

INTRO

*A lot has changed in the world of sustainability communication since our last review in 2018. **But, alarmingly, much has stayed the same.***

Climate strikes and the unfortunate proliferation of natural disasters has seen mainstream opinion shift to accept that man-made climate change is real and serious. As a result, more time, money and effort is pouring into sustainability than ever before. Brands and organisations are speaking about it. But are they doing so in a way that is making people listen and act?

What we're seeing is a shift in quantity, not quality of communications.

The Stock Sustainability we identified in our last report is still rampant today. It's everywhere, from advertising campaigns to annual reporting. Brands and organisations are defaulting to the same, boring, and ineffective slew of sustainability clichés. It's hindering progress towards their own objectives, and, potentially holding back the progress of sustainability itself.

In our last review we focused on the visual language of sustainability – the design and photography that went into sustainability communications and what needed to change to make them more effective.

This time we're looking at the language of sustainability. The words that work and those that don't.

Quite a lot has been said on the topic, but we've found the academic research too abstract to easily apply. Whilst the research by media outlets and communications professionals is too specific to change sustainability communications overall.

Highlighting individual problematic words in sustainability language can be useful, but only to a point. The failings in written sustainability communication appear to sit upstream of the words themselves. Success or failure is decided before words make the page, in the ideas and metaphors that sit behind them. In this report we attempt to address the root causes of the problem. Not just its symptoms.

If you're reading this document, you know that we are at the precipice of sustainability's most urgent decade. Every jargon-filled paragraph and doom-and-gloom message disengages a person that needs to act, now. We hope this report will act as a practical guide to words that work, for your brand and sustainability as a whole.

RESEARCH

We took a hybrid approach to our research – combining insight from industry professionals, academic research, our own experience, and a review of recent sustainability writing from a variety of brands.

01

We talked to sustainability communication professionals from a range of sectors to find out what they thought was going well in sustainability communication, what was going wrong, and their best tips to shape the rest of our research.

03

We reviewed existing market and academic research, seeking the latest and most robust insights on sustainability communications.

02

We conducted large-scale quantitative research by using language analysis software (and the human eye) to review sustainability webpages from 50 of Forbes 100 most valuable brands. We compared these findings with ten leading sustainable brands.

04

We interviewed experts including semioticians, ecolinguists, and science communicators to gather perspectives from their different disciplines.

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THE PROBLEM

Our research findings were pretty unequivocal – sustainability communications may have improved in the last few years, but there’s still a long way to go.

Progress on sustainability issues is still being held back by communications that lack either the strategic rigour or creativity used to communicate in other spheres.

Jargon

Complex insider language works for insiders, but the technical terms used to discuss sustainability alienate pretty much everyone else. If restricted to communications intended solely for other sustainability professionals, this would be fine. But, unfortunately, it isn't the case. Almost nothing kills people's interest faster than impenetrable jargon.



It's too macro

Sustainability is a massive, complex topic. And, people seem to communicate it in a big, complicated way. How many times have you read a sustainability article beginning with a sweeping apocalyptic statement, like “we have until 2030 to save the planet”? This kind of message is neither unique, nor informative. Most people will have read variations on this universal theme a thousand times, and it says nothing about what your brand is actually doing about the issue. Although tempting to reel in your audience with a grandiose systemic truth about the gravity of the issue at hand, in many cases it's not relatable enough to resonate.



Overused language becomes meaningless

If everyone defaults to the same language, words get overused and lose their meaning. The word ‘sustainability’ itself is a perfect example of this. As Julia Giannini at ITV put it, “sustainability doesn't mean anything to anyone anymore”. More cynical experts say the word sustainability “has been commandeered by industry, and they simply add it as an adjective to any new project in order to greenwash the public”¹.

Beyond ‘sustainability’, there is a profusion of words and phrases rendered almost meaningless through over-use. The omnipresent jargon and stock sustainability are already a problem; the mix-and-matched soup of overused sustainability buzzwords only makes it worse.



1. <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-05-14/against-sustainability-and-other-plastic-words/>

Now is a good time to introduce you to something we call Stock Sustainability.

In our previous research into the Visual Language of Sustainability, we found there was a default 'brand' which we labelled Stock Sustainability.

STOCK**STOCK****STOCK**

You know it when you see it, because it is everywhere: leaves, lightbulbs, an odd mix of dated corporate graphics, endless icons, and off-tone cutesy illustrations are just some examples.

We found the same problem with how sustainability is written. Verbal Stock Sustainability is a mix of science, corporate 'business speak' and strings of unconvincing vague sentiments like "we care", "for the future", and "together for change".

