Sustainability Is More Than a Big Leafy Green Picture

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As businesses attempt to navigate the incredibly complex, fragmented and increasingly regulated sustainability landscape, they all too often opt for a “leave no trace” approach. This is because the issue is all at once highly prioritized and also highly scrutinized, from consumers to C-suites. As a result, organizations often delegate it to the responsibility of sustainability silos, failing to meaningfully tie major efforts to the mainstays of their brands and ultimately leaving no impression and no impact.

Simply put, brands aren’t showing up to get attribution for their action.

With brands cowering behind sustainability tropes (i.e.: the babbling brook, leafy green forest) or in the shadow of their logos, the message gets lost. When deploying those obvious green tropes, we’re inadvertently saying that this product is “for” people who deeply care about sustainability. In doing so, we risk alienating a bigger group of people who often believe that a product being sustainable also means that there is a negative trade-off on another element such as taste, price or quality.

When we integrate sustainability into the brand story, we open

ourselves up to more interesting design opportunities that feel intrinsic to the brand and don’t risk alienating broader audiences.

Businesses still need to show and tell in equal measure

Consider these facts: 92% of CEOs remain in support of their ESG programs with nearly three-in-four (72%) saying they have modified their approach to talk less and listen more closely to stakeholders to decide when and where to engage.

What’s more, 9-in-10 marketers agree that sustainability agendas must be more ambitious and 94% say marketers need to act more bravely and experiment to drive transformative change. This is reflected in more brands now having sustainability as a KPI in their marketing dashboards, up from 26% in 2021 to 43% in 2023.

But in the race to get something out there, amidst this baton drop, we forget our expertise as marketers in translating our credentials into compelling stories.

We do ourselves a disservice if we don’t think about how our brand might distinctively communicate sustainability (i.e. taking into consideration the channel, the category, our brand’s unique positioning and our audiences).

Sustainability at the heart of the business

The sustainability story can be carefully set as part of a narrative and values that are already known amongst a brand’s audience.

Nespresso needed a new identity to tell the story of its future as well as its commitment to responsible sourcing. It

avoids all the typical ‘tropes’ of sustainability, i.e. green leaves and Earth motifs. Instead, it uses a confident monogram as a seal of quality and reassurance of responsibility, set against a natural canvas, further elevating the brand’s role in delivering a high-quality brand experience that is imbued with sustainability credentials, including B-Corp certification that it is working hard to maintain and evolve.

Guinness Clear uses the brand’s unique tone of voice and place in culture to bring warmth and connectivity to an otherwise wagging finger “drink responsibly” mandatory CSR message, It successfully showed up during the Six Nations rugby fixtures and again over Christmas, without dampening the mood.

Lego uses the same authentic human language of its “Together we can rebuild the world” brand campaign to convey its corporate sustainability commitments. As a result, it stays true to the optimism of the product and category while communicating to a broader audience.

Another solid example is AWA by Magnum, which serves as a way for the brand to bring the cocoa-sourcing story closer to people via an engaging platform. It is born from the insight that outside of the farming season, women in cocoa communities must seek alternative ways to create income. Local community programs that promote creativity, craft and financial independence are funded and their work is showcased via the AWA platform, which uses the rich visual and verbal brand world of Magnum as the basis for expression.

Find the point of maximum impact

To evolve a sustainability journey, brands need to bring together data-led materiality and brand-building principles to create a holistic assessment of a business and its brands’ role in society against a commercial backdrop. In short, leveraging how you add value as a business to add value beyond it.

A targeted approach that tackles the above unlocks the sustainability opportunity for all brands committed to the journey. It maintains relevance in peoples' lives and broader business culture now and in the future.

This is all to say that brand and sustainability are not only intrinsic to each other's success; they have the answers the other is looking for. Brands can potentially be epic storytellers thanks to evidence and data backing sustainability efforts. But no one can listen if they don't have access to the most compelling aspects of the narrative across audiences.

However, when these two disciplines are brought together, they can simultaneously drive value for each other and deliver sustainability stories that are all at once clear, connected and credible.

So, suppose the biggest challenge facing sustainability today is a brand challenge. In that case, that may also be the perfect rallying cry for marketers to leverage the brilliant minds of sustainability peers and overlay with consumer and cultural needs to fuel creative problem-solving. This will help create an emotional connection with stakeholders and ultimately, build confidence in where a brand concentrates.

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