

# Sustainability communication – building trust and telling your story responsibly

RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR COMPANIES  
TO OPERATE MORE  
SUSTAINABLY

***“Saving our planet is now a communications challenge.”***

– Sir David Attenborough, 2020

When Sir David Attenborough spoke these words five years ago, he captured the essence. We will not save our planet through technology or financial investments alone. Or success (or lack thereof) will depend on how clearly we can explain what matters, why it matters, and what actions we intend to take as a community. In 2025, it seems we are only now beginning to take this challenge truly seriously.

Companies today operate in an era of profound change and growing expectations. In such an environment, it is becoming clear that it is no longer enough to do the right things – we must also demonstrate why we do them, how we deliver them, and what impact they have. This is more than a question of transparency; it is about building resilience, earning trust, and securing a long-term license to operate.

Employees want to work for companies that exhibit values. Consumers demand transparency. Investors reward a long-term perspective.

Experience with companies shows that it is not words that make the difference, but credibility. What counts are actions that back up the message. Data that demonstrates progress. And the courage to openly acknowledge where the gaps remain and how we plan to close them.

Sustainability communication is evolving: from a stand-alone function to a strategic partner. Today, the question is no longer only on what we say, but what we can substantiate, why, how, and to whom.

That's why these recommendations were created: to support companies that want to communicate more thoughtfully, more credibly and with greater impact. They are not a complete answer, but a tool for reflection, improvement and shared learning.

When we talk about sustainability, our minds often go first to targets, standards and regulations. But at the heart of every genuine sustainability transformation lies communication. Not as advertising, but as a story a company builds through its actions, transparency and honesty.

***“Our climate fate will not be decided in boardrooms, parliaments, financial markets or on the streets. It will be decided by the story we humans tell – about ourselves.”***

– Climate Outreach

We already have everything we need for the transition – from science and technology to economic models and political commitments. What is often still lacking is a shared story. One that connects actions, values and people. A story that builds trust – not through perfection, but through honesty.

These recommendations are not a complete answer. They are an invitation to more mindful communication, greater accountability and collective learning.

Every word carries weight. Every decision about what to say – and what to acknowledge instead – matters. So let's tell a story that carries weight. A story worthy of trust.

**An honest sustainability story that does not strive for perfection, but for relevance, concreteness, and openness.**

**Such communication not only strengthens the reputation of a company – it also builds trust in the future.**



**Špela Kržišnik Mesarić**

Head of Marketing and PR,  
CER Sustainable Business Network

Europe's green transition does not depend solely on innovation, technology and investment. It also – and above all – depends on trust. Trust is the foundation that enables consumers to choose environmentally friendly products, investors to support responsible companies, companies to implement sustainable practices, and governments and societies to adopt ambitious measures for a fairer, more inclusive and climate-resilient future.

Unfortunately, that very trust is often being tested. Research shows that a significant share of environmental claims made by companies are misleading, vague or unsubstantiated. Greenwashing is not merely a term for unfair commercial practices – it is a systemic threat to the credibility of the entire green transition. The green transition goes beyond formal regulation. It calls for a transformation in our shared culture – one that we must lead together: institutions, companies, communicators, consumers, and civil society.

That is why we welcome CER's initiative, which through this handbook responds to the concrete needs of Slovenia's business community and communications profession. Such guidelines are vital, as they promote good practice and help companies build the trust that underpins sustainable competitiveness.

**Only through responsible, transparent, and evidence-based communication can we build a market where every green claim reflects a genuine commitment – and every consumer knows that they can choose with confidence.**



**Jerneja Jug Jerše**

Head of Commission  
Representation in Ljubljana

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# The role of sustainability communication



Between June 2023 and June 2024, global greenwashing cases decreased by 12%, marking the first decline in six years. However, high-severity cases surged by 30% during the same period.

– Woola – “50+ Greenwashing statistics”, 2024



# Trust is built on truth: responsible sustainability communication

The question of how a company understands its role in society – and how it communicates that role – is becoming increasingly central to business. Today, customers, partners and investors expect more than just good products and services; they want to understand the values the company embodies and how it contributes to a better future.

That is why the manner of communicating about sustainability is becoming almost as important as the actions themselves.

Yet raising awareness is not enough – companies must inspire, engage, and lead through their messaging.

In practice, however, this is not always easy: the achievements a company values most are not always the ones the public sees as meaningful. Simple, catchy messaging often fails to capture the full complexity of sustainability efforts. As a result, many companies find themselves caught between two expectations:

- on one hand, the growing demand for accurate, evidence-based claims,
- on the other, the marketing world's constant pursuit of simplicity, speed, and ease.

Research also shows that many of the terms used in sustainability communication are interpreted differently by audiences – or not understood at all.

It is therefore vital that companies focus not only on what they want to say, but also on how and to whom.

Effective sustainability communication begins with clarity: defining ambitions, understanding stakeholders' expectations and determining how to measure and communicate real contributions to sustainability.

It is not merely a matter of compliance – it is a strategic opportunity to shape a credible, cohesive and lasting identity. And because stakeholder expectations are clear – they want messages that are honest, understandable and verifiable – companies must tell their sustainability story thoughtfully, responsibly and in language that builds trust.

This handbook is designed precisely for that purpose.

It serves as a guide for companies that wish to share their sustainability story with greater awareness – without embellishment, yet with pride. With long-term impact and credibility in mind.

## These recommendations serve as a guide for companies that want to:

- build or strengthen stakeholder trust,
- communicate sustainability in line with actual performance and ambitions,
- reduce the risk of greenwashing,
- and embed sustainability as an integral part of their brand identity.

# Sustainability as the foundation of corporate and brand identity

Effective sustainability communication starts with a clear understanding what sustainability means for your company and your business.



## Defining the sustainability focus

A clear definition of sustainability priorities and targets, tailored to the specific industry and the operating context of the company.