The result is that for many sustainability reports, web pages or campaigns, you could swap one brand's name for another and not be able to tell the difference.

Some of this Stock Sustainability comes from fear. Brands are afraid of being called out. So, they veil their messages in a murky corporate façade. Ironically, these overly sterile words often come across as dishonest and leave audiences even more sceptical of what the words are hiding. Even when they aren't dishonest, Stock Sustainability language doesn't appeal to even the 'greenest' of audiences. So why use them at all?

THE NUMBERS

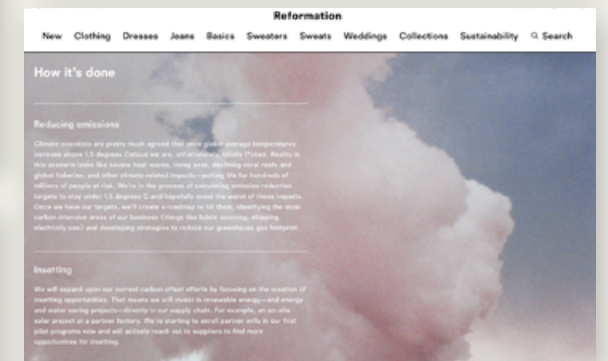
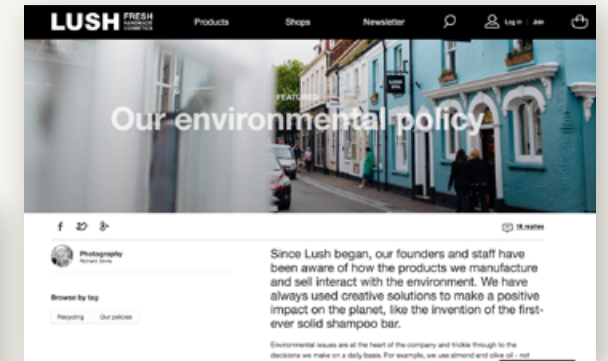
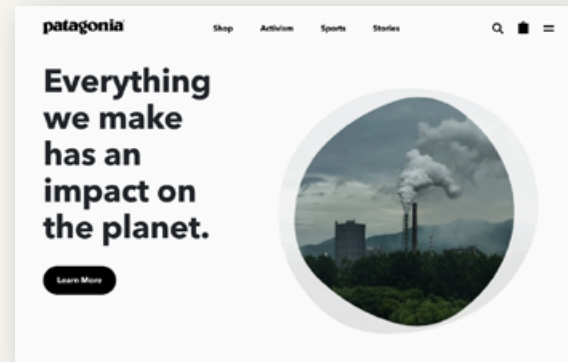
Don't believe us? We know what Stock Sustainability is when we see it, but others might not notice it or see the problem with it.

To identify exactly what constitutes as Stock Sustainability writing, we scraped 50 of the Forbes 100 most valuable brands' websites and looked at the language they used around sustainability.

We then compared them with 10 brands who are leading the way in sustainability communications – such as Patagonia, Ben & Jerry's, Lush, Reformation, Ecover and more.

Note: Why sustainability websites? We found that sustainability websites are the most widely available and consistent form of communications across all brands. They also tend to serve many types of stakeholders simultaneously, whereas annual reports may be too technical and speak to fewer types of stakeholders. Campaigns and other forms of consumer communications had not been produced by enough of the brands and contained fewer words to analyse.

THE LEADERS



WE ARE ECOVER.

Our analysis confirmed that an ineffective monotonous language is rampant among the world's most valuable brands:

Instead of relying on the word “sustainability” to say everything, leading brands use specific words to describe their efforts.

On average, the word “sustainability” is repeated 10 times on each sustainability webpage for the Forbes top 50 brands. But the most sustainable brands? They only used it once. The most sustainable brands know the word has been used and abused over the years.



We found eight clusters of words and phrases being used again and again as crutches instead of clear communications. By themselves, any one of these words or phrases would be fine. But overusing and stringing them together results in a jargon and buzzword salad.

THE 8 CLICHÉS

01

Our commitment

- We are committed

02

The future

- Future generations
- Sustainable future
- Better tomorrow

03

The planet

- Protect the planet
- Help the planet
- People and the planet

04

Biggest challenge

- World's biggest challenge
- Urgent issue
- Unlike any other we've faced
- Of the 21st century

05

Our journey

- Climate journey
- Sustainability journey

06

Together, we can

- In this together
- Work together
- Together, we can

07

Building a better

- Creating
- Shaping

08

Good for business

- Win all round
- Improves business

A large, bold, dark blue number '9' is centered on the left side of the page.A large, bold, dark blue number '8' is centered in the middle of the page.A large, bold, dark blue percentage sign is positioned on the right side. A white rectangular stamp with a black border and the word 'CLICHÉ' in bold, black, uppercase letters is placed over the sign, tilted slightly.

of the Forbes 50 most valuable brands
used at least one of these clichés in the
sustainability content on their websites.

