

Module 7: Public Relations

Lesson 3 - Sustainability

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will gain an understanding of how sustainability efforts companies across all industries. Students will also identify ways a business or brand approaches sustainability from a marketing and public relations perspective.

OBJECTIVES

1. Explain what sustainability means in business.
2. Describe why public relations is important to a business or brand's sustainability initiatives.
3. Describe the concept of greenwashing.

KEY TERMS

Greenwashing

Sustainability

This Lesson Bundle Includes:

- Sustainability - Lesson Outline
- Sustainability - Presentation Slides
- Industry Application - Related Links
- Discussion Deck - Earth Day, Sustainability in Marketing, and Greenwashing
- Student Activity - Sustainability

Lesson 3 - Sustainability



DISCUSSION

- What do you think of when you hear a business or brand talking about “going green” or reducing their carbon footprint?
- How do sustainability issues impact you as a consumer?
- Do you think businesses and brands have a responsibility to invest in sustainability? Why or why not?

SUSTAINABILITY

What is Sustainability?

Sustainability refers to an approach to business where a company conducts its business in a way that minimizes any adverse impact on the environment or on society as a whole. When you hear terms like “reducing the carbon footprint” or a business “going green”, the implication is that they are focusing on sustainability.

The concept of sustainability is not just ethical or an issue for organizations prioritizing corporate responsibility, it can be beneficial to companies from a business perspective.

Consider the following statistics from [Forbes](#):

- 92% of consumers say they’re more likely to trust brands that are environmentally or socially conscious.
- 88% of consumers will be more loyal to a company that supports social or environmental issues.
- 87% of consumers would buy a product with a social and environmental benefit if given the opportunity.

Specifically, companies can see benefits across the board by going green, including areas like sales, brand loyalty, productivity, employee satisfaction, and cost savings:

- Sales: Overall sales revenue can increase up to [20%](#) due to corporate responsibility practices.
- Productivity: Employees at eco-friendly companies are [16%](#) more productive than average.
- Employee satisfaction: [38%](#) of employees are more likely to be loyal to a company that prioritizes sustainability.
- Brand loyalty: [77%](#) of consumer products and retail organizations found that sustainability leads to increases in customer loyalty.
- Cost savings: According to one study, more than [25%](#) of businesses experienced cost savings by investing in sustainability.



This is where marketing, advertising, and public relations come into play. It isn't enough for a business to prioritize sustainability in its overall business planning, it is also important that the company communicate that information to consumers, media, and influencers.

Not only do businesses and brands create opportunities to benefit from green initiatives, but they can also encourage action from consumers and the general public that can lead to improved environmental conditions.

Today's consumers consciously look for brands with values that align with their own. According to a Harris Poll [survey](#) commissioned by Google Cloud, 66% of shoppers seek out eco-friendly brands. It is important for businesses and brands to communicate their efforts to reduce environmental impact. Consumers make decisions about which brands to support and products to purchase based on how corporate or brand values align with their own values. This is why many brands use Earth Day as a time of year to promote their green initiatives and sustainability efforts.



DISCUSSION

How do businesses and brands communicate sustainability efforts? Review the “Earth Day Marketing” discussion deck in class, and discuss how brands have aligned with the holiday to communicate the brand’s position on environmental issues. You will also explore the concept of greenwashing as part of the discussion.



“Going Green”

So how do businesses and brands “go green” by investing in sustainability? There are a variety of practices that a business or brand can engage in to become more environmentally friendly.

- Investment in renewable energy
 - [Renewable energy](#) comes from sources that can naturally be replenished.
 - Solar energy from the sun
 - Wind energy
 - Hydropower from flowing water
 - Biomass from plants
 - Geothermal energy from the heat inside the earth
- Reduction of carbon footprint
 - Energy use typically equates to roughly half of a company’s overall carbon footprint, so cutting back on energy bills can drastically reduce its negative impact on the environment.
 - Cutting unnecessary travel can help reduce a carbon footprint while also reducing costs incurred by the business.
 - Minimizing water consumption is becoming increasingly important as water reservoirs become depleted, draughts become more prevalent, and overall water levels continue to rapidly decline.
- Recycling
- Repurposing of materials
- Packaging
 - Re-examining existing packaging strategies to find more sustainable alternatives
 - Not only can improved packaging have a positive impact on the environment, but it can also improve brand affinity and potentially increase sales.



86% of consumers among younger generations (under the age of 45) would be willing to pay more for sustainable packaging



57% of all consumers are "less likely" to buy products in harmful packaging



74% of consumers say they would be interested in buying products that come in refillable packaging



68% of consumers have chosen a product in the last six months based on its sustainability credentials

SOURCE: Trivium Packaging 2022 Global Buying Green Report

There are smaller things that require minimal effort and investment that a business can do to become more eco-friendly such as:

- Paying bills online to reduce paper consumption
- Encouraging employees to bike, walk, carpool, or use public transportation to cut down on emissions
- Involving employees in eco-friendly projects like tree planting
- Providing opportunities for employees to work remotely

“Going Green” Examples:

Coca-Cola Company

- In 2022, Coca-Cola [announced](#) that Sprite would no longer be packaged in its iconic green bottles, replacing it with a more useful recyclable material with clear packaging featuring a more prominent “Recycle Me” messaging.
 - Other Coca-Cola Company brand beverages will also transition to more sustainable packaging, including Fresca, Seagram’s, Mello Yello, and Dasani will be made from 100 percent recycled plastic (excluding the caps and labels)

Nike

- Since 2012, Nike has kept more than 3.5 million pounds of waste from reaching landfills in 2012 by reducing the amount of raw materials used and labor time necessary to manufacture its shoes, according to [Fortune](#). The company now uses primarily recycled materials to produce most of its products.

