SUSTAINABILITY ESSENTIALS FOR CORE FUNCTIONS: MARKETING

THE WHY AND HOW OF EMBEDDING ESG INTO MARKETING



UN Global Compact Network UK

CLYDE&CO

INTRODUCTION

Marketing teams are responsible for many of a company's most visible sustainability decisions: what the brand promises, which products take the spotlight, and how the company describes its progress.

As the face of the organisation, it is vital that marketing teams have a thorough understanding of ESG to illustrate sustainability efforts in an authentic way that not only resonates with customers, but also reflects the truth.

The marketing team's involvement in sustainability is critical for realising the commercial benefits of ESG, including improved customer trust, enhanced brand value and engagement, and leadership in the market.

Recognising the critical intersection of marketing and sustainability, the UN Global Compact Network UK hosted an event in November 2025 to explore how the two functions impact each other, what marketing teams should know to support the integration of sustainability throughout the business, and what sustainability and marketing functions can do to work together towards sustainability goals, while driving growth.

The event, supported by Clyde & Co, featured the following speakers:



Jonathan Hall
Managing Partner, Sustainable Transformation Practice, Kantar



Zoe Dittmann
Corporate Purpose & Strategic Impact Manager, Holland & Barrett



Matt Bourn
Director of Communications, Advertising Association



William Brewster
Global Head of Communications, Clyde & Co

Why sustainability and marketing?

Achieving a company's sustainability targets cannot be accomplished by one person or even one team. Sustainability is complex and requires consideration of a multitude of factors across the business, supply chain, and whole economy. Yet in many companies, sustainability still operates in a silo, without active engagement from the functions whose decisions shape the outcome. For sustainability to be truly integrated, every core function needs a fundamental understanding of how its role contributes, including marketing.

Marketing connects a company with its market – shaping demand, positioning the brand, briefing agencies, and deciding what messaging and values a campaign promotes. Through product and range decisions, brand strategy, advertising and media, and the partnerships it chooses, marketing determines whether the more sustainable product sells, whether the claim behind it is substantiated, and whether the company's advertising helps or hinders the behaviour change its strategy depends on.

The question is not whether marketing has a role in sustainability, but whether the company uses that role to build customer trust through authentic communication, or treats sustainability as a source of buzzwords.



"We need, as a discipline, to move beyond just communications. We need to see our responsibility across the value chain."

Jonathan Hall, Kantar

Where the two functions meet

Sustainability and marketing now sit closer together than most organisational charts suggest. The UN Global Compact's CMO Blueprint for Sustainable Growth, developed in 2025, sets out this intersection across five pillars, and the UN Global Compact–Kantar CMO Benchmark Study measures how far organisations have progressed against each one. Key areas where sustainability and marketing intersect include:

Growth strategy & differentiation

Sustainability is increasingly a source of growth and differentiation, rather than only a reputational issue.

Marketing is well placed to translate a company's sustainability strategy into propositions that help generate growth and stories that set the business apart, but many marketers haven't yet realised this opportunity: 69% of organisations in the CMO Blueprint benchmark say they are progressing well in translating sustainability strategy into the marketing agenda, but only 47% of marketers rate themselves highly on differentiation, and 42% are confident they are building brand growth from sustainability.

Communications, advertising, & media

Advertising campaigns, social media, and promotional events give marketing a platform to demonstrate sustainability leadership and encourage consumer participation, while analytics show which messages actually change behaviour.

Kantar's analysis of roughly 10,000 ads a year finds that only 6% show sustainable behaviours, explicitly or implicitly, so more can be done to strengthen this portrayal, particularly when the desired behaviour change is relevant to the company's targets or ESG-related products and services.

Additionally, Ad Net Zero's five-point action plan helps the industry reduce the footprint of its own operations, production, and media.

Innovation & behaviour change

Marketing and product teams should understand the full impact of their products, from cradle to grave, and how to improve them through circular design, resource use, end-of-life disposal, accessibility, and inclusion.