44%

On average, these brands used almost 4 out of 8 (44%) of the clichés identified. One brand even used 6 out of 8 clichés.

94%

of brands used the cliché “We are committed”. Sometimes, using the word “committed” makes sense. But we’ve seen brands use it as a catchall for anything, whether it is a concrete commitment or not. People don’t trust brands like they trust people – so a brand vowing it is “committed” to an issue doesn’t build confidence, and ultimately waters down the meaning of the word.

63%

of brands were guilty of stringing multiple clichés together in a sentence, turning their sustainability communications into bland and empty sentences that sound like this:

“We are committed to protecting the planet for future generations. Together, we can continue our sustainability journey, facing the biggest challenge of our time to build a better world, which is good for the environment, our communities and for business.”

Every Brand Ever

*44 brands have made
over 100 commitments:*

We are committed to...

- environmental leadership.*
- creating a world without waste.*
- playing our part.*
- actively promoting ESG initiatives.*
- protecting biodiversity.*
- a carbon neutral future.*
- buying renewable energy.*
- building sustainable ties.*
- engaging communities.*
- protecting the planet.*



WHY?

Stock Sustainability is rife in the sustainability communication of the world's most valuable brands.

If these global leaders that all invest a fortune in building their brands are falling into the trap, you can be sure most others are too.

This is problematic for a few reasons:

Reduced engagement

In case you hadn't noticed: Stock Sustainability is BORING. Normal people and brands don't speak like this. The jargon would put enough people off alone, but when it all sounds the same too, you have a recipe for communications guaranteed to switch off any audience.

Reduced differentiation

The excess of Stock Sustainability undermines the distinctiveness and differentiation between brands. As we found with our Visual Language research, brands often ignore their normal brand guidelines when it comes to sustainability, with some close competitors using almost identical language to each other. The reduced distinctiveness of brands undermines attempts to make audiences associate particular sustainability claims with specific brands. No one is going to perceive sustainability as a true part of your brand if you sound the same as everyone else.

Reduced action

We can't prove this one, but we strongly suspect the omnipresence of Stock Sustainability reduces action on sustainability issues. There's plenty of evidence that this kind of language doesn't engage normal people. So, any campaign or communication that aims to persuade people to act, or even to take an interest, will be undermined by it.

We also know that sustainability is an 'other' for many people. While they might believe in climate change, the challenges of sustainability just doesn't feel relevant to their day-to-day lives, which reduces their willingness to take action on them. In our view, the wide use of Stock Sustainability will only perpetuate this issue.



HOW?

None of this is to say that communicating sustainability is easy. In fact, we can't claim to have a perfect record when it comes to the clichés and pitfalls of Stock Sustainability.

To fix these problems with sustainability writing, we first have to understand where they came from.



The origins of sustainability

While sustainability takes many forms today, for the most part it started amongst academics and the global NGO community, most notably when the 1987 Brundtland Report² published its definition of sustainability. Because it was shaped by a relatively small number of people, sustainability communications suffers from an ‘insider perspective’.

As Julia Giannini from ITV puts it, “the reason why we’re here is because academics and scientists were communicating when they’re not communicators. Carbon dioxide levels, degrees of warming and environmental concepts are not going to motivate behavioural change. You need the comms and marketing experts in the room, who know how to frame messages that cut through that are easy to understand, and allow people to act.”

There is also an issue of privilege. The people who work in sustainability tend to be well-educated – 72% of sustainability managers have a master’s degree³. It means there’s a scarcity of different backgrounds and perspectives in sustainability, leading to one-sided communications that don’t speak to diverse audiences.

2. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

3. Green Biz, State of the Profession report, 2018

Siloisation

These issues have been exacerbated by siloisation. This is as much about separation of teams within a business as it is the dividing lines between topics like the ‘economy’ and ‘the environment’ (as if the two are not intimately connected). For example, interviewee and ecolinguistics professor Arran Stibbe discussed how the environment section of a newspaper might celebrate decreasing sales of diesel cars, while the business section in the same newspaper would lament it as bad for economic growth.

The result is that when sustainability issues are communicated, they tend to feel isolated and artificially separated from the wider world and context, making their real importance less apparent or completely disjointed from broader narratives.

