



Communicating sustainability

About these guides

These practical guides explain important sustainability topics for businesses. Share them with the people in your organisation who are working together to meet your environmental, social and governance goals.

Why communication matters

Communicating your sustainability efforts can make the difference between good intentions and creating lasting change. It helps you set out your strategy, bring People on board, inform and educate your stakeholders, motivate your team, make better decisions and celebrate your progress.

Well-worded and thoughtfully designed communication is more likely to be understood and acted upon - driving meaningful change.



Guiding principle: Pono

Understanding how the team communicate to each other authentically and transparently

Sustainability professionals often act as the moral compass for the organisation. Communication requires honesty and transparency. Sharing information to ensure your audiences are fully informed will be considered pono. This includes sharing information with employees with as much transparency as possible and applying the key principles we have discussed in these guides through communications in a genuine and authentic way.

Benefits of good communication

Improves business performance	Demonstrates your sustainability credentials, creating competitive advantage.
Builds stakeholder support	Encourages suppliers, customers and employees to support your sustainability goals.
Risk management	Identifies and manages sustainability risks effectively, essential for compliance and reporting requirements (e.g., climate reporting).
Reputation and trust	Strengthens stakeholder trust by transparently sharing your sustainability journey. Attracts customers, investors and top talent.



Making sustainability communication work

- **Clarifying your sustainability strategy:** Committing your strategy to paper helps to make sure it's coherent, comprehensive and actionable, holding your business accountable.
- **Engaging stakeholders:** Clear communication helps you educate your stakeholders and enlist support across your value chain - e.g., your suppliers will source material responsibly and your team understands and supports the strategy.
- **Promoting your sustainability efforts:** Sharing successes with your customers strengthens loyalty and shows your brand can be trusted'
- **Managing risk:** Climate reporting helps businesses identify risks and opportunities clearly, turning insights into proactive strategies.



What good sustainability communication looks like

Your sustainability communications should be:

- **Clear and concise:** Communicate in plain English using simple and clear language. Avoid jargon.
- **Relevant and timely:** Keep stakeholders informed regularly, provide updates and tailor content to those who need to know.
- **Engaging and practical:** Include examples and stories your audience can relate to and act on.
- **Fact-based and credible:** Always support statements with reliable data and facts.
- **Open and transparent:** Share honestly about both your achievements and challenges.
- **Visually appealing:** Good design makes your content easier to read and understand.



How to communicate effectively: an example

Communicating your scope 3 emissions strategy to your value chain.

Component	Example details
Purpose	Encourage suppliers, engage employees, reassure customers.
Audience	Suppliers, internal teams, customers.
Channels	Supplier workshops/webinars, internal intranet, external social media posts, sustainability report.
Key messages	Suppliers: "Collaborate with us to reduce emissions - better outcomes for all." Team: "Our scope 3 emissions matter - let's innovate together to make a difference." Customers: "We're reducing impacts throughout our value chain - here's how you benefit."
Measurement	Supplier participation rate, employee awareness surveys, customer engagement (click rates, shares, feedback).



Sustainability reporting frameworks

Sustainability reporting frameworks help your business clearly communicate your progress, highlight your impact and build trust with customers, investors and stakeholders.

Here is an overview of the major internationally recognised frameworks.

Framework	Main focus	Best suited for your business if you...
GRI (Global Reporting Initiative)	Broad sustainability impacts across environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors.	...want a globally recognised, detailed and structured approach to cover ESG topics.
IFRS S1 (Sustainability-Related Financial Disclosures) (SRFD)	How sustainability is integrated into your overall business strategy, performance and how you create value.	...aim to connect sustainability closely with financial performance and strategic decision-making.
Aotearoa New Zealand Climate Standards	Climate-related financial risks and opportunities, including your approach to climate governance, risk management and metrics.	...need to specifically address climate risk, meet New Zealand's mandatory climate reporting requirements, or inform investors and regulators about climate impacts.
TNFD (Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures)	Risks and opportunities related to how your business affects and relies on nature and biodiversity.	...are exploring your impacts on nature, biodiversity, or ecosystems and want to align with emerging global best practice.
Custom Reporting (No set framework)	Flexible sustainability reporting tailored to your unique business operations, goals and stakeholders.	...prefer flexibility or are early in your sustainability journey where simple and clear might work best.

Choosing the right framework for your business:

- › Consider the scale and structure of your organisation.
- › Understand what your stakeholders need (customers, investors, regulators).
- › Identify the sustainability issues most relevant (material) to your business.
- › Decide based on your resources and capability.

