

Sustainable Branding Guidebook

An essential read for business owners and executives
looking to build a genuine sustainable brand

In partnership with

eqlosion



Branding sustainability

Sustainability has an image problem. On the one hand, most people agree that our current way of life is not sustainable, and that we have to quickly transition to a green economy. But when asked *how* we can achieve that goal, everyone, from business and political leaders to everyday citizens, has a different take on the matter.

It's not purely a technical issue. Experts agree that we already possess many of the tools to reform our economy. But in order to make that leap, we need a collective buy-in, a new social and environmental contract. In that context, brand owners are in a difficult position: how do we lead the change, while safeguarding and adapting our businesses to this new reality?

Part of the answer to that question lies in how companies will be able to leverage their sustainable drive and turn it into an asset for their brand, paving the way for greener growth.

This document was created to reflect on the issue of sustainable branding, and offer recommendations on how to build brands that are able to accompany and amplify a company's sustainability strategy. It stems from the collaboration between branding company **Creative Supply** and sustainability consultancy **eqlosion**.

It's better to embrace sustainability, than to be forced into it.



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Content

04 Status Quo

11 5 Principles to build sustainable brands

Status Quo

Where does your company stand and what questions do you need to ask yourself to build a winning sustainable brand?

An aerial photograph of a forest. The left side of the image shows trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, red, and brown. The right side shows lush green trees. A dark road winds through the forest, and a small white car is visible on it.

What defines a “sustainable brand”?

Sustainable branding relates to how companies can leverage their **existing sustainability strategy** in order to amplify its effects, gain visibility and engineer greener growth. A sustainable brand is a brand that has successfully integrated sustainability into its DNA, and that sees social & environmental progress and economic gain as equally important pursuits.

Some facts about sustainable brands:

- Sustainable brands strive to create long-term economic and environmental value for all stakeholders
- A sustainable brand aligns with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- A sustainable brand cannot exist without an underlying sustainability strategy with tangible results

Where are you today?



PUBLIC STAR

Your company has not implemented a strong sustainability strategy. However, its brand is somehow recognised as a strong actor in the field of sustainability.



GREEN STAR

Your company has implemented a wide range of actions to make its products, operations and supply chain sustainable. The brand is seen as a key actor in the sustainability field.



STAR TO BE

Your company has not implemented a strong sustainability strategy and its brand is not at all associated with sustainability.



HIDDEN STAR

Your company has implemented a wide range of actions to make products, operation and supply chain sustainable. But the brand is not recognised for its effort.

Level of sustainable
operation maturity

Level of sustainable branding maturity



Star to Be

Your company has not implemented a strong sustainability strategy and your brand is not at all associated with sustainability. What should you do?

Challenges

If competitors are moving quickly on that topic, it might soon be too late to catch up. However, it's even riskier to fall behind.

Opportunities

Introduction of sustainable practices are likely to be well received and supported by your customers, as well as external and internal stakeholders.

Questions to ask yourself

- How do I chart my sustainability journey: what is the roadmap to integrate sustainability in my brand positioning and, in parallel and in a coherent way, develop an efficient sustainability journey for my operation?
- Where should I start my sustainability journey? What resources can I use?
- Do I need to convince internally? If yes, who and how do I convince to go that path? How do I inspire people to go further?

12-month focus

- Assess competitors and the market. Where are they and how fast do they move?
- Identify who should be convinced internally and build your network of supporters
- Build a sustainable vision with the top management
- Work on a global strategy, per department/brand (including brand team)
- Implement a one-year action plan based on that vision and strategy
- After 12 months, review and refine the strategy and action plan



Hidden Star

Your company has implemented a wide range of actions to make its products, operations and supply chain sustainable. But the brand is not recognised for its effort.

Challenges

Internally, communicating about your sustainable operations can be perceived as too opportunistic.

Externally, a sudden communication about sustainability can potentially confuse customers about your value offering and the positioning of your brand.

Opportunities

You have all the foundations needed to build a leadership sustainable brand.

Questions to ask yourself

- Who is my sustainability audience? Who should I target first, internally and externally?
- How do I integrate sustainability in my branding? What does sustainability mean for my brand? How do I communicate around it, and how fast can I go?

12-month focus

- Define priorities and objectives for your sustainable brand push
- Identify the current practices that support your brand in terms of sustainability
- Look at your current positioning and identify any sustainable aspect it may contain, and where new ones can be added.
- Define a communication strategy to get the word out, and set up a roadmap for improvement



Public Star

Your company has not implemented a strong sustainability strategy. However, its brand is somehow recognised as a strong actor in the field of sustainability.

Challenges

A “green” image without substance is a PR ticking time bomb.

A gap between external perception and internal operations can create confusion.

First sustainable actions will not bring any tangible benefits in terms of branding.

Opportunities

Known for your sustainability leadership, you should not have any difficulties to convince the value of this leadership internally. Backing your communication with facts will strengthen your position.