## Deep understanding of impacts

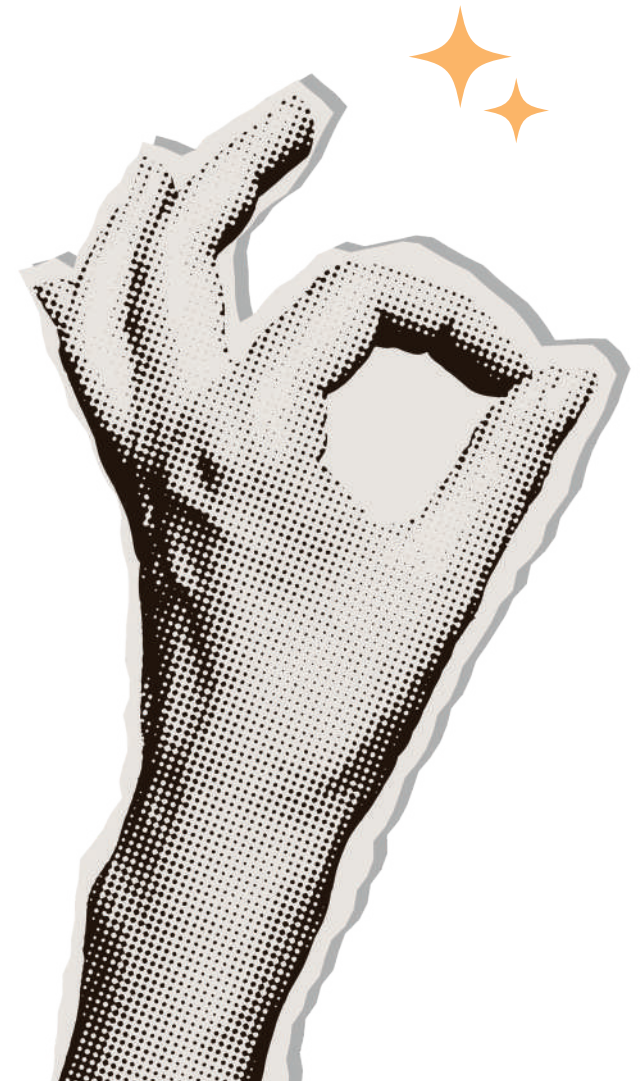
Understanding the environmental, social, and economic impacts of a company is essential for crafting messages that genuinely reflect its efforts.



## Aligning words with actions

Communications must be grounded in concrete measures and achievements, not in generic claims.

Consistency of messaging – from advertising to sustainability reports – strengthens brand recognition and fosters trust-based relationships with stakeholders. A proactive approach that anticipates audience questions and concerns, openly acknowledges challenges and offers solutions further enhances the company's credibility and deepens its connection with target audiences.



# Effective sustainability communication requires collaboration across multiple departments

Ultimately, responsibility for sustainability communication lies with the company's leadership, which sets clear sustainability guidelines and targets that form the basis for all communication efforts. Yet successful sustainability communication depends on collaboration across departments – especially among marketing, public relations and sustainability experts.

## WHAT MAKES SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVE?



### **Involving communicators already at the stage of developing the sustainability strategy.**

Communicators are not merely messengers passing along information. They are the ones who, already during strategy development, help connect the company's sustainability goals with stakeholder interests and foster transparency in decision-making.

### **Linking communication to the company's real impact.**

Good sustainability communication highlights not only successes, but also the learning process, the challenges and the areas where the company is still seeking solutions. The focus should be on the company's contribution to people, the environment and communities – not on self-congratulation.

### **Empowering marketing and PR teams with sustainability content and knowledge.**

Superficiality, lack of context or unsubstantiated claims quickly lead to unconvincing communication — even when the intentions are good. It is therefore essential for communicators to understand core sustainability concepts, speak the language of sustainability, and take a strategic view of the company's impacts.



As a communicator, I believe we are responsible for the integrity of sustainability communication: we must ask the right questions, verify sources, and remain transparent. We must communicate what the organization actually does, not just what it wants people to think about it. Without clear guidance on what is appropriate – and ultimately permitted – sustainability communication quickly devolves into feel-good phrases and appealing surface-level promises that lack real substance. That is why recommendations are such an important tool: they help preserve credibility, build public trust, and create a space where sustainability stands for action, not just a good story.

### **Tina Cipot**

Executive Director o28,  
Communications Group



In operating on the market, companies increasingly want to highlight to the consumers the sustainability benefits of their products, services, or practices. However, many lack clear guidance on what is permitted and what may constitute greenwashing. The legal risks associated with greenwashing should not be underestimated. Competent authorities can impose substantial fines, while public exposure of inadequate practices can also cause lasting reputational damage. Good-practice recommendations therefore offer valuable support for companies seeking to communicate their sustainability efforts responsibly, as they help ensure compliance, encourage a consistent approach in practice and, last but not least, foster a culture of communication that goes beyond the letter of the law.

### **Špela Arsova**

Partner, Šelih & partnerji Law Firm



# Greenwashing



**94% of investors expressed skepticism about the credibility of corporate reporting on sustainability performance.**

PwC Global Investor Survey, 2023



# When communication becomes misleading: the risk of greenwashing

Greenwashing occurs when a company presents its environmental responsibility as greater than it truly is – often to enhance its reputation or appeal to environmentally conscious customers. Instead of demonstrating concrete actions, it relies on generic promises, highlights insignificant details or exploits the absence of clear rules.



## 53%

of environmental claims in the EU were found to be vague, misleading, or unfounded, according to a European Commission study. Common shortcomings include the absence of a clear strategy, lack of independent verification, incomplete information, and claims made without evidence of comparison or impact.



## 80%

of online stores, websites and advertisements contain information about products' environmental impacts = "green claims" (European Commission, 2022).



## 56%

of consumers in the EU reported encountering misleading green claims (European Commission, 2022).

# Reasons why companies fall into greenwashing



## Unclear corporate goals and values

A lack of clear sustainability direction and values often results in superficial, inconsistent communication that relies on appealing but empty terms.



## Internal misalignment

When there is no connection between marketing and operational departments, companies may communicate sustainability initiatives that are not actually implemented. This creates a gap between promises and actions.



## Lack of knowledge about how and when to communicate

Unclear system boundaries and ignoring impacts across the full life cycle and value chain can lead to misleading claims – even when the intentions are good.



## Intentional deceptive practice

A company deliberately creates a false image of environmental responsibility using misleading advertising, token actions or fake certificates.



## Lack of expertise

Insufficient understanding of environmental topics, regulations or standards (e.g., LCA, ESG) can result in incorrect or unsubstantiated claims, often made unintentionally.



## Absence of strategy and measurement

Without impact analyses, sustainability targets and KPIs, companies often showcase isolated activities, such as tree planting or sustainable packaging, as substitutes for a holistic approach.



## Operating under old mindsets

A company continues to follow traditional marketing practices without reflection, highlighting a single claim without questioning its accuracy or consequences. Such an approach overlooks the important role of advertising in co-creating a sustainable society.

## GREENWASHING OFTEN ACTS AS A SMOKE SCREEN

- ! Conceals the company's actual environmental and social impacts.
- ! Distracts from vulnerabilities in the supply chain.
- ! Creates the appearance of environmental responsibility – without any meaningful changes to business operations.

**Transparency is therefore crucial. Genuine sustainability communication also includes acknowledging challenges, limitations, and goals that have not yet been achieved.**

The consequences of failing to do so are not merely symbolic. Beyond potential financial penalties, greenwashing also erodes trust and company credibility, damaging stakeholder relationships and the company's reputation in the long term.



# Types of greenwashing

Below are the most common forms of misleading sustainability communication (greenwashing) that occur in practice. The purpose of this overview is to help companies avoid such practices and build credible, transparent and foster communication that is credible, transparent and grounded in evidence.