Kantar data shows 85% of people worldwide want to live more sustainably and only 29% feel able to, and marketers rate their progress at just 42% on understanding the motivators and barriers behind that gap.

Circular and systems thinking (41%) and new business models (38%) score lower still.

Brand strategy & authenticity

Today's customers expect transparency about how products are made, where materials are sourced, and what the environmental and social impacts are, so claims must be accurate and backed by action.

Greenwashing, and its social equivalent, bluewashing, can quickly damage a brand, while rigorous, independently validated certifications (e.g., Fairtrade, organic, or science-based targets) can strengthen it.

Marketers rate themselves at 53% on building trust successfully, but Kantar's Sustainability Sector Index finds that 52% of people believe companies give misleading or false information about their sustainability efforts.

Regulation & green claims

Growing ESG legislation and reporting requirements mean marketing professionals need to understand both the rules on claims and the metrics by which their company's sustainability performance is judged.

Since April 2025, under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024, the Competition and Markets Authority can fine businesses directly for misleading environmental claims, with penalties of up to 10% of global turnover, alongside the Advertising Standards Authority's environmental claims rules.

In the EU, the Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive bans generic claims such as "eco-friendly", offset-based neutrality claims, and uncertified sustainability labels from 27 September 2026. Sustainability reporting gives marketing a credible basis for telling the story of a company's progress.

Collaboration & partnerships

Sustainability opens the door for marketing to work with charities, NGOs, certification bodies, and industry initiatives, which can strengthen credibility and extend reach.

This is the pillar where the benchmark is weakest: 47% of marketers say collaboration works internally, 41% across industry, and 36% on systemic change with governments and NGOs.

WHAT COLLABORATION IS WORTH

Collaboration between marketing and sustainability produces clear returns a business can measure: improved sales and brand recognition, a claim that holds, and commitments the company can still defend years later. The 2025 UN Global Compact and Accenture CEO Study highlights the heart of the problem: only 50% strongly agree they are currently comfortable communicating their progress.

To the people in the roles



Meaningful collaboration benefits both roles. Sustainability teams own the targets and the evidence of progress, while marketing teams know what customers will respond to and how to craft that message.

However, collaboration has to start early: **"you have to give people an opportunity to disagree early on, so that it doesn't become a distraction down the line."** Zoe Dittmann, Holland & Barrett.

The same applies to public commitments: testing them with healthy scepticism early on makes them stronger:

> **"Think about what it might look like in five years' time. If journalists turn around and ask you a difficult question... how will you answer that?"**
>
> William Brewster, Clyde & Co

To the organisation's sustainability goals



Many sustainability targets rely on changing customer behaviour over time, and marketing plays a key role in making the sustainable choice easy. The strongest results come from offering a genuine, better alternative.

Phasing out krill-based supplements at Holland & Barrett cut sales of those products by 12% in the first month, as expected, while sales of algae-oil alternatives rose 24%.

> **"Think about what better looks like, and how can you go and collaborate with marketing, with your commercial teams."**
>
> Zoe Dittmann, Holland & Barrett

Marketing teams understand what messaging resonates with customers, so they can creatively position a more sustainable product around the benefits customers already care about, such as price, durability, or style, with sustainability as part of the appeal rather than the whole pitch.

This benefits the sustainability team and the organisation's goals without compromising sales.

To the business



Collaboration between the two functions is what turns commercial drivers, such as customer preference, cost, regulation, and reputation, into value.

Kantar estimates that sustainability perceptions already contribute as much as 10% of the value of the Kantar BrandZ Global Top 100 most valuable brands. Bringing sustainability expertise into marketing early reduces the legal and reputational risk of claims that cannot be substantiated, avoids costly last-minute rewrites, and helps the business bring more sustainable products to market with a story customers trust.

Consumers are smart, sense over-promising, and reject brands they think have misled them. Trust is built by talking about progress, rather than perfection. Progress claims, framed as year-on-year improvement rather than a promise for 2035, give marketing something honest to say and keep customers informed as the journey continues.