The way it's framed

How sustainability is framed (or mis-framed) is crucial to why sustainability communications have not succeeded in the past. It's about how the content of a message is positioned, the context around it and the meanings people take from that. Simply put, framing is about whether someone writes about a glass being half empty or half full – they're both the same, but they imply different meanings. The frames employed, whether sustainability is portrayed in a negative or positive tone for example, have a significant impact on how effective communications are.

Sustainability challenges, being as dire as they are, historically led to quite a negative frame for communications – all the things that might be lost if we don't act. More recently some have focused overwhelmingly on trying to frame messages positively – if you act now you can save the world. Research suggests neither of these approaches is quite right.

“The reason why we're here is because academics and scientists were communicating when they're not communicators.”

Julia Giannini

PRINCIPLES

To help overcome the issues with written sustainability communications we have distilled everything we learned into 10 principles.

They won't tell you to swap one word for another. The problem starts well before then, but they will help you address the root causes of bad sustainability writing – the ideas that shape and frame your writing.

The principles should be easy to understand, but they won't always be easy to apply.

Writing sustainability headlines and copy well is a lot harder than doing it badly. But, it will pay off in communications that stand out from the rest, engage your audiences, and help you make progress on your objectives.

- 01 ***Put your audience first***
- 02 ***Bring in diverse voices and opinions***
- 03 ***Get specific***
- 04 ***Frame it right***
- 05 ***Avoid the s-word***
- 06 ***Explain the why***
- 07 ***Make it personal***
- 08 ***Be honest***
- 09 ***Make the future tangible***
- 10 ***Say it your way***

*Put your
audience*

FIRST

01

Calibrate your jargon

Write too technically and you risk killing your audience's interest. But write too simply, and your audience may doubt your credibility. To achieve the right balance, you need to understand where your audience's understanding falls. Tailor your communications so the audience least familiar with sustainability jargon will understand.

Escape the insider perspective

Earlier, we talked about how sustainability's insider perspective leads to equally insular communications. Knowing what your audience wants to hear from your brand is the first step to adopting an outside-in approach. It sounds simplistic, but we've seen too many brands think about what they want to say to the world before considering what the world wants to hear from them.

Segment communications

Different audiences call for different messages, or even whole approaches to communication. For example, one audience might prefer emotive storytelling as a format while others might prefer scientific analyses. Understanding your audience segments will help maximise your ability to tailor communications, and thus engagement. It can also help identify which frames you should use in your communications (more on that later).

“With our corporate content we take an insight-led approach – crafting our stories in the language and format our audiences love and delivering them through the channels in which they play. It’s all about finding that sweet spot between what we want to say and what our audiences want to hear and see.”

Madeleine Lewis / Unilever

Bring in

DIVERSE

*voices and
opinions*

02

“There isn’t one public. People have many different experiences – how can you appeal to their specific experiences?”

Dr. Sam Illingworth

ANIKA

GEORGE

OTI

AYTHAN

KUMMAL

NICOS

KELLY

Principle 2: Bring in diverse voices & opinions

radley yeldar.

Sustainability communications will sound the same if they’re only written by people with the same backgrounds. Bring in diverse voices and opinions to take sustainability out of its ivory tower.

Involving a range of content creators lets you speak to the mainstream and push boundaries on your own communications. The broader the voices and opinions you incorporate, the more types of audiences you can appeal to. Hire untraditional copywriters, source stories from a wider net, and involve employees across different departments in your process.

Get

SPECIFIC

03

“When you talk about sustainability generally, many don’t understand the underlying complexity and nuances – but when you actually speak with them about specific topics and make it concrete, people are often very knowledgeable and engaged.”

Moritz Scaer / Stakeholder Reporting

Move away from lofty macro sustainability statements.

Research shows that the general public doesn’t necessarily understand how everything in sustainability is linked together. But they do understand a great amount about sustainability topics when they are narrowed down to a specific category. So ditch the broad, lofty statements and get down to the specifics.

For instance, don’t just say “this t-shirt is sustainable”. Specify if it’s made from 100% organic cotton, recycled polyester, or hemp. Then clarify why these attributes make it sustainable.

*Frame
it*

RIGHT

04



There's evidence that positively framed communications can motivate people to engage in sustainability issues, but they also risk lulling people into a false sense of security and achieving the opposite effect. Similarly, whilst negatively-framed messages can be more memorable, and are known to be more effective with people who have a low concern for the environment – you don't want to run the risk of scaremongering.

Striking the right balance is vital. Listen to and understand your audiences. Does your audience have a low concern for the environment? Then a negatively-framed message may be the right choice. Do you need your audience to take action? Then a message framed by tangible gains for the individual may be most effective.