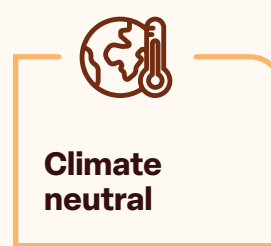
*Summarized from: Planet Tracker*

| TYPE OF GREENWASHING    | WHAT IS IT?                                                                                               | WHY IS IT PROBLEMATIC?                                                                           | TYPICAL EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Greenlighting</b>    | A company highlights a minor green initiative to divert attention from more significant negative impacts. | Creates a false impression of progress while the material impacts remain unchanged.              | Showcasing a single project while overall emissions rise; promoting one green product within an otherwise unsustainable product line. |
| <b>Greenshifting</b>    | Shifting responsibility for environmental problems onto consumers.                                        | Reduces pressure on the company and weakens systemic impact.                                     | "You change your habits" campaigns; emphasizing personal responsibility without making changes in business operations.                |
| <b>Greenlabelling</b>   | Labelling products as "eco", "natural", "sustainable" without evidence or standardization.                | Consumers are misled, which undermines trust in genuinely sustainable products.                  | Using empty terms; applying proprietary labels without third-party verification.                                                      |
| <b>Greenrinsing</b>     | The company repeatedly revises or postpones sustainability targets before achieving them.                 | Undermines credibility and delays real change.                                                   | Pushing back carbon neutrality deadlines; announcing new targets without evaluating previous ones.                                    |
| <b>Greenhushing</b>     | Deliberately under-communicating sustainability efforts.                                                  | Hinders public scrutiny and accountability and makes comparisons difficult.                      | Not publishing targets; scaling back ESG reporting out of fear of criticism.                                                          |
| <b>ESG greenwashing</b> | Emphasizing ESG commitments without genuine implementation or systemic change.                            | Misleads investors and undermines trust in ESG as a driver for change.                           | Flaunting ESG ratings without methodology; "best-in-class" in a weak sector; omitting material impacts.                               |
| <b>SDG greenwashing</b> | Using Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) without a substantive link to business activities.             | Exploits the credibility of the 2030 Agenda and creates a misleading impression of contribution. | Displaying SDG icons without measurable targets; referencing goals with no connection to the business.                                |

# Commonly misused and misunderstood claims

Greenwashing often hides behind seemingly positive terms that lack clear definitions or verifiable substance. Many such claims appear repeatedly across different forms of communication without being properly explained. Recognizing recurring terms is therefore a key tool for assessing their credibility.

These claims often fall under different types of greenwashing (e.g., green labelling, greenlighting, greenrinsing) – particularly when they are not supported by transparent methodologies, independent verification or a specific context of use.



# Cautionary real-world examples and how to avoid them



## Example 1

### VAGUE PRESENTATION OF PROGRESS

A company publishes the claim that it *“will be carbon neutral by 2030”*, but does not disclose the current emissions status, the emission scopes or the methodology to achieve the target.

#### Why this is problematic

Such a claim creates the impression that decarbonisation is already underway or nearly complete, which can mislead stakeholders and undermine trust.

#### Recommendation

Clearly distinguish long-term targets from current performance. Provide concrete data, interim milestones and details on the methods used.

#### Good practice

*“Our goal is decarbonisation by 2030; we have currently reduced Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 24% compared with 2018, calculated using the GHG Protocol methodology. We are deploying energy-efficient systems and progressively phasing out the use of fossil fuels.”*

## Example 2

**DIVERTING ATTENTION WITH MINIMAL ENVIRONMENTAL MEASURES**

The company advertises *“support for local projects”* (e.g., planting nectar-rich plants for bees) without disclosing that, in the same period, it increased production using fossil fuels by 15% and lacks a concrete plan to reduce its own emissions.

**Why this is problematic**

Such an approach creates the impression that the company is seriously reducing its carbon footprint, while internal emissions are actually increasing, which misleads consumers and investors.

**Recommendation**

Disclose emissions for the previous year, set targets and link financing of external projects to actual emission reduction in your own operations.

**Good practice**

*“We reduced Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 12% by 2024 compared to 2020 (GHG Protocol). By 2026, we aim for a further 10% reduction through heating optimization and our own wind turbines. We allocate 5% of annual profit to beekeeping projects as part of our biodiversity strategy.”*

## Example 3

**GENERAL CLAIMS ABOUT SUSTAINABLE DELIVERY**

The company uses the generic term *“sustainable delivery”* without providing additional information about the mode of transport, geographic coverage or the actual environmental impact.

**Why this is problematic**

Without concrete data, the claim is unverifiable and may mislead consumers about the actual emissions reductions.

**Recommendation**

Communicate using precise figures, technologies, and the geographic areas where the changes actually apply.

**Good practice**

*“Delivery in Ljubljana and Maribor is carried out exclusively with electric vehicles. In 2023, the entire urban delivery fleet was replaced, reducing annual emissions by more than 12 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>.”*

## Example 4

**MISLEADING CLAIMS ABOUT RECYCLING**

The product is labeled *“100% recycled”*, although this applies only to part of the product or recyclability is not guaranteed in all settings.

**Why this is problematic**

Consumers are misled about the product's actual environmental benefits.

**Recommendation**

Clearly state which parts of the product are recycled and under what conditions they can be recycled.

**Good practice**

*“The packaging of this product is made from 100% recycled plastic, certified by RecyClass; internal components are made from virgin materials.”*

## Example 5

**GREEN IMPRESSION WITH VISUAL ELEMENTS**

Using *nature symbols, green colours or icons* on products without corresponding sustainability value.

**Why this is problematic**

Visual communication can create a misleading perception of a product's environmental performance.

**Recommendation**

Use visual imagery only if it reflects the true attributes of the product or service.

**Good practice**

*"We use the green symbol on FSC-certified products to indicate the sustainable sourcing of raw materials and a reduced environmental impact."*

## Example 6

**UNSUBSTANTIATED AND GENERALIZED CLAIMS**

In communication, attributes of a single product are *extended to the entire line or brand*.

**Why this is problematic**

It creates the false impression that all products meet the same sustainability standards.

**Recommendation**

Claims should be specific, substantiated and tied to specific products.

**Good practice**

*"Our 'Pure Nature' shampoo range uses packaging made from certified paper without plastic layers. The packaging is suitable for recycling together with other paper products. This attribute applies exclusively to this product line."*

## Example 7

**CLAIM NOT SUPPORTED BY TESTING**

The company claims that its *fuel additive reduces emissions by up to 20%*, but has not conducted its own testing – relying instead on the similarity to a competitor's product.

**Why this is problematic**

A performance claim without appropriate testing breaches the principle of verifiability and can lead to misguided purchases.

**Recommendation**

Before publishing such a claim, carry out appropriate testing tailored to the product's context and use.