Questions to ask yourself

- What is my sustainability journey: what is the roadmap to integrate sustainability into my operations?
- Where should I start? What are the short, medium and long-term changes I can make? How do I catch up and accelerate the integration of sustainability in my operations?
- Do I need to convince internally? If yes, who?
- How do I inspire people to walk the talk? How do I explain the risk of not taking action?

12-month focus

- Assess the risk of not moving
- Identify who should be convinced internally and build your network of supporters
- Build a sustainable vision with the top management, aligning brand and business objectives
- Build an action plan and start realising your vision
- Start to progressively feed branding with sustainable operation stories and build the interactions between both



Green Star

Your company has implemented a wide range of actions to make products, operation and supply chain sustainable. The brand is a key actor in the sustainability field.

Challenges

As a leader, people are watching you and your actions. Losing your green leadership might cost a lot.

Finding new ways to integrate sustainability into your brand & business. Being the first-mover is expensive.

Opportunities

Higher risks lead to higher benefits for successful sustainable strategies.

Questions to ask yourself

- How am I doing on the sustainability front? What works, and what needs to change? Who should I be speaking to in order to make it happen?
- How do I progress on sustainability while maintaining support and cooperation between operations and brand team?
- How do I further develop and integrate sustainability within my brand? How do I anticipate new developments?

12-month focus

- Implement a detailed watch on competitors, experts and trends. Use it to inspire your teams
- Identify the best experts and start a conversation with them
- Be agile, organise regular meetings with transversal teams to tweak your sustainability strategy
- Bring sustainability to the boardroom. Add a board member expert in sustainability and make sure the topic stays on the agenda
- Be rigorous in monitoring your green KPIs, and when testing out new practices

5 principles to build sustainable brands

Go beyond greenwashing and CSR initiatives.

Follow these principles to build an attractive brand that places sustainability at its core.

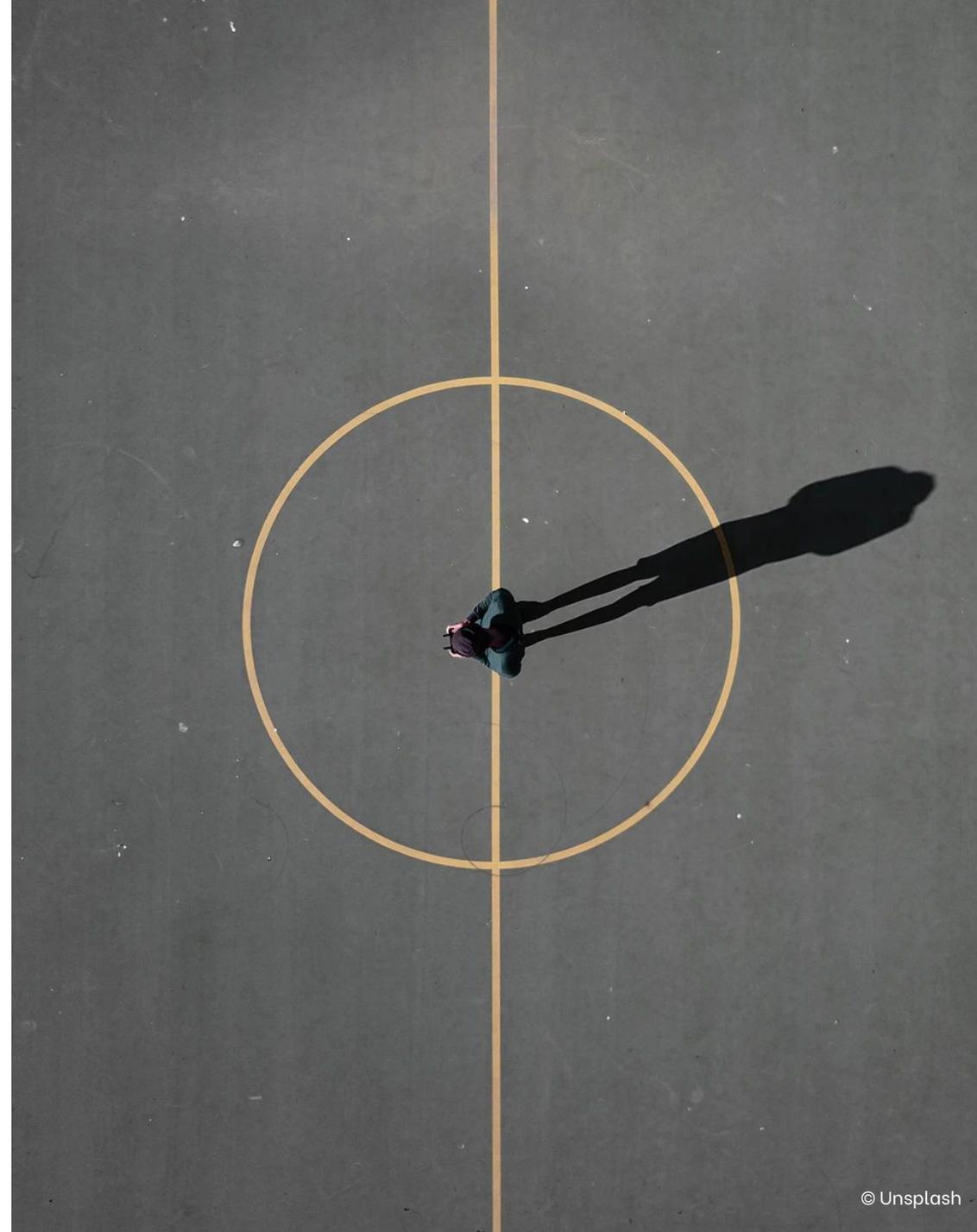
01 Core Business

Build sustainability at the core of your business, not as a sub-brand

From car makers to fashion companies, many brands have created sustainable versions or sub-brands of their products (think “eco-line” of a standard product). While this is a good start, a winning sustainable brand should go one step further and build sustainability at the core of their business.