Get the balance right and your communications will be far more effective.

*Avoid
the*

S-WORD

05

Not talking about ‘sustainability’ when talking about sustainability may seem bizarre and counter-intuitive. But it actually serves two important purposes.

1. Getting to what matters

The less time you spend unpacking what you mean by sustainability each time you use the word, the more you can focus on the topics that matter. This relates back to our earlier principle around ‘getting specific’. As the term ‘sustainability’ has been overused to the point of losing meaning, it’s better to avoid it (anywhere but in the title of the sustainability section on your website or report). Get specific. Talk to individual topics. Ditch the ‘S’ word. Research shows that the most ‘sustainable’ brands almost never use it. They know the word ‘sustainability’ alone isn’t enough to convince audiences. It’s time the rest of us did too.

2. Making sustainability normal

Making the most sustainable choice can run counter to existing priorities or mindsets (e.g. when organic food is so expensive it’s not worth the price). In such situations, the choice that’s most personally beneficial wins. But sustainability doesn’t always have to be a source of tension. Think about how Tesla is an exclusive futuristic brand first, electric car second. By normalising sustainability, you break the silo sustainability usually finds itself in, helping to mainstream the subject. The word sustainability is a barrier to this itself because most people may be concerned about sustainability issues, but they don’t identify the word itself to their lives.

All in all, the less you use the ‘S’ word in your communications, the more you’ll be able to say.

“Sustainability communications sometimes work best when they don’t really talk about sustainability and they just make sense to people in the context of their lives.”

Dr. Arran Stibbe

*Explain
the*

WHY

06

...cutting emissions **WHY?**
...protect the future **WHY?**
...play a part **WHY?**
...more for the planet **WHY?**
...create change **WHY?**
...be Carbon neutral **WHY?**
...reduce waste **WHY?**

When looking at brands highly regarded as great sustainability communicators, they all had one thing in common: they explained the why.

We don't mean the overall 'why' (we can all agree that climate change isn't great). We're talking about the specific motives behind every action.

For example, did an initiative come to life because of an employee, because customers were demanding it, or because of a new regulation?

Opening the curtain to your sustainability decisions adds a human element that will make your communications more trustworthy. This isn't necessary for every single sustainability claim, but it will make your communications far more engaging than the normal laundry list of initiatives.

***Make
it***

PERSONAL

07

“Different stories will motivate different kinds of people. We need an equally wide range of stories. The positive ones tend to get forgotten and these also need to be told, with hopeful and positive depictions of what the future could look like.”

Dr. Arran Stibbe

One reason why ‘stock sustainability’ feels so off-putting is because it lacks a human touch.

The deluge of generic language creates distance between your brand, sustainability, and your audience. Telling the human stories behind your sustainability efforts bridges that gap, making your communications more authentic.

Combining this with our earlier principle of bringing in diverse voices, you also need a variety of stories to help you appeal to different people. Reflect the diversity of your organisation and audiences by publishing stories from a range of perspectives. Their unique tones and voices will speak to audiences in ways a corporate brand couldn't.

Be

HONEST

08

Sustainability is complicated, and Stock.

Sustainability is often used to shroud gaps and insecurities in communications. Brands fear criticism if they reveal too much or are too honest.

But painting an overly positive story leaves doubts and builds distrust. It's okay to address challenges and to admit faults – doing so helps to create transparency and trust in your brand.

None of us are perfect. When things seem too good to be true, they often are. Be brave, and be honest.

THE BEST POLICY

Honesty.

***Make
the***

FUTURE

tangible

09

“We need to take the upper hand and show the reality of where we need to get to in a way that’s fun and entertaining.”

Julia Giannini / ITV

Ideally you would always talk about the now. People get the now, while the future often seems far away. But with so much of sustainability being about the future, this will not always be a choice.

While 68% of companies in our research talked about creating a better future, few defined what that really looked like. The only real images we have of our future are laden with resource-scarcity, natural disasters, and despair for humanity, yet negative frames are for the most part detrimental.

Painting a clearer picture of what future your brand is working towards can motivate your audiences to take part in your journey. Because right now, the “better future” we are all picturing is just “slightly less apocalyptic”.

Say it

YOUR

WAY

10

Previously we suggested brands should “Do their own thing”. Our recent research has shown us just how important this still is, so we’re driving this point home:

STOP

SOUNDING

Most brands morph into a stale, corporate version of themselves when speaking about sustainability. Our research shows that even the world’s most reputable and resourced brands default to Stock Sustainability in their writing.