**Good practice**

*"Results of internal laboratory testing in accordance with ISO 14034 confirm 15–18% lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions with regular product use."*

## Example 8

## UNEXPLAINED ESG RATING

The company publishes an ESG rating *without explaining the source, methodology, year or scope of the assessment*.

## Why this is problematic

Stakeholders do not understand how the rating was obtained and what it means.

## Recommendation

Always provide the source, year and an explanation of the methodology.

## Good practice

*“According to the 2023 assessment by Morningstar Sustainalytics, we rank among the top 10% of companies in our industry in terms of ESG risk. The rating is based on an analysis of the company’s practices for managing environmental impacts, social responsibility and corporate governance, and reflects data up to the end of 2022.”*

## Example 9

## LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

The company highlights its support for fair working conditions, but *does not disclose information about suppliers and their practices*.

## Why this is problematic

Claims about ethical business conduct are not credible without demonstrable oversight and transparency.

## Recommendation

Publish key information about the supply chain and the mechanisms for ensuring human rights and labour standards.

## Good practice

*“In 2023, we conducted independent social audits at 92% of key textile suppliers, focusing on working conditions, occupational health and safety and respect for human rights. The audits were carried out using the SMETA (Sedex) methodology. Based on the results, we developed action plans for improvements together with suppliers. We publish a summary of findings and measures in the annual sustainability report.”*

## Example 10

## CERTIFICATION WITHOUT CONTEXT

The company highlights a sustainability certification on packaging or in advertising (e.g., FSC, Fairtrade, EU Ecolabel), but *does not explain what the certification actually verifies or which part of the product it applies to*.

## Why this is problematic

Consumers do not know whether the certification applies to the entire product, just the packaging or only a single ingredient– which can lead to a misleading impression and undermine the company’s credibility.

## Recommendation

Always accompany certifications with a clear explanation of what they cover, what share of the product is certified and who issued the certification and when.

## Good practice

*“The product contains Fairtrade-certified cocoa, which accounts for 18% of all ingredients. The certification ensures that farmers received fair payment and that social and environmental standards are respected in production. The remaining ingredients are currently not yet included in a certification scheme.”*

# How to handle additional information that doesn't fit in the ad

When space or content constraints do not allow a full explanation (e.g., a billboard, TV spot or slogan), **provide access to verifiable sources of information:**





Advertising has long shaped ways of thinking, influenced desires, and helped define society's value systems. The introduction of sustainability standards should not be seen as a constraint, but as a strategic opportunity to direct this influence toward creating long-term value. It opens up space for creative development – a new dimension for ideas and a renewed appreciation of the professional skills that advertising has cultivated in the service of economic growth and consumer dynamics. Capabilities such as storytelling, shaping aspirations and steering trends are becoming essential for the transition to a sustainability-oriented society and economy. Advertising therefore carries not only exceptional transformative potential, but also an important responsibility that must be consciously embraced and exercised with integrity.



### **Meta Pavlin Avdić**

Chair of the Council for Sustainable  
Development of the  
Slovenian Advertising Chamber



I believe that sustainable operations in companies are tied to creating economic value in ways that support people and the planet. I advocate a holistic approach that extends across all levels and functions, because fragmented efforts cannot deliver real change. Sustainability practices must be addressed through dialogue with internal and external stakeholders. We can be ambitious in our communication, as this creates space for bigger shifts, but it is essential to be specific: every claim must be grounded in practices and facts we can substantiate. Only in this way can we build trust and long-term credibility.



### **Melanja Korošec**

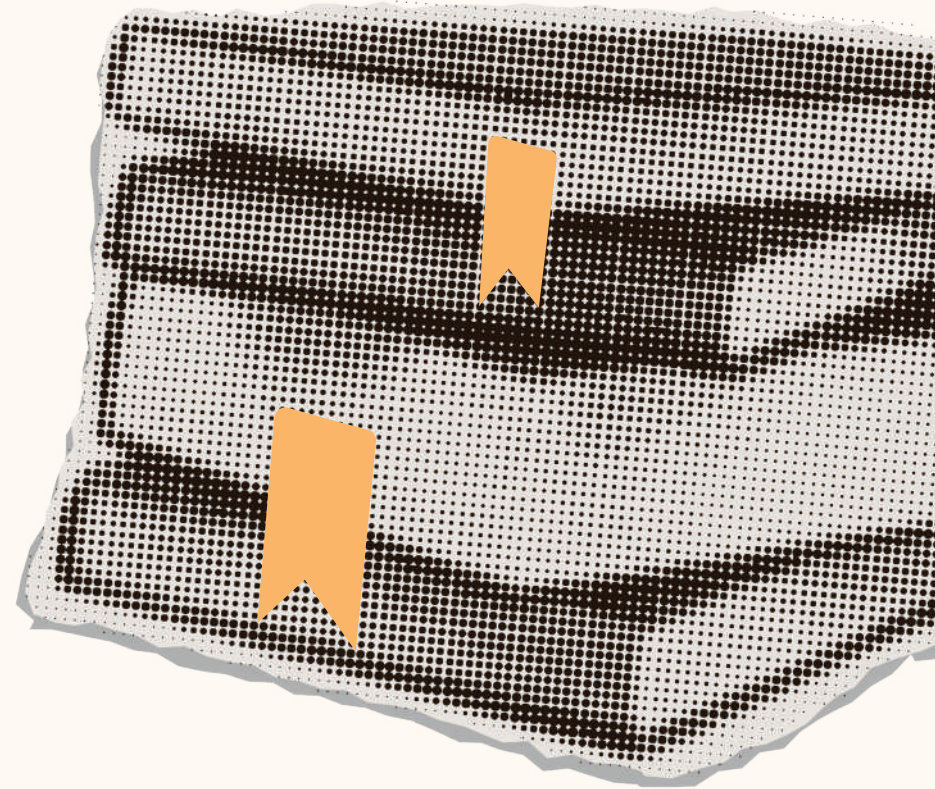
Brand strategy advisor, partner at  
DreamSail Strategic Consulting,  
member of the Council of the CER Institute

# Credibility frameworks



The EU Green Claims Directive will prohibit the claim “climate neutral” if it relies solely on offsetting.

Reuters/BrandWatch, 2024



# Credibility starts with knowledge of the law



## Consumer Protection Act (Zakon o varstvu potrošnikov, ZVPot-1)

Prohibits misleading commercial practices – e.g., incorrect or omitted information that influences a consumer's decision. Fines of up to EUR 50,000 for legal entities.



## EU Directive 2024/825

Expands the definition of misleading practices and adds 12 new examples of greenwashing. Applies from September 2026.



## Prevention of Restriction of Competition Act (Zakon o preprečevanju omejevanja konkurence, ZPOmK-2)

Enables action against unfair market practices, including greenwashing that creates confusion about the environmental characteristics of products or services.