Start simple and build from there - clarity and transparency are what matters most.

Greenwashing and how to avoid it

What is greenwashing?

Environmental claims that make an organisation, service or product appear more environmentally friendly than they really are.

Why avoiding greenwashing matters:

What

Why it matters

- › **Consumer trust** Kiwis value sustainability and misleading claims erode confidence in your business.
- › **Environmental impact** Greenwashing diverts resources from real action on issues like cutting carbon and reducing waste.
- › **Regulatory compliance** The Fair Trading Act 1986 prohibits misleading environmental claims, with increasing enforcement by the Commerce Commission.
- › **Business reputation** If you're found to be greenwashing your claims, it can damage brand credibility.

What does greenwashing look like?

Vague claims: Using broad, undefined terms like "eco-friendly" without evidence.

Example: A company labels its plastic packaging as "biodegradable" without specifying conditions or timeframes.

Hidden trade-offs: Focusing on one green aspect while ignoring negative impacts.

Example: A brand promotes its recyclable coffee pods but doesn't disclose the high carbon footprint of production.

Misleading imagery: Using nature-related visuals to imply sustainability.

Example: A petrol company's ad shows lush forests and clean rivers, suggesting its fuel is environmentally friendly.

False certifications: Misusing or inventing eco-labels.

Example: A product displays a "green tick" that isn't backed by an independent certifier.

Irrelevant claims: Highlighting features that are legally required.

Example: A spray brand advertises itself as "CFC-free" even though CFCs are already banned in New Zealand.

Omitting key information: Leaves out important details about a product's real impact.

Example: A company offsetting carbon but not cutting emissions

What about greenhushing?

Some organisations are so scared of greenwashing that they avoid environmental claims altogether. This phenomenon is called 'greenhushing'.

Three good reasons to embrace trustworthy environmental claims:

- **A brand boost:** Sustainability stories elevate your brand and build loyalty.
- **Become a product of choice:** Your customers can rely on your data and compare your product to others.
- **Industry standards:** Collective action is essential. Lead by example and inspire others to follow with your success stories.

How to avoid greenwash: Eight principles for trustworthy claims

1. **Be accurate and truthful:** Make sure your claims give the full picture and reflect your environmental impact.
2. **Back up your claims:** Support what you say with independent, science-based evidence.
3. **Include all key information:** Don't hide important details in fine print. Know your product's full life cycle and share the facts.
4. **Explain any conditions:** If the benefit depends on how people use the product, make that clear.
5. **Avoid broad, unqualified claims:** Use specific language. If a claim has limits, say so clearly.
6. **Keep it simple:** Skip technical terms and make it easy for everyone to understand.
7. **Use honest visuals:** Avoid nature-themed visuals or recycling symbols if they give the wrong impression.
8. **Be open about your journey:** Share both your achievements and challenges in reaching sustainability goals.

Source: [Australian Competition and Consumer Commission \(ACCC\)'s Making Environmental Claims: A Guide for Business.](#)

A roadmap to bring it all together

Getting started

- Identify the sustainability issues that matter most to your organisation.
- Set clear, achievable communication goals and develop a communication plan that considers your objectives, target audience, key messages, channels, frequency and success measures.
- Use simple, plain English to share your sustainability story.
- Be honest and transparent about where your business is at right now.

Making progress

- Regularly update stakeholders about your sustainability journey.
- Collect data and share measurable progress.
- Encourage feedback to build trust and engagement.
- Share successes, but also be open about challenges.

Leading the way

- Align your reporting with recognised frameworks (e.g., XRB, GRI).
- Proactively communicate how sustainability drives your business strategy.
- Influence and inspire stakeholders and peers by sharing best practices.
- Show leadership by openly discussing your sustainability challenges and solutions.

About us

The **Sustainable Business Council (SBC)** is a CEO-led membership organisation that mobilises over 130 ambitious businesses to build a thriving and sustainable future for all.

thinkstep-anz is an independent trans-Tasman sustainability firm. We offer a full range of sustainability services and specialise in plain English sustainability communications and design. thinkstep-anz's sustainability communicators have written this guide.

Kaitiaki Collective promotes transformational thinking through sustainability, environmental and stakeholder engagement. We reflect whakaaro me mātauranga Māori in everything we do.

More information

You'll find the other guides in this series here:
sbc.org.nz/sustainability-toolkit

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