No matter how large or small your brand may be, don’t fall into this trap – you probably already have a unique tone of voice that has been honed over years, maybe decades. Sustainability can be serious and technical so you may need to adjust your tone-of-voice, but it should still be your tone-of-voice. The most effective brands are those that stick to their unique personality no matter the topic, channel, or audience.

The first step is to remove as many clichés from your copy as possible. Then, show your writing to someone who hasn’t read it and remove your brand name – are they able to guess your brand, or at least your industry, based on what you’ve written? If not, think of ways to make your sustainability communications more intricately tied to your brand.

If you stop sounding like everyone else, sustainability communications will work better for your brand, and you’ll be doing your part towards making global sustainability communications that little bit better.

LIKE

EVERYONE

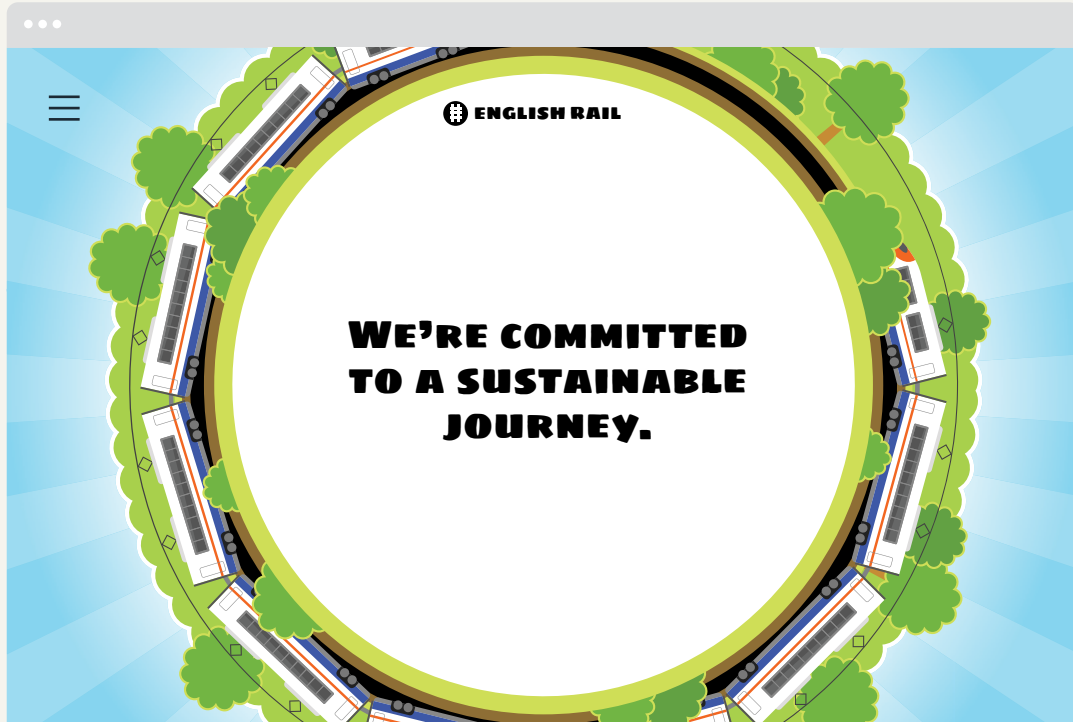
ELSE

IN PRACTICE

It's always easier said than done.