## CSRD (Directive (EU) 2022/2464)

Introduces mandatory sustainability reporting, including investment plans, strategy alignment and sustainability targets. In Slovenia it is transposed through the ZDG-1M amendment.

Although the legislation is evolving, many existing provisions already affect sustainability communication today. A summary of the key takeaways:



### Proposal for a Green Claims Directive

Will require companies to substantiate green claims through independent verification and a transparent methodology, otherwise, sanctions may apply.



### Ecodesign (ESPR), energy labelling and the right to repair

New rules govern sustainable product design, prohibit the destruction of unsold stock, consumption labelling and access to repairs.

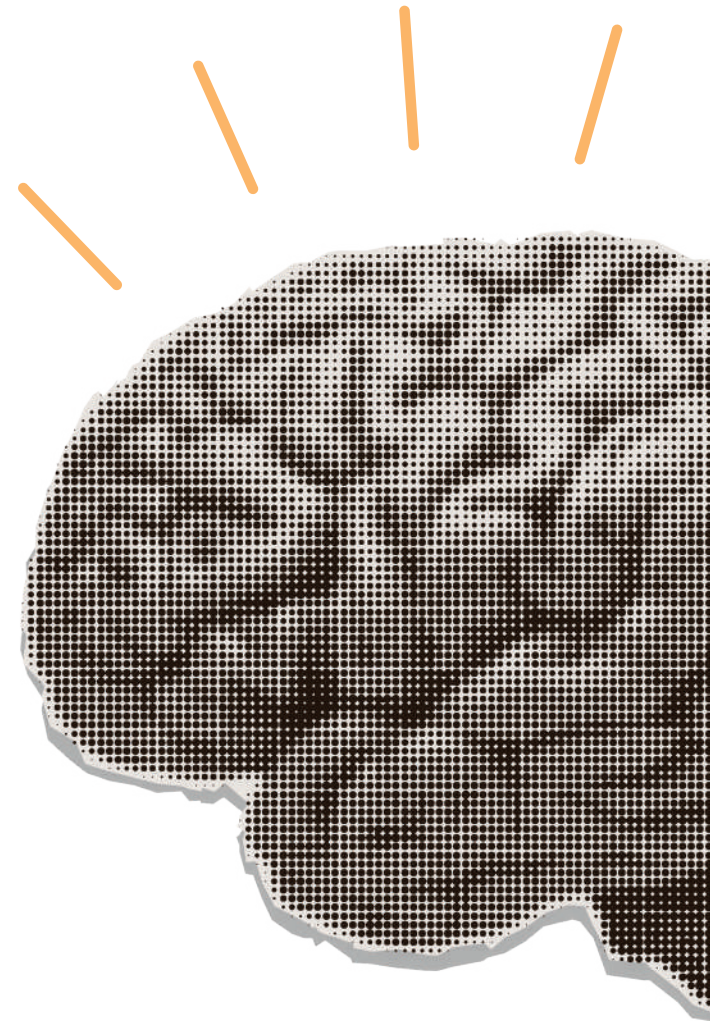


### Financial sector

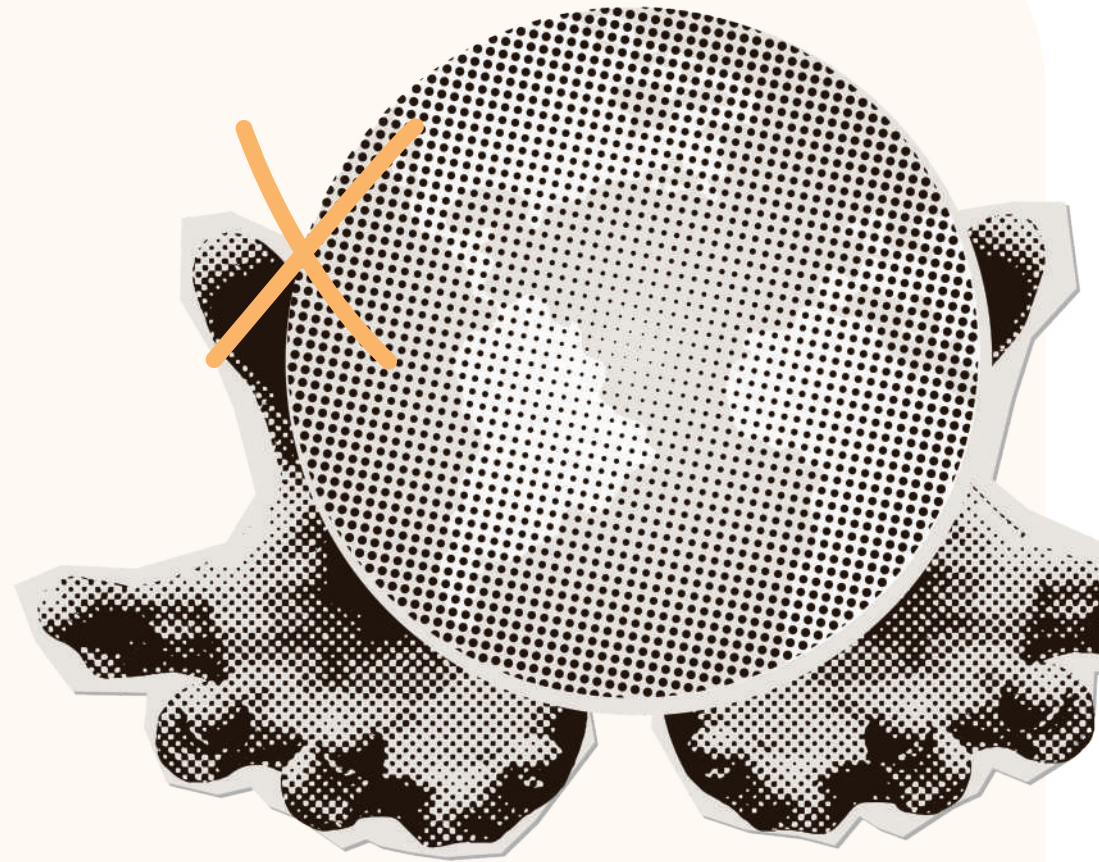
The SFDR and the Taxonomy Regulation restrict misleading claims about sustainable investments. The new European Green Bond Standard (EuGBS) sets strict rules for using the term “green”.



Companies should monitor the implementation of these rules, as they also extend to B2B relationships and require a higher standard of transparency in all forms of communicating environmental and social attributes.



In February 2025, the Ministry of the Economy published a draft amendment to the Consumer Protection Act which, in line with EU rules, expands the scope of misleading commercial practices. Prohibitions would additionally include misleading practices concerning social and environmental attributes as well as the **use of various sustainability labels**. This primarily codifies an obligation to provide verifiable, evidence-based claims regarding the environmental attributes of a product or service or the company's overall operations.



