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COMMUNICATIONS

COMMUNICATION is key to Sustainability Success

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COMMUNICATION is key to Sustainability Success

Business leaders around the world are taking a stand for our environment.

They're changing the way they run their businesses through sustainability strategies. These strategies help business leaders define their organization's values and vision, set goals, and make decisions. For both internal and external audiences, communication plays a key role in the strategy's success. They need clear expectations, an opportunity to make suggestions, and a chance to give feedback.



COMMUNICATION is key to Sustainability Success

What role does communication play in a sustainability strategy?



INTERNAL AUDIENCES

Organizations that have implemented sustainability as part of their business strategies make sure employees, and other internal stakeholders, are aware of the strategy. Communications plans help everyone understand the why behind the strategy, its goals and objectives, what initiatives are going to be implemented, and what is expected of each of them as individuals and as teams. A clearly articulated understanding of these factors helps to realize the results of the strategy in ways everyone will be able to feel.

"Alone We Can Do So Little. Together We Can Do So Much" - Helen Keller

These are the key things to communicate with your internal team

1. What is the purpose of the sustainability strategy?

Here are a few goals a sustainability strategy will support.

- Enhanced Brand
- Better Employee Attraction / Retention
- Cost Savings (Energy, Human Resources, etc.)
- Risk Mitigation
- Regulatory Compliance



2. What initiatives are included in a sustainability strategy?

Employee Programs

What internal programs support the sustainability strategy? Helping employees understand what is available, how they are expected to support the initiative, and if there are any incentives, will increase meaningful employee participation. This is fundamental to achieving positive results. These may include recycling programs, energy-saving programs, incentives to ride your bicycle/walk/carpool to work, and enhanced health programs.

Community Projects

Let employees know what community projects the organization actively supports. Let them know if there are opportunities to volunteer or participate in other ways. Examples might include a clean-up day at the local beach or along a hiking trail. The business might plant a community garden to support a community kitchen. Opportunities to donate to a food bank or housing project might be run out of the office.

Marketing

Sharing the marketing campaign calendar of marketing with your employees should come with the opportunity to give input. Their input will get them involved with the campaigns, to generate and share content with their social networks.

New design updates to the workspace

Employees will need to be prepared for any physical changes to their workspaces. Construction and renovations can cost employees extra time and inconvenience. Advising them of what energy-saving or water-saving benefits these initiatives will realize will help employees be patient with any inconvenience.



3. Who are the key players? Identify, engage, and communicate with internal audiences

Everyone is involved.

Sustainability requires change and effort from everyone. Recognize and model this fact from the top down.

Endorse and approve the strategy.

Business leaders, including the C-Suite, needs to develop the strategy, oversee its implementation, and report on its progress, set-backs and achievements. There must be a leadership team put in place to champion all aspects of the strategy.

Inform the strategy.

Consultants, managers, research providers, government, regulatory organizations, investors and all other stakeholders need opportunities to weigh in on the strategy and make it meaningful to their role.

Manage the action items.

Assign managers to take ownership of the action items and monitor how their teams adopt and adapt to their new working realities. Participate and support the action items. Most sustainability strategies have a component that calls upon all employees and other stakeholders to participate, Everyone has a role to play that is meaningful and measurable.

Assist with communications.

Give everyone freedom to talk about the strategy and its implementation. This makes media, corporate communications, marketing team, employees and other stakeholders your best friends in realizing the strategy.



4. How will we know the strategy is successful?

Setting clear goals and SMART objectives will help set the stage for success. Indicate key performance metrics, what methods will be used to measure progress and, ultimately, how these will evaluate success, and when the reports will be required for review. Communicating this to the team is important. It ensures the right information is collected, that there is consistency with the data, and that the right information is available at the right time. Regular milestone reports, shared widely, will keep everyone informed about what they need to know to stay engaged with the process.

How to report on your success [to both internal and external audiences]

Small businesses generally have simple sustainability strategies. These may include a recycling program, workspace upgrades for energy efficiencies, and a community program that supports a local charity. Reporting these key metrics may include the amount of waste diverted from the landfill, the reduction in energy costs, and the amount of money or kilograms of food donated. Marketing tactics that communicate these metrics may include print materials, an e-newsletter, or information added to the sustainability statement page on your website. These facts can also be shared across social media. Try using graphics and video to visualize the data.