INTEGRATING THE TWO FUNCTIONS

Who is involved and how it is governed

ESG-led marketing involves a wide range of people across the organisation:

CMO or brand lead
for strategy and messaging

Communications lead
for claims, reputation, and internal engagement

Sustainability lead
for targets, terminology, and data

Commercial team
for range and pricing

Insight and analytics
for consumer behaviour and measuring impact

Legal
for substantiation

Procurement
for agency and supplier criteria

The executives the functions report to

The reporting lines are also critical to success. Marketing, sustainability, and communications reporting into the same growth division and the same executive, as at Holland & Barrett, means shared goals and vision, and working together is considered routine. Where that is not possible, sustainability, marketing, and leadership need a close working relationship so that objectives match, rather than pull in different directions.

HOLLAND & BARRETT: ONE DIVISION, ONE SET OF GOALS, AND A TOOL FOR CLAIMS

Green claims regulation forced marketing, sustainability, and communications to work through problems together, which made shared goals and regular joint work the default. The business brought in Provenance, a software platform that validates green claims for retailers, and sustainability worked with marketing to implement it across the organisation.

In 2025, the company announced a phase-out of all its krill-based products, which was driven by the sustainability team as part of its wider commitments to accelerate positive environmental change. The sustainability team had to work with the commercial and marketing teams closely – providing evidence that sales of alternatives such as algae oil had risen 24%, twice the 12% fall in krill sales, as well as collaborating carefully with marketing to craft the right message about the shift. In the end, there was no negative commercial impact for Holland & Barrett from the krill phase-out.

What changes in the process?

Move sign-off to the start of the campaign

The sustainability team should be consulted on the creative brief, on product range decisions (which products to develop, stock, or promote), and on any public commitment or claim before they are fixed. It's easier to make tweaks throughout, rather than make substantial changes at the end of the process.

Substantiate every claim before eagerness takes over

Journalists, regulators, and customers will ask difficult questions, so think critically about the longevity of claims at the point of approval. Advertising should be legal and truthful, with the relevant data to back up every claim – both teams should be critical about whether a specific claim is misleading.

Redefine creative excellence

An award-winning campaign that causes environmental or social harm is a reputational problem waiting to surface, so the industry's definition of commendable work needs to include its sustainability impacts. Editorial teams already know their readers want to live more sustainably; the opportunity is advertising that portrays those lifestyles too.

Share knowledge to enable effective collaboration

Collaboration is only possible if both teams have the necessary understanding. Marketing needs enough sustainability literacy to brief agencies on impact key performance indicators (KPIs) and to understand the intricacies behind a claim. Likewise, sustainability needs enough marketing literacy to see why a claim that is true may still not resonate. The CMO Blueprint gives both a shared framework and a benchmark to measure against each year, and the UN Global Compact Academy offers free training for both teams. In each case, the aim is the same: **"Speak to your colleagues before there's a deadline, before there's a deliverable due… whether you're on the sustainability or the marketing team."** Zoe Dittmann, Holland & Barrett. Twentieth-century advertising was about selling something. Today's version is about problem solving through creativity, and the question for every brand is which sustainability problem it can help solve.

CLYDE & CO: COMMITMENTS TESTED BY COMMUNICATIONS FIRST

At Clyde & Co, the communications team was consulted before the firm made its net zero commitments to check that they would land and to work through the worst-case scenarios. The team then helped build the employee engagement programme, outlining what communications could do to further progress by translating net zero into actions that employees could take in their day-to-day roles. As a firm that advises clients on greenwashing, Clyde & Co knows its own claims will be scrutinised, so it has also put its targets on a commercial footing: its credit facilities with all of its major lenders are now sustainability-linked, and it accepts that the legal media will publish and hold it accountable for its progress.

