

# Sustainability: The New Communications Imperative

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- by [Shelly Schroedl](#) , 96 minutes ago

Eco-consciousness got a boost in 2017, fueled by events ranging from the debate over U.S. participation in the Paris climate accord to the viral video of a starving polar bear. U.S. Millennials, long recognized as the most sustainability-conscious generation, are growing even more sensitive to the issue, and a 2017 sustainability study by The Hartman Group found that the number of consumers across all segments who prioritize sustainability purchasing is up significantly.

For many CPG brands, the question is no longer whether to start communicating their commitment to sustainability, but how. Here are some thought starters for consideration.

## **1. Touting a product's earth-friendly packaging is no longer enough.**

An earlier Hartman study found that modern shoppers view sustainable packaging as a simple measure open to all brands; essentially, it's become a minimal requirement that is to be expected rather than commended. Brands need to think beyond packaging and its disposal and consider the environmental impacts throughout a product's life cycle as the product is sourced, manufactured, and sold.

And today's consumers see sustainability as extending to also include labor practices and animal welfare. Nespresso's recent sustainability program, "The Choices We Make," recognizes this and shares specifics on how a community coffee mill it built in Colombia not only delivers a better-quality, more eco-friendly product, but helps farmers save time and get paid faster as well.

## **2. It's not you, it's me.**

As brands begin to socialize their sustainability efforts, they need to take care not to talk about their initiatives without explaining the added value sustainability brings to consumers personally (beyond the gratification of "doing the right thing"). This seems obvious, but it's surprising how often it's missing from the story.

Tide gets it right, ensuring consumers know that its cold water formula not only gets clothes clean at low temperatures, but lets them use half the energy per load. And if a product's sustainability comes without trade-offs, that should be made clear as well. Take a cue from Method's "Fear No Mess" campaign, which emphasizes product performance through various torture test messes and introduces sustainability only in its "Clean Ingredients for Dirty Play" tagline.

## **3. Show, don't simply tell.**

With the growing prevalence of greenwashing, it's no wonder a 2017 Iconoculture survey found that U.S. Millennials are confused and skeptical about sustainability claims. And third-party credentialing isn't a guarantee of clarity and credibility: a survey by the World Resources Institute identified more than 600 different green labels worldwide that dispatch some sort of eco-benchmark. Rather than helping consumers make better choices, the explosion of certifying organizations has instead contributed to eco-confusion and distrust.

Consequently, it's more important than ever to keep it simple, tangible, and transparent. On its website, Reformation, an L.A.-based fashion company, offers what it calls a "RefScale," an online feature that tells consumers the carbon dioxide, water, and waste savings for each of its garments.

Tom's of Maine lets consumers see its progress on sustainability goals with a pictorial view of their commitment against a timeline, in areas ranging from energy and waste to employee participation in company-sponsored volunteering. Others are walking the talk with financial demonstrations of their sustainability commitment: Patagonia donated 100% of its Black Friday 2016 sales to grass roots environmental organizations, and in 2017, Mars announced an eye-popping \$1 billion pledge to fight climate change.

#### **4. Give consumers a place to start.**

When asked in an Iconoculture survey what prevents them from being more actively involved in sustainability, U.S. Millennials said that the lack of knowledge about what they can do to make a difference was as important a factor as the perceived additional expense of sustainable choices. It's easy for consumers to feel overwhelmed about the many actions they're supposed to take; remember that even figuring out how to recycle or safely dispose of products can be daunting.

Recognizing this, brands are increasingly using the How2Recycle label to explain what to do with their packaging or unused product. Some brands are combining sustainability education with entertainment, such as Chipotle's "Food With Integrity" initiative, offering video and game downloads and an educational platform that invites action.

Increasingly, it's becoming clear that sustainability isn't just the right thing for CPG brands to do; it's also good business. Unilever, for example, has reported that those of its brands that had integrated sustainability into both their purpose and products have grown 30% faster than the rest of the business. As we head into 2018, it's time for CPG brands to bring the sustainability efforts buried in their social responsibility reports into their consumer communications. When they do, it will be a win-win for all.