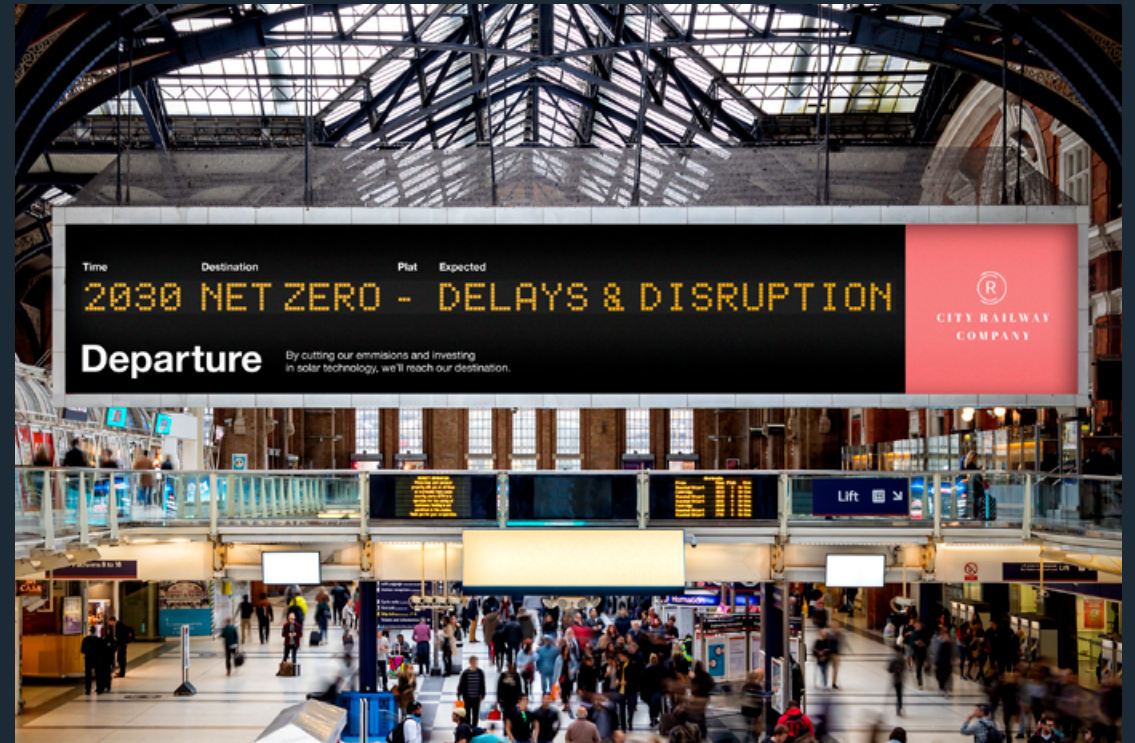
We tasked our creative team with putting these principles to the test, to show that avoiding Stock Sustainability is not only possible, but worth the effort.

FROM THIS...



Not only is it not convincing, it's a cliché that will just push people away. Your communications will just fade into the background. It's not communications - it's wallpaper.

TO THIS



This statement is much clearer, more engaging and relevant to the brand. The honest acknowledgment that reaching these goals isn't easy will make readers more likely to take you seriously and believe that your commitments are genuine.

FROM THIS...



This may scream 'I'm eco-friendly' but it will also leave people saying, how? And – haven't I seen this before?

TO THIS



Here's a much more effective example of how to be both specific and engaging. You don't need to tell someone your product is eco-friendly. If it really is good for the environment just focus on how and why in a clear and engaging way. It's more authentic and interesting and will help you stand out.

FROM THIS...