ADVERTISING ASSOCIATION: AWARDS THAT DEMAND SUSTAINABILITY METRICS

Four years ago, the Advertising Association set up the Campaign Ad Net Zero Awards as an alternative to the industry's existing prizes. They are the only awards in the industry that require sustainability metrics as well as commercial ones: **"the work will not win unless we see clear evidence of commercial success and sustainability success."** Matt Bourn, Advertising Association.

The website now has more than 100 case studies. In one, Transport for London and its agency VCCP responded to a brief from the Mayor's office to make the city's advertising as sustainable as possible, which meant reducing the footprint of the media supply chain, as well as the creative work. In another, ITV, the media agency MGOMD, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero wrote heat pumps into an Emmerdale storyline, supported by surrounding advertising; it won the Grand Prix and was one of the first UK government investments in a climate behaviour-change campaign.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

To uncover areas for further work, discuss the following questions with a colleague from the other function. Record actions, owners, and timelines for next steps in our accompanying Discussion Template.

- Which campaigns, product range reviews, and commitments are planned in the next twelve months, and how does sustainability factor into each one?
- What does “better” look like in our product categories, and which products or services could we offer instead of the ones that contribute to negative sustainability impacts?
- Which of our current claims could we substantiate to a regulator or a journalist today, and which would we struggle to defend in five years?
- Which of our claims and campaigns touch on social issues, such as fair wages, labour rights, or inclusion, and how are they substantiated?
- Do our agency briefs and supplier criteria include social and environmental KPIs, and does anyone’s performance review or bonus depend on them?
- Where do our advertising and content portray sustainable lifestyles, and where do they portray the opposite?
- Do marketing and sustainability report to the same executive, and if not, how are objectives aligned?
- Which of the five CMO Blueprint pillars are we weakest on, and what would move us up the benchmark next year?

Additional resources

Frameworks, benchmarks, and sustainability training

- Kantar BrandZ Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands
- Kantar Sustainability Sector Index
- Sustainable Development Goals
- UN Global Compact Academy
- UN Global Compact and Accenture CEO Study 2025
- UN Global Compact CMO Blueprint for Sustainable Growth and CMO Benchmark Study with Kantar
- UN Global Compact Ten Principles
- World Federation of Advertisers (WFA) and Kantar Sustainable Marketing 2030

Sustainable advertising, marketing and media

- Ad Green
- Ad Net Zero
- Cambridge Institute of Sustainability Leadership Sustainable Marketing Hub
- Campaign Ad Net Zero Awards and Case Studies
- Chartered Institute of Marketing Sustainable Marketing Hub

Green claims, greenwashing, and greenhushing

- Anti-Greenwash Charter
- ASA and CAP Environmental Claims Guidance
- CMA Green Claims Code
- Directive (EU) 2024/825, Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition
- South Pole 2024 Destination Zero: the state of corporate climate action

ABOUT THE UNITED NATIONS GLOBAL COMPACT

As a special initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General, the UN Global Compact is a call to companies worldwide to align their operations and strategies with Ten Principles in the areas of human rights, labour, environment, and anti-corruption.

Its ambition is to accelerate and scale the global collective impact of business by upholding the Ten Principles and delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through ambitious, accountable companies and environments that enable change. With more than 21,000 companies and 3,300 non-business signatories based in over 167 countries, and 64 Local Networks, the UN Global Compact is the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative — one Global Compact uniting business for a better world.

For more information, visit www.unglobalcompact.org

ABOUT THE UN GLOBAL COMPACT NETWORK UK

The UN Global Compact Network UK is part of the world's largest responsible business initiative, the United Nations Global Compact, connecting UK companies and other organisations in a global movement dedicated to driving sustainable growth. Through an extensive programme of activity, it promotes sustainability leadership to create a world we want to live and do business in, by inspiring ambition, enabling action, and collaborating to shape the business environment.

The Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact, rooted in UN treaties, provide a robust foundation for corporate sustainability and business action on the SDGs.

For more information, follow us on LinkedIn ((UN Global Compact Network UK) or visit unglobalcompact.org.uk

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