# A strong sustainability narrative is grounded in facts, values and purpose

Sustainability communication is not just a good story – it is a commitment to truth, consistency and inclusion. To be credible and avoid greenwashing, it must be based on facts, not impressions.

1

## State what sustainability means to you

Clearly define what sustainability means in your sector and don't imitate others. Highlight your own priorities and challenges.

2

## Targets without evidence don't count

Support claims with data, certifications and methodology. Differentiate long-term intentions from achieved results.

3

## Be consistent

Communicate the same story across all channels: online, in reports, in internal communications and in advertising.

4

## Be honest

Acknowledge limitations and challenges. Transparency fosters trust.

Only 17% of people believe the claims companies make about sustainability without an independent source.

Kantar Sustainability Sector Index, 2023

Once these foundations are in place, a company can start building messages grounded in impact, authenticity and an understanding of its target audience. This means:



### Start with impact

Emphasize the changes your actions deliver for people and the environment.



### Be authentic

Don't show only successes, share the learning journey too.



### Connect data with stories

Illustrate with real-world examples.



### Stay clear

Don't sacrifice truth for simplicity, but explain in plain terms.



### Build long-term trust

Communication should be part of your sustainability commitment, not just a campaign.



At Pivovarna Laško Union, part of HEINEKEN, we believe that credible and responsible sustainability communication is key to building trust – both within the company and externally. That's why we introduced an internal Green Claims Policy that provides employees with clear guidelines, approval procedures and concrete examples of best practices. Through e-learning and workshops, we empower our employees to confidently address these communication challenges. The results are encouraging: greater confidence, more consistency and a strong sense of responsibility toward consumers and the environment. We support the initiative to develop common recommendations, as we believe that together we can set higher standards and contribute to more transparent, trustworthy communication across the entire sector and beyond.

**Tanja Subotić Levanič**

Director of Corporate Relations,  
Pivovarna Laško Union d.o.o.



At the NLB Group, we are not only key financial stakeholders of our clients but increasingly their partners on the sustainability journey. It is essential that companies provide us with reliable, comparable and accurate data on their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) risks, as this enables us to assess sustainability profiles, evaluate risks and design appropriate green financial instruments. Sustainability disclosure is a long-term, interdependent process between banks and companies. We encourage companies to embed sustainability in their strategy, invest in employee capabilities and view disclosures as a development tool, not merely a compliance obligation. Companies should also avoid greenwashing and broader ESG misleading practices. Frameworks such as the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) and similar initiatives play a vital role in ensuring the comparability, clarity and relevance of sustainability information.

**Karidia Toure Zagrajšek**

Sustainability Development  
Coordinator at NLB



# Good sustainability communication



RepRisk finds that approximately 1 in 4 ESG risks is also linked to economic or social misrepresentation, demonstrating the connection between greenwashing and social washing.

RepRisk, October 2023



# What people remember – and why this matters

Data alone don't win hearts. People respond to what they understand and feel. **To earn attention and trust, communication must:**



**Speak to real needs, not abstract frameworks.**



**Show how sustainability improves lives and solves everyday problems.**



**Focus on progress and solutions, not only on challenges.**



**Use language that connects to fundamental human needs – safety, health, community, beauty.**

In this new phase of sustainability communication, we are no longer talking only about reducing harm, but about creating new value: **innovation, competitiveness and long-term performance.**

Trust isn't something a company earns with a one-off message, it's built with every action, every claim and every story it shares with the world. We hope these recommendations help you tell your sustainability journey with honesty, clarity and impact.

**70% of younger employees (millennials) want to work for companies with a clearly defined purpose, values and a sustainability strategy – and that communicate these effectively.**

Deloitte Millennial Survey, 2022

# Leaders in sustainability communication: concrete, transparent and credible messaging

## What separates a credible sustainability story from an empty promise?

Companies that see sustainability as the core of the business, not a marketing add-on. Their communication is concrete, evidence-based, and does not conceal areas where challenges remain.

From compelling numbers to social activism – these companies do not sell perfection, but responsibility. Their strength lies in transparency, consistency and the courage to tell the truth.

In this chapter, we present five brands that set new benchmarks through their communication and demonstrate how words can truly make a difference.



## TONY'S CHOCOLONELY

### What sets the company apart

Tony's doesn't just sell chocolate; it actively calls out injustices in the cocoa industry. Their goal – 100% slave-labour-free chocolate – is not just a tagline on the packaging, but the core of all their communication.

### Communication approach

The chocolate bars are a message in itself: their uneven pieces illustrate inequalities in the supply chain. The packaging and website clearly explain the company's collaboration model with farmers, using graphics, data and stories. The company communicates openly about not having achieved the goal yet and clearly outlines the remaining barriers. The tone is bold, clear, and sometimes playful – but never superficial.



## SCHNEIDER ELECTRIC (B2B)

### What sets the company apart

Schneider Electric is regarded as one of the most consistent and systematic sustainability communicators among B2B companies. Their premise is simple: help customers reduce environmental impact – and demonstrate it in concrete terms.

### Communication approach

The communication is grounded in concrete numbers and impact. On its website and in its sustainability reports, the company clearly shows how much energy it has helped other businesses save, how many emissions were reduced and what the costs and benefits are. The company includes case studies, calculators and explanations of how its solutions work in practice. The company communicates in a professional yet accessible way, always from the user's perspective.



## BEN & JERRY'S

### What sets the company apart

Ben & Jerry's makes no secret that their ice cream is part of a bigger story. For years, the company's communication has gone beyond environmental certifications – it actively engages with social issues such as human rights, racial justice and climate responsibility.

### Communication approach

On social media, in campaigns, and on its packaging, the company takes clear positions. The company doesn't try to be neutral; it clearly states what it stands for. In its sustainability reports, the company writes clearly and provides ample context, explaining what still lies ahead. At times it collaborates with movements or organisations that share their values. Importantly, the communication is aligned with how the company operates – otherwise the credibility would quickly be lost.



## VEJA

### What sets the company apart

VEJA does not advertise. Instead, the company puts all its energy into traceability, ethical supply chains and sustainable materials. Its communication is very understated, yet that's precisely why it stands out.

### Communication approach

Instead of slogans, the company publishes reports that explain in detail what it does, why some things are not yet ideal and how it is seeking solutions. Their website contains concrete information about materials, suppliers and challenges. The story is not embellished – it is told the way it is. And this is appreciated by the customers.



## REFORMATION

### What sets the company apart

The brand targets style-conscious millennials and Gen Z consumers who no longer trust green slogans without substantiation. Reformation knows how to combine aesthetics and substance without posturing.

### Communication approach

Each product page shows the product's environmental cost – how much water, emissions, and waste were involved compared with a typical item. The company uses its own "RefScale". On social media, the company communicates with humor, clearly and without hype – but always drawing on the facts.

Reformation

## ØRSTED (B2B)

### What sets the company apart

Ørsted is one of the few examples of a company that has undergone a serious transformation – from a coal-based corporation to a leading wind energy developer. And the company knows how to bring this story forth.