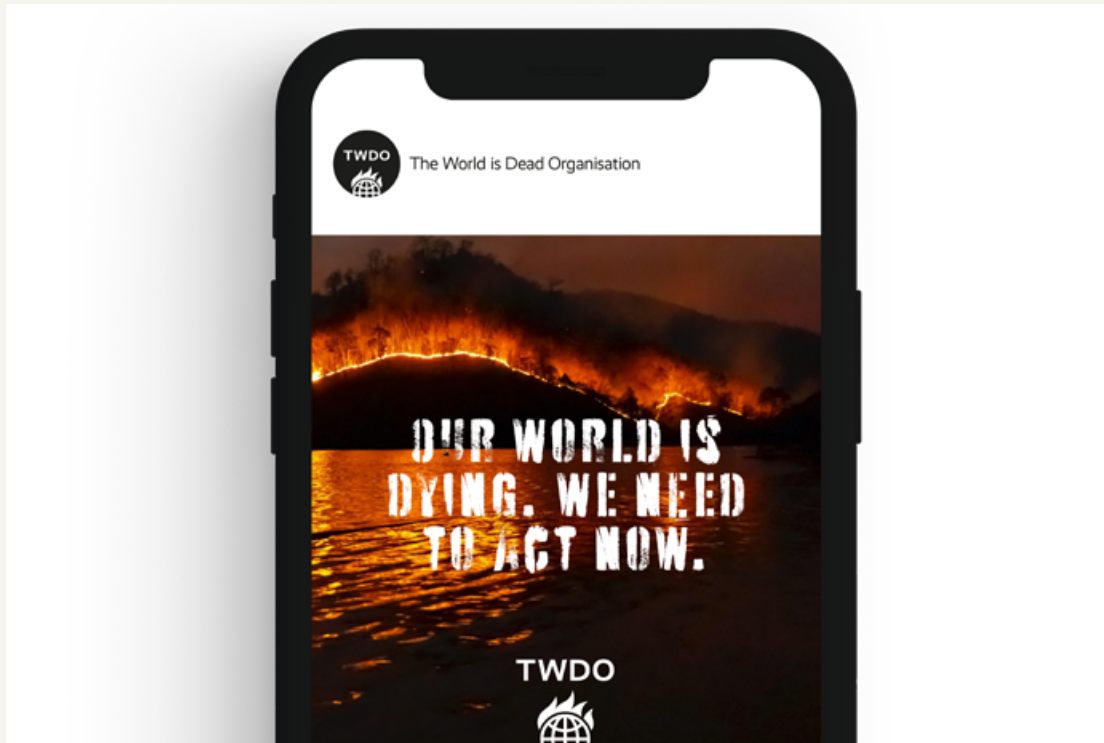


Net what? Your journey to where? What exactly does a better tomorrow look like? This is a classic vague, overused statement that will do nothing but bore mode on the reader.

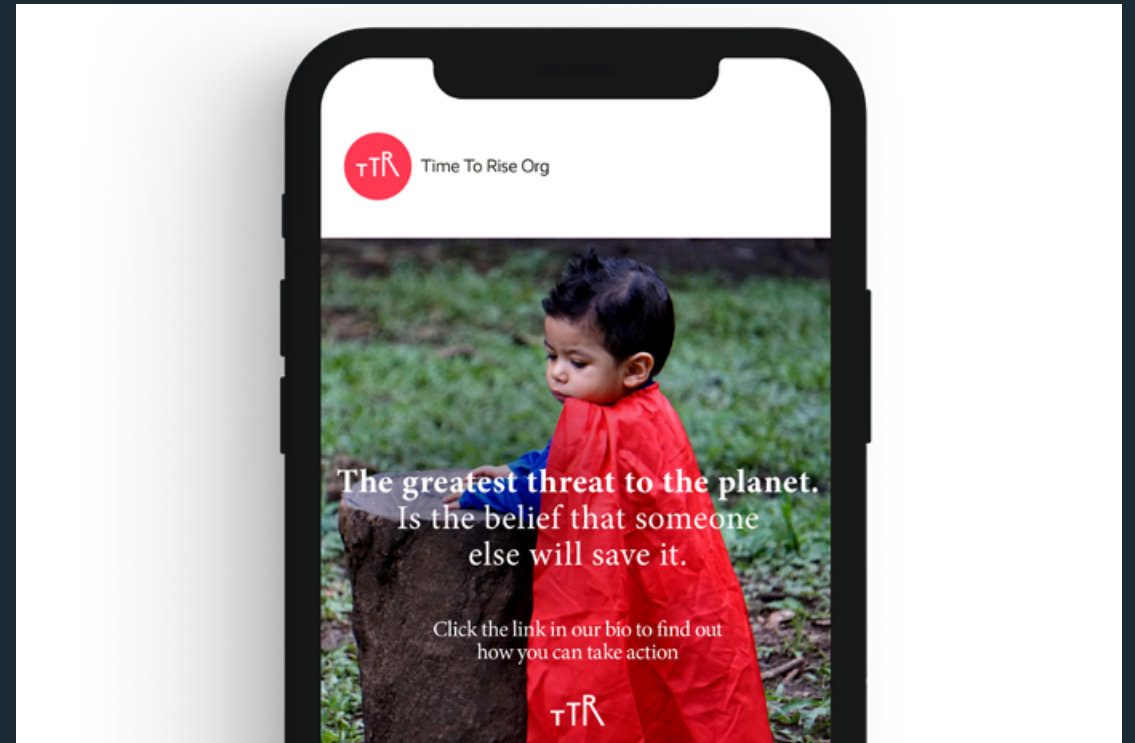
TO THIS



Being specific doesn't mean being boring. Make it clear what you're talking about and do so in an engaging way. You know immediately what this poster is about through the punchy headline, whilst the sub-copy specifically outlines the target and where to find out more.

FROM THIS...

Though scaring people into action can work, it isn't always the best approach and is one that has been overused in environmental campaigning over recent years. Plus, if you're asking someone to urgently take action, it is usually best to give them some hint as to how – or else you risk them feeling powerless and highly likely to do nothing.

TO THIS

Lofty statements about 'the world' don't work. This hard-hitting quote (originally penned by Robert Swan) makes climate change a human, relatable issue. The call to action is precise, providing a tangible solution to the negative frame used.

FROM THIS...

What about this product is sustainable?

The packing being green? We don't think so.

This copy could be put on any product or brand.

Un-memorable and unclear means unsuccessful.

TO THIS

This copy both informs and inspires. Humour can be a great tool in making a serious and important topic like sustainability more engaging, but most importantly, get specific as to why it is sustainable.

radley yeldar.

Words that work:

effective language in sustainability communications

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