Doing so presents several advantages:

- Easier to associate your brand with sustainability
- No risk to be perceived as opportunistic or, worse, manipulative by customers (ex: green washing)
- Sub-brands add complexity and costs to the overall brand management
- Helps keep sustainability on the agenda in the long term
- Fulfills external expectations of what a modern business should be



Brands that put sustainability at the core of their business



Vestre

The Norwegian manufacturer of outdoor & public space furniture aims to become the most sustainable furniture brand in the world. Sustainability is at the core of all they do: production is done in Scandinavia in factories that run on renewable energy, the carbon cost of transport is to be fully compensated by 2020, and 10% of annual profits are donated to sustainability projects worldwide. All of this while living up to their brand purpose of “creating caring meeting places”.

Fairphone

The Amsterdam-based company was built to be sustainable from the start. From operations to branding, sustainability permeates everything they do: from a partnership with */e/ Foundation* to make data privacy accessible to all, to portraying “change makers” in their blog and encouraging people to take part in their phone recycling movement.



02 Benefit Driven

Highlight the tangible customer benefits of sustainability

Many sustainable brands base their entire brand communication on their “noble cause”. The problem with this approach is that sustainability on its own rarely has a direct consumer benefit, meaning it does not (always) attract a wide audience. In order to broaden the appeal of sustainability, brands should emphasise the consumer benefits created by socio-ecological attributes. For instance, brands can talk about how sustainability positively impacts:

- Efficiency and cost effectiveness
- Quality and performance
- Health and safety
- Functionality and design
- Social status

Consider what other benefits your brand has to offer and use them to communicate. After all, the main reason people buy ice cream is because it tastes good.



Sustainable brands with clear customer benefits



Beyond Meat

The producer of plant-based meat substitutes focuses not only on the environmental benefits of their products, but also communicate heavily on the health benefits of a meat-free diet.



Tesla

Electric cars can be fun and powerful. This is what Tesla communicates with its "Ludicrous" mode. Car models with this feature can accelerate from 0-100 km/h in 2.5 seconds.



Bleu Blanc Ruche

The French producer of honey communicates about the quality of its ingredients and the taste of its products at the same level as it does its mission to "Repopulate France with bees".

03 Shared Vision

Building a sustainable brand requires a collective buy-in, from employee to CEO.

The challenges of creating a sustainable brand cannot be solved by one person, or even one company department. Solving them requires the support of both internal and external stakeholders. The process of building a shared vision will galvanise your team, engage your customers and convince observers of your commitment to sustainability. Having a shared vision also helps to:

- Motivate the workforce to contribute to something more than making money, and generate a sense of collective responsibility
- Attract new talent (especially Gen Y and Gen Z) who are sensible to environmental challenges, and retain existing talent
- Create synergies between departments, and facilitate best practice sharing for sustainable practices

Storytelling is a great tool to articulate the brand vision and communicate it across the workforce. This is far more effective than a billboard with empty slogans or keywords placed in the office canteen.



Sustainable brands with a shared vision



Danone

In order to motivate their employees to share the company's sustainable mindset, workers receive one Danone share. Danone has also created an internal platform featuring sharing and learning resources to help employees support the firm's vision and goals.



Tribe

People working at Tribe join a community of nutrition experts who care about the world and are dedicated to making sports nutrition products with natural ingredients. All employees share the passion for being outdoors and contribute to the combined effort of fighting the world of human trafficking.



Lush

In order to drive home its positions on sustainability, animal welfare and natural cosmetics, Lush provides extensive training to all its employees: each worker gets walked through the company policy on ingredient use and provenance, ethics and packaging to better understand and share the “Lush values” with customers.

04 Authentic Feel

Sustainability should be an added reason to buy your products. Not an excuse.

Increasing sustainable practices is essential, but it shouldn't come at the expense of your brand's visual and verbal universe. Sustainable efforts should not appear to be an artificial layer added to a brand.

- It's easier to change “how” you operate than to change “what” you do. Start by making your existing operations more sustainable
- Don't greenwash: adding green leaves to your logo is likely to harm your brand, no matter how sustainable your policies are

A fashion brand's purpose is to sell clothes. Messages like “save the world, buy our jeans” ring hollow and can alienate consumers. Conversely, messages like “Hand-crafted vegetal leather”, “eco-certified atelier” and “garments made to order” stay “on brand” while including information about sustainable practices.

