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How To Tell Your 'Green' Story Internally

You can transform your sustainability communication from boring bullet points to a compelling story.

Most companies are trying to get on the bandwagon of becoming “green” and sustainable whether through small or big initiatives. And for good reason: Their leaders don’t want the government to mandate sustainability rules, and they believe with some empirical backup that sustainability leaders outperform sustainability laggards.

The sustainability trend is here, and it will be important to communicate effectively what your company is doing to all its stakeholders —especially to employees.

But from their perspective, what could be more dull than what passes for much environmental communication these days, i.e., a list of bullet points singing the company’s praises?

Every company needs a compelling, all-encompassing sustainability “story.” Here’s how.

What are the ingredients of a ‘green story’?

So, what story do you tell and how do you tell it? A story needs to move listeners by combining facts, information, ideas and emotion. Robert McKee, a authority on writing, offers this advice on how to frame a story.

Step 1: Create an analogy. Connect your readers with a similar or parallel idea—the simpler the idea, the better. This can be connected to values, moments or changes that most people might experience in their life.

Step 2: Provide facts and statistics. It is important to offer relevant statistics that will impress your readers with the current situation or environment. Show comparisons to those facts when appropriate.

Step 3: Provide quotes. Offer testimonials and quotes from relevant people either involved in the story or who witnessed events. The quote ideally should have emotive words of how the person felt about the situation or event.

Step 4: Tell the story. Tell the story and create imagery. Be sure to include the characters of the protagonist, antagonist, the desired outcome and the final ending.

These companies tell their green stories well

Here are a few examples of companies that told the story of how they got started in sustainability. Each of these stories is simple to understand and each is backed up by facts and statistics that prove the company is truly becoming more socially and environmentally conscious.

- **Interface, Inc. tells the story of how it got into sustainability.**

Interface founder Ray Anderson was asked more than 14 years ago “what was [his] environmental position,” and Ray didn’t have an answer. He began to read about sustainability, ask questions of the experts and ultimately established an internal team that developed an initial sustainability strategy called “The Seven Fronts of Sustainability.”

They use that strategy to this day. Anderson engaged his employees, suppliers and investors in the movement and is now considered one of the most progressive leaders of sustainable commerce. They have an aggressive “Mission Zero” campaign that promises to eliminate any negative impact their company has on the environment by 2020. To date, they have decreased total manufacturing waste sent to landfills by 70 percent since 1996, and they have increased renewable energy use by 16 percent.

- **Starbucks is an even more emotional example of a good sustainable business story.**

When Howard Schultz was a kid, his dad broke his leg and eventually lost his job. With no income and no health insurance, Howard’s family despaired. This left a profound impression on Schultz and is why he has been such an advocate for health insurance for all employees, whether full-time or part-time. Starbucks’ health benefits include medical, dental, vision, prescription drugs and alternative health-care coverage. They pay 75 percent of health coverage costs for their associates and 56 percent for their dependents.

- **New Belgium Brewery started its sustainability initiative with a simple red bicycle.**

In the early years of the company the leaders developed an employee benefit program that gave each new employee a red cruiser bike to promote biking and exercise instead of driving. This began the widespread sustainability initiatives where New Belgium is one of the leaders. They were the first windpowered brewery in the United States, which was approved by unanimous employee vote. Along with many, many more environmental accomplishments, the brewery has now reduced carbon dioxide emissions by almost 17,500 tons.

- **Pitney Bowes takes its sustainability initiatives so seriously that all new employees sign and agree to the sustainability guidelines of the company.**

The company felt it was vital to the success of the program that their employees feel committed and engaged on all levels. Management created a separate stewardship and compliance committee that monitors sustainability for all Pitney Bowes products. The result: They've reduced total toxic emissions by 98 percent. They have worked with the Environmental Protection Agency to redesign Energy Star packaging.

At a recent corporate responsibility officer conference held in Chicago, Susan Puflea, head of change with GollinHarris, said, "Companies need to be proactive telling their stories."

They need to be more than proactive: They need to be compelling, too.

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WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOING GREEN AND 'GREENWASHING'?

"Greenwashing" is the new term to describe how companies present misleading information to conceal the facts of their social and environmental neglect and present a more flattering public image.

These days greenwashing can be as disastrous for a company's reputation as environmental accidents, when the public eventually learns the truth. Be sure that your company's sustainability intentions are genuine versus merely desiring the image of being "green" and cashing in on the movement. Here are ways the public will be able to tell the difference.

Actions speak louder than words. Be authentic—do what you say and say what you do! There is nothing worse than reporting on a sustainability initiative that either doesn't happen or is grossly misstated. Your company will lose credibility quickly. Make sure before an announcement is made that management is behind the initiative.

Exaggerated facts and figures. Before releasing your facts and metrics find comparable statistics from another industry or other companies. If your statistics are grossly exaggerated, the public and press might ask the company to verify the results. Be ready to prove how you got there.

Cover-ups. Don't use sustainability initiatives to cover up or conceal environmental or social issues. If you have an eco-issue, be honest about your company's current situation and the plans in place to make it right. The public can be forgiving if it is assured that a company is trying to do the right thing.