

# FOCUS

For years, sustainability communications has warped the lens to foreground incremental change or token initiatives.

# ON

Now it must reflect — and drive — true impact.

# IMPACT

# FOCUS ON IMPACT

## What to do

### 1 Start with the science

It may seem obvious, but don't get out there unless your story is pinned to a number. This doesn't mean you lead only with metrics – that's a cold dish for most audiences. You'll still need to deploy narrative power, aligned with the values of the people you're looking to reach (see our thinking on [Telling true stories](#) and [Speaking to values](#)). But it must be founded on data – data that can be found without looking too hard.

#### Considerations

- Don't lead with targets alone – always include current metrics for achieved progress
- Consider vivid graphic visualisations of the hard numbers
- Clearly link to the details – and present the data very clearly on online sources

### 2 Foreground true impact

Define what truly sustainable impact looks like for the issue areas you're working in, and track your progress against that threshold. It seems sensible: isn't this what sustainability is supposed to be? But arguably this is the most daunting principle of all because very few businesses are operating within sustainable boundaries. Nevertheless, this is what's demanded of us now. If you start here, you're serving clarity on the issues and building belief in your plans. You're also way ahead of most companies today.

#### Considerations

- Start with how much of your activity nature and society can sustainably carry
- Admit that true mitigated impact is far off – and quantify how you'll get there
- Educate on concepts like the planetary boundaries and tipping points

### 3 Own your trade-offs

Sustainable progress means hard choices. There's an initial cost. You have to prioritise issues. To perform well in one area often comes at a cost to another. Highlight how you approach these trade-offs, and how you'll leverage your strategy for longer term success. It will win trust with your stakeholders – and signal to investors that your transition is serious, and a long game.

#### Considerations

- Openly hold up two possible directions and highlight why you chose the path you did
- Concede the cost of this choice
- Address how you might, over time, address the other side of this trade-off

### 4 Tell on yourself

If you do poorly against your material issues, be honest. Get out there with that story, in appropriate channels. This honesty nourishes your brand health. It advances the conversation. It galvanises employees. And we only move forward together if we can all see how we're doing. Anything less will be called out, sooner or later.

#### Considerations

- Choose a particularly stubborn issue area for your sector (e.g. energy use for data storage) and highlight how and why even your best efforts have not yet addressed them
- Assume a tone of humility as you outline areas of failure
- Speak to what you'll be trying next

**Sustainability comms has long been plagued by vague, indefinite claims. Progress has been pinned to arbitrary targets – like past performance – not a truly sustainable level of impact.**

#### Incremental progress

For example, if you previously used 7,200 litres of water to manufacture a pair of jeans, and now use just 2,000, you're still a long way from a safe operating boundary. It's this boundary that's actually sustainable.

A new set of indicators will track this kind of measure: the UN Sustainability Development Performance Indicators (SDPIs). These are calibrated by ecological normative thresholds (how much impact on water, emissions, chemicals and so on defines a safe operating space on natural and social systems).

These kinds of indicators will gain ground. Deeper, more objective substantiation will be the standard for everything we say about sustainability going forward.

#### Token initiatives

It's a well-worn sleight of hand to focus on a small corner of a business and make a lot of noise about it. Think paper straws at a fast-food giant, or a single sneaker made of ocean plastic among hundreds of a brand's collection. These often have little to do with the impact of the overall business model.

#### New guidelines

New regulations like the Green Claims Code and the ASA CAP guidance in the UK, FTC guidance in the US and the EU Green Claims Directive are targeting arbitrary, token initiatives.

They focus on real impact – a well-substantiated picture, in proper context – and give legal teeth to rising media and public sentiment and represent the direction of travel for all sustainability comms. Offsets are under fire. Vague language is called out. Players big and small are being taken to task.

**This changes the game, leading us to entirely different first principles when building comms campaigns.**