### Communication approach

The company's story is simple: to show that change is not only possible but necessary. The website, annual reports, and videos tell the story of how the company transformed itself – and how it helps others do the same. The company doesn't talk about a "green future," but about what it has already done. The language is clear, the tone calm and the messaging is strongly supported by visuals.

Ørsted

# Tools



**72% of respondents believe that companies use sustainability primarily as a marketing tool rather than as a genuine business commitment, indicating a high level of public skepticism.**

GlobeScan / BBMG, Healthy and Sustainable Living Report, 2023



# Self-assessment tool

The list of questions helps identify areas of strength and uncover gaps where there is a risk of greenwashing. The results serve as a basis for improvements, easier alignment with internal departments and stronger trust in the brand.

## HOW TO FILL IN THE TABLE

For each claim, mark:

### ✓ YES

if the claim is fully implemented in your company,

### ⚠ PARTLY

if measures are only partly in place or are being phased in,

### ✗ NO

if the area has not yet been addressed or is irrelevant.

In the “**COMMENT / NEXT STEP**” field, enter:

- notes (e.g., which messages are already aligned),
- proposed next steps (e.g., preparing claim substantiations, clearer taglines, explanation of certifications),
- the person responsible or a timeframe for improvement.

## NEXT STEPS

### ○ Review the results

Identify 3–5 areas where improvements would most strengthen the consistency and credibility of your messaging.

### ○ Engage the team

Align marketing, the sustainability department and leadership on the next steps.

### ○ Define the measures

e.g., ensuring communication consistency across all channels, preparing a publicly accessible strategy, reviewing visuals.

### ○ Review regularly

Use the tool when preparing new campaigns, reports or strategies to maintain consistency and credibility.



| CLAIM |                                                                                                                                                                                | YES | PARTLY | NO | COMMENT / NEXT STEP |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------|----|---------------------|
| 1.    | <b>Credible and accurate claims</b><br>Are your green claims supported by facts, data or evidence?                                                                             |     |        |    |                     |
| 2.    | <b>Clarity of language</b><br>Do you use clear, unambiguous terms that are understandable to the general public?                                                               |     |        |    |                     |
| 3.    | <b>Explaining conditions</b><br>Do you clearly state the conditions under which your claims apply?                                                                             |     |        |    |                     |
| 4.    | <b>Relevant comparisons</b><br>Are comparisons with other products/services not misleading or taken out of context?                                                            |     |        |    |                     |
| 5.    | <b>Visual consistency</b><br>Do colors, symbols and graphical elements reflect the facts and avoid creating a false impression?                                                |     |        |    |                     |
| 6.    | <b>Audit of communication channels</b><br>Have you checked that claims are consistent across all channels (web, social media, advertising)?                                    |     |        |    |                     |
| 7.    | <b>Publicly available strategy</b><br>Do you have a publicly available strategy for the goals you communicate?                                                                 |     |        |    |                     |
| 8.    | <b>Distinguishing between goals and facts</b><br>Do you clearly distinguish between long-term goals and results already achieved?                                              |     |        |    |                     |
| 9.    | <b>Communicating certifications</b><br>When using certifications, do you state what they cover, which part of the product they relate to, and who awards them?                 |     |        |    |                     |
| 10.   | <b>Stating methodology and baselines</b><br>Are claims about impact reductions supported by a methodology, a baseline year and scope?                                          |     |        |    |                     |
| 11.   | <b>Specificity of claims within the offering</b><br>Do you clearly specify which products/services each claim applies to and refrain from generalising it to the entire brand? |     |        |    |                     |
| 12.   | <b>Responsible use of SDG icons</b><br>Do you clearly state how your activities contribute to the selected Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)?                                 |     |        |    |                     |

| CLAIM                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | YES | PARTLY | NO | COMMENT / NEXT STEP |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|--------|----|---------------------|
| 14. <b>Checking compliance with legislation</b><br>Do you regularly monitor compliance of claims with EU and national rules (e.g., the Green Claims Directive)?                                                                             |     |        |    |                     |
| 15. <b>Alignment of marketing with actual business operations</b><br>Are sustainability messages aligned with actual changes to the business model and not based solely on promotional content?                                             |     |        |    |                     |
| 16. <b>Independent verification</b><br>Are your claims independently verified (e.g., by third-party experts, certification bodies)?                                                                                                         |     |        |    |                     |
| 17. <b>Whole value chain coverage</b><br>Do the claims cover the entire value chain (from sourcing of raw materials to the final product/use), and not just one part of the process?                                                        |     |        |    |                     |
| 18. <b>Transparency about limitations</b><br>Do you clearly disclose the limitations and areas where you do not yet have sustainability solutions?                                                                                          |     |        |    |                     |
| 19. <b>Proportion of sustainable versus non-sustainable impacts</b><br>Do you explain what share of the total offering or operations is covered by sustainable practices, so as not to create the impression that all activities are green? |     |        |    |                     |
| 20. <b>Leadership accountability</b><br>Are sustainability claims aligned with the decisions and accountability of the company's leadership and embedded in strategic documents?                                                            |     |        |    |                     |
| 21. <b>Stakeholder engagement</b><br>Do the claims reflect stakeholders' expectations and feedback (employees, consumers, the local community)?                                                                                             |     |        |    |                     |
| 22. <b>Time-bound commitment</b><br>Are your pledges time-bound (short-, medium-, and long-term timelines) rather than left open-ended?                                                                                                     |     |        |    |                     |
| 23. <b>Accessibility of information</b><br>Are the claims and evidence publicly accessible in a format understandable to different groups (consumers, investors, employees)?                                                                |     |        |    |                     |

# Useful tools for credible communication

## Provenance Framework

Data standard for sustainability claims that defines the criteria, evidence and verification needed for compliant and credible communication. Also includes practical case studies from different industries.

➤ [provenance.org/framework/net-zero](https://provenance.org/framework/net-zero)

## Periodic Table of Sustainability Certifications

A visual overview of the most relevant sustainability certifications by topic (e.g., environment, fair trade, recycling). To help with correct labelling of products and services.

➤ [thesustainableagency.com](https://thesustainableagency.com)

## Greenwashing Compass

A tool for analyzing sustainability claims in text – it detects vague terms and suggests improvements to avoid greenwashing.

➤ [gronnvaskingskompasset.vercel.app](https://gronnvaskingskompasset.vercel.app)

## Truth in Advertising (TINA.org)

Independent U.S. organization for reviewing deceptive claims in advertising, including in the field of sustainability. Also includes concrete examples of court cases and warnings.

➤ [thesustainableagency.com](https://thesustainableagency.com)

## Ecolabel Index

The world's largest directory of sustainability labels and certifications – includes 450+ ecolabels with explanations of scope, credibility and criteria.