For larger organizations that must adhere to regulations on their reporting, be sure to follow the required guidelines. GRI reporting, for example, outlines client supply chain requirements, reports for government energy savings rebates, and investor reporting. On top of reporting to the required organizations, be sure to inform your employees and share data with your clients so they can celebrate your success with you.



EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

Organizations that have implemented sustainability as part of their business strategies make sure employees, and other internal stakeholders, are aware of the strategy. Communications plans help everyone understand the why behind the strategy, its goals and objectives, what initiatives are going to be implemented, and what is expected of each of them as individuals and as teams. A clearly articulated understanding of these factors helps to realize the results of the strategy in ways everyone will be able to feel.

Media and Influencers

Get to know the media outlets and journalists that support and publish articles about sustainability. Follow them on social media and read their articles to get to know what newsworthy topics they write about. If your company has accomplished something newsworthy, let the interested journalists or outlets know. Provide them with the necessary information and be available for follow-up. A general press release is sometimes appropriate while smaller, targeted outreach is more appropriate at other times.

Also, consider influencers when it comes to sharing your sustainability initiatives. These may be social media influencers or bloggers who are sustainability advocates and have a large following. Thought leaders like sustainability academics and niche media outlets that are relevant to your work or industry, should also be updated regularly.



Customers

In a 2017 Nielsen survey, 81 per cent of global consumers believed very strongly that companies should support initiatives to improve the environment. Millennials, Gen Z and Gen X are the most supportive, with Gen X and Boomers not far behind. [1]

“Consumers are using their spending power to effect the change they want to see.” - nielson.com

Brands have an opportunity to connect with these consumers. This is proven by campaigns to ban plastic straws, led by companies such as Starbucks. Both the general public, and other companies, accepted and endorsed this change. Restaurants and cafes chose to not provide straws in their drinks, or started to provide paper straws instead. Consumers quickly accepted this as the new norm. People everywhere continue to purchase bamboo or stainless-steel straws to take along when on the road.

It is essential to communicate sustainability initiatives with clients through both words and actions. Leverage digital marketing channels to do this. Use the company website and social media channels. Develop content that tells your brands’ green story and encourage followers to be a part of your story by sharing their own posts and comments. Transparency is key to getting support from the public, which means letting them know your goals, talking about the challenges you face and sharing the victories along the way.



Talent

The “failure to attract and retain top talent” was the number-one issue in the Conference Board’s 2016 survey of global CEOs. [2]

In six years, Millennials will make up three-quarters of the workforce. Recent surveys show:

“Nearly 40% said that they’ve chosen a job in the past because the company performed better on sustainability than the alternative. Less than a quarter of gen X respondents said the same and only 17% of baby boomers.”

“More than 70% said that they were more likely to choose to work at a company with a strong environmental agenda.” [3]

Effectively communicating your sustainability strategy will assist in attracting and retaining young talent. This happens when you inform the audience of the work that is being done, while also helping to build trust in your brand. A recent survey shows that there is a decline in trust in business’ ability to be a positive impact on society. Considering Millennials want to align themselves with organizations that share their values, which includes social and environmental concerns, it is important for businesses to effectively communicate their sustainability strategy with this audience.

Organizations need to be transparent in their efforts and authentic in carrying through with their commitments. This means developing an online marketing-communication plan to inform and engage with this audience. It must include social media activity and content that includes opportunities for two-way communication. This is the communications content that resonates most with these younger generations. [4]



Investors

The CEO from Blackrock, the world's largest shareholder company, says that climate change places "sustainability at the centre of [its] investment approach." They will choose to vote against companies that are not progressing well enough on sustainability-related initiatives.

Communicating the right information to investors is key to getting support from investors. Sustainability reporting must become reliable, consistent and cover the material items that show the economic performance of the company and their global impact. There are guidelines such as the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board that are available for companies to follow. When communicating with investors, the Sustainability Report should be accompanied by financial statements, quarterly earnings calls, and investor briefings. [5]

Sustainability strategies, like any major cultural change demands input and participation from everyone.

By modeling that change from the top down, for fully-communicated reasons, companies make sure those demands result in the very best from everyone..



REFERENCES

To review this article online visit,

<https://www.lauradunkley.com/site/blog/2020/02/07/communication-key-to-a-successful-sustainability-strategy>

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