United Airlines

- Airlines account for [2.5 percent](#) of all emissions contributions to climate change, according to a study in the journal Atmospheric Environment. To help reduce its emissions, United Airlines began taking a few simple steps to make its planes lighter, which also [saved](#) the company millions in fuel costs. To reduce the weight of each flight, United used lighter paper to reduce the weight of each copy of its ‘Hemispheres’ inflight magazine, installed lighter seats, redesigned its restrooms, eliminated beverage carts, and used lighter cargo containers.

“Greenwashing”

While it is important for companies to communicate sustainability efforts to consumers, it is also important for any business or brand to do so in a manner that is not misleading, exaggerated, or factually inaccurate.

Greenwashing refers to a company’s efforts to position its business or brand as environmentally friendly when those claims are partially or totally false. If a business or brand attempts to create the perception that its products and/or services are eco-friendly when they really are not, they have engaged in the practice of greenwashing. Greenwashing also includes false, misleading, or exaggerated claims about production methods and business operations being sustainable or eco-friendly.

For example, let’s say a footwear brand launched a new sneaker and 5% of the product was made using recycled materials. However, if the brand markets the new footwear product as “made from recycled materials”, consumers might be led to believe that the entire product was created using recycled materials because of the brand’s exaggerated marketing messaging. This would be considered greenwashing.



In marketing, certain words or phrases are common with greenwashing efforts, such as:

- “Green”
- “All natural”
- “Chemical free”
- “Pure” or “raw” ingredients
- “Antibiotic-free”
- “Organic” (without certification)
- “All natural”

Use of these terms in marketing does not always represent an example of greenwashing. Rather, when greenwashing occurs, a business or brand is likely to use words and phrases that imply the product or service is environmentally friendly.

As consumers demand more investment from businesses and brands on sustainability records, and demonstrate a strong desire for more environmentally friendly products and services, greenwashing practices are becoming more common. However, not only is greenwashing unethical, it is also illegal in the United States. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency established a set of "[Green Guides](#)" to provide guidance for companies to abide by the FTC Act when communicating environmental claims. Refusal to follow those guidelines could result in significant fines and a public relations crisis for those businesses and brands that engage in greenwashing practices.



ACTIVITY

Apply what you have learned in this lesson by creating recommendations to a corporation or brand for improving their sustainability practices.

For this activity, your teacher will divide the class into groups or pairs, and each team will draw from a deck of cards. Each card will feature the name of a corporation. Once you have selected a card, you will research the corporation and its brands and explore their current sustainability practices. Then, you will offer recommendations for how the corporation and/or its brands can create new or improved sustainability initiatives. Be prepared to present your ideas in class.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Sustainability refers to an approach to business where a company conducts its business in a way that minimizes any adverse impact on the environment or on society as a whole. When you hear terms like “reducing the carbon footprint” or a business “going green”, the implication is that they are focusing on sustainability. It is important for businesses and brands to communicate these initiatives to consumers, but also to do it in a way that does not include false, exaggerated, or misleading claims (known as greenwashing).



INDUSTRY APPLICATION

Connect your classroom with industry examples by reviewing the following news stories relating to concepts covered in this lesson:

Earth Day Marketing - [For Lundberg Family Farms, 'Every Ducking Day Is Earth Day'](#)

Greenwashing - [Earth Day 2023: green or greenwashed?](#)

Greenwashing - [The World Is Finally Cracking Down on 'Greenwashing'](#)

Greenwashing - [Brand Watch: 2023 will be a year that separates the bona fide from the bogus on sustainability pledges](#)

Greenwashing - [Tide avoids greenwashing with #TurnToCold efforts](#)

Greenwashing - [10 Companies Called Out For Greenwashing](#)

Greenwashing - [H&M Is Being Sued for Greenwashing. What Does That Mean For Fashion?](#)

Greenwashing - [H&M Escapes Lawsuit Accusing it of Greenwashing](#)

Packaging - [Coca-Cola Rolls Out Bottles With Caps That Don't Come Off To Reduce Litter](#)

Packaging - [America's #1 Ketchup Brand Is About To Launch A Paper Bottle](#)

Sustainability - [Coach Launches Coachtopia, a Circular Subbrand Dedicated to Sustainability](#)

Sustainability - [Majority of shoppers want brand values to align with their own: survey](#)

Sustainability - [Dole Sunshine Company Harnesses New York's Trash to Create Awareness of the Impact of Food Waste on Malnutrition and Food Insecurity](#)

Sustainability - [Puma assembles team of young activists to tailor sustainability initiatives](#)

Sustainability - [Ethereum Merge: A cryptocurrency 'going green'](#)

Sustainability - [Patagonia founder just donated the entire company, worth \\$3 billion, to fight climate change](#)

Sustainability - [Nature Valley Launches First-Of-Its-Kind Rewards Shop on TikTok for Sustainable Families with Stephen "tWitch" Boss and Allison Holker-Boss](#)

Sustainability - [Kourtney Kardashian is trying on sustainable fashion. Many designers are already there.](#)

Trends - [Sustainability Trends 2023: Goodbye Greenwashing. Hello Business Results](#)

KEY TERMS DEFINED:

Sustainability: An approach to business where a company conducts its business in a way that minimizes any adverse impact on the environment or on society as a whole.

Greenwashing: A company's efforts to position its business or brand as environmentally friendly when those claims are partially or totally false.