➤ [ecolabelindex.com](https://ecolabelindex.com)

## WWF Greenwashing Guide

A simple four-pillar guide to evaluating an environmental claim: buzzword, evidence, verification, sustainability.

➤ [wwf.org.uk/learn/guide-to-greenwashing](https://wwf.org.uk/learn/guide-to-greenwashing)

## Let's harness the power of advertising!

The SOZ initiative sets sustainability standards for agencies, clients, and media, and offers clear steps on how to integrate sustainability into the brief, production, and communication.

➤ **PDF document**

## Ad Net Zero – Responsible Advertising Toolkit

Tools for advertising teams to design campaigns that avoid greenwashing. Focus on holistic advertising.

➤ [adnetzero.com](https://adnetzero.com)

## Create change. A guide to activating the brief as a tool for sustainability shifts

The SOZ document provides guidance on how to integrate sustainability into every brief and make it a mandatory part of marketing, advertising and communications. It shows the role of agencies, advertisers, and media in shaping consumer habits, sets focus areas (environment, society, business) and encourages stakeholder collaboration for systemic change.

➤ **PDF document**

# Mini glossary

## Carbon neutral

Carbon neutrality is achieved when the amount of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emitted into the atmosphere is balanced by an equivalent amount that is removed or offset. It does not necessarily require emission reductions, as a product or service can be considered carbon neutral if its emissions are neutralized through carbon offsetting. Achieving carbon neutrality also does not require a science-based reduction plan and inclusion of wider value-chain emissions (Scope 3 emissions) is only optional.

## Net zero emissions

Net zero emissions means that the amount of greenhouse gases (GHGs) emitted into the atmosphere is balanced by the amount removed as a result of one's activities. Unlike carbon neutrality, net zero prioritizes reducing emissions first and uses carbon offsetting only as a last resort (typically the final 5–10%). Achieving net zero also goes beyond carbon dioxide alone – it covers all greenhouse gases, including methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) and fluorinated hydrocarbons. A plan to achieve net zero emissions must be based on science, following frameworks such as the SBTi.

## Gross zero emissions

They are also known as “real zero emissions” and refer to industrial sectors, such as the energy industry, that aim to eliminate carbon emissions from their operations entirely.

## Climate neutral

Climate neutrality means reducing all emissions, not just CO<sub>2</sub>, and other impacts on the climate. Various gases also contribute to atmospheric warming, and some have a greenhouse effect 100 or even 1,000 times greater than that of carbon dioxide. Well-known greenhouse gases include methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O), which are produced in agriculture, waste decomposition and wastewater management. Less well known are the so-called F-gases, used as refrigerants in heat pumps, refrigerators and other appliances. Sulphur hexafluoride (SF<sub>6</sub>) also has an extremely high greenhouse effect – 23,900 times greater than CO<sub>2</sub> – and is used in electrical equipment.

# Partners



## CER Sustainable Business Network

CER is Slovenia's leading association for sustainable business, bringing together more than 100 companies and numerous experts from various sectors.

Since 2012, it has acted as an advocate of the sustainable economy, bringing together stakeholders and accelerating the sustainability transition. It is founded on expertise, collaboration, open dialogue and trust.

Through a range of activities, CER encourages companies to adopt sustainable business practices and supports their sustainability transformation. It develops own projects, participates in EU programmes and awareness campaigns and has received multiple awards.

It advocates for an ambitious and responsible approach to sustainable business and addressing the climate crisis. CER operates as an information hub, an advocate for business in strategic debates, and a coordinator within national and international networks. CER's activities are based on four pillars: sustainable business, cross-sector collaboration, innovation and stewardship.

By joining CER, companies gain access to a community that fosters a mindset shift and responsible, long-term oriented business based on collaboration, knowledge sharing and strategic partnering.

➤ [www.cer-slo.si](http://www.cer-slo.si)



## Green Star



Green Star is a tool and certification developed by CER for a comprehensive assessment of companies' sustainability performance. It is based on the analysis of more than 150 indicators across environmental, social and governance (ESG) dimensions. It provides insight into a company's sustainability maturity, highlights strengths and opportunities for improvement and enables comparisons between companies. Based on the results, companies receive a report and recommendations for further action, while the certificate serves as evidence of commitment to sustainable development. It encourages companies to underpin their sustainability decisions with facts and data.

For Green Star, CER received the 2023 Energy Award from the Finance newspaper for the best promotional project and became the national winner of the European Commission's European Enterprise Promotion Award in the "Supporting the sustainable transition" category.

➤ [www.green-star.si](http://www.green-star.si)

# Recommendations for companies to operate more sustainably



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# Sustainability communication – building trust and telling your story responsibly

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPANIES TO OPERATE MORE SUSTAINABLY

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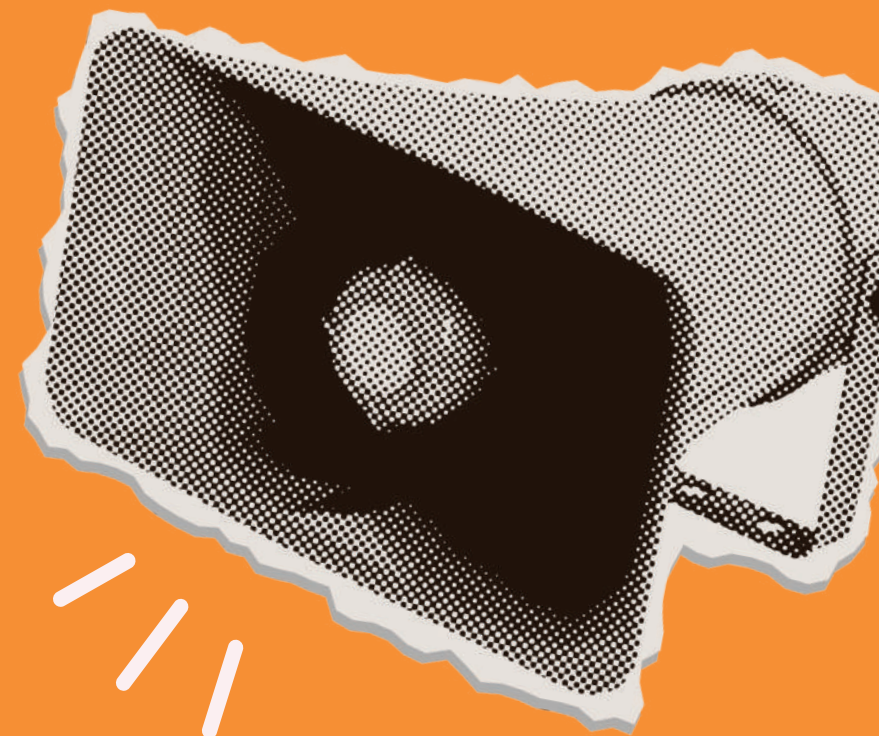
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