
- Adopting UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Employee travel / air miles
- Gender pay gap

Accreditation & Authenticity

The accrediting organisations use a of these to evaluate performance and improvement.

There are a range of different paths that a business can travel to bring credibility to their claim to be sustainable or at least to be working hard to achieve a sustainable contribution to the circular economy.

There are three key ways to gain accreditation for your company's environmental performance:

External

1. Accreditation through a full ESG evaluation and change process that may require a change to the governance of the business at a fundamental legal level
2. Accreditation via one of the many sustainability accrediting companies / organisations

Internal

3. Developing the criteria that you will measure yourself against and then undertaking the evaluations to ascertain performance and evidence it.

However a business decides to evidence their environmental credentials there is always a requirement to communicate those credentials to the external world

Communicating your credentials authentically

Beyond the mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of your initiatives there is the question of how to communicate your business intent and motivation. We have gained a number of valuable insights from working with our clients to ensure that there is business as well as environmental benefits to be gained from their initiatives.

1.

Transparency and the courage of our convictions. Companies can be so concerned about getting external messaging wrong that they either do nothing or only undertake the bare minimum of external engagement with their initiatives. *Insight: Openness and transparency (within sensible parameters) combined with a positive but measured tone is a good starting point for building credibility. Don't spin or overclaim.*

2.

Beyond compliance and data. Accreditation is a by-product not an end goal. At best it confirms what you are claiming at worst it is dull and has no heart or human content to connect to and is seen as 'going through the motions'. *Insight: The environment is an emotive subject and a human one match your communications to those drivers. Accreditation can provide commercial advantage in the supply-chain but not always. Be clear as to the actual discernible benefits of the route chosen*

Getting your message across

3.

Tell the story. An extension of insight 2. business can be poor at telling stories. In a data driven environment story telling can be a rare art. People connect with people, stories are memorable (when done well). Data just is. Stories live in the emotional memory. *Insight: Your environmental story is not about you. It is about your audience. What is important to them? What do they **feel** strongly about? What would they **feel** sufficiently engaged with that they would tell others? These are the questions that drive good story.*

4.

Start here. It can take time to develop a really effective set of stories and messaging around your environmental initiatives. Your external audience is not the place to experiment (or guess). Researching your external audience to understand what they want to hear about will take you so far... *Insight: In our experience it is good to combine this research with practical application. Develop engaging stories for your internal audience, it's the perfect place to trial your messages, get feedback, and refine your environmental story.*

5.

Voice. Part of creating the right impact is the voice that is adopted in telling the story and delivering the messages. Who will the audience feel, albeit subliminally, is telling the story or giving them the message? *Insight: Voice or tone of voice is the subliminal influencer in all communication. Our experience with client projects has led us to define voice and tone of voice early in the process it is so vital to success.*

6.

Vehicle. Once you have refined and honed your voice, messages and stories the next decision is what vehicles will communicate them best. *Insight: Without question the most influential of all mediums currently is video. Story telling through video when handled well can generate high levels of engagement, emotional connection and support. It is these outcomes that all our other insights contributes to.*

'If once your audience senses that they are being over-sold... it will be very difficult to win back their trust.'

7.

Openness and honesty. We have featured these values twice. Why? Because without them there is no possibility of your audience believing you are genuine and trustworthy. *Insight: Trying too hard can be mistaken for insincerity. If once your audience senses that they are being over-sold an environmental message it will be very difficult to win back their trust.*

Sustainability and business growth

Which comes first...

Of course business is all about profitability and growth. However it is also true that the pursuit of those things in isolation can lead to negative impacts on society, the environment and on a business.

Our experience is that driving change from a place of integrity and genuine desire to protect the environment brings commercial and business benefits in multiple ways. Growth does not need to be seen just in financial terms. When companies embrace environmental protection and change people grow too. Culture grows, reputation grows, engagement and loyalty grow.

There is of course a caveat. There are some things that need to be carefully planned and executed in order for growth to emerge from sustainability. There must be a genuine desire to do the right thing on the part of the senior management team and board. There must be solid commercial decisions made about costs and resource implications and there must be carefully planned, crafted and communicated messages.

The work we have undertaken to enable our clients to find their authentic voice and craft impactful messages about sustainability informs our thinking.

We do of course do more than just think about sustainability we create communication strategies and campaigns that deliver.

ACQUISITION | Authentic engagement

At **DOWDING** we understand that communication means something slightly different in every new situation. We don't provide one size fits all solutions; we provide solutions tailored to your business and commercial need. We ensure that the communications we create with our clients (not just *for* you) are fresh and effective and reflect the unique DNA of your business.

We offer a flexible service to our clients. For clients in the early stages of growth we bring board level expertise without the costs of a communications director. For larger businesses we bring specialist expertise making it unnecessary to cover the cost of in-house resources on a full-time basis.

Ask us

Why not get in touch and find out how we can provide solutions and support to address your communication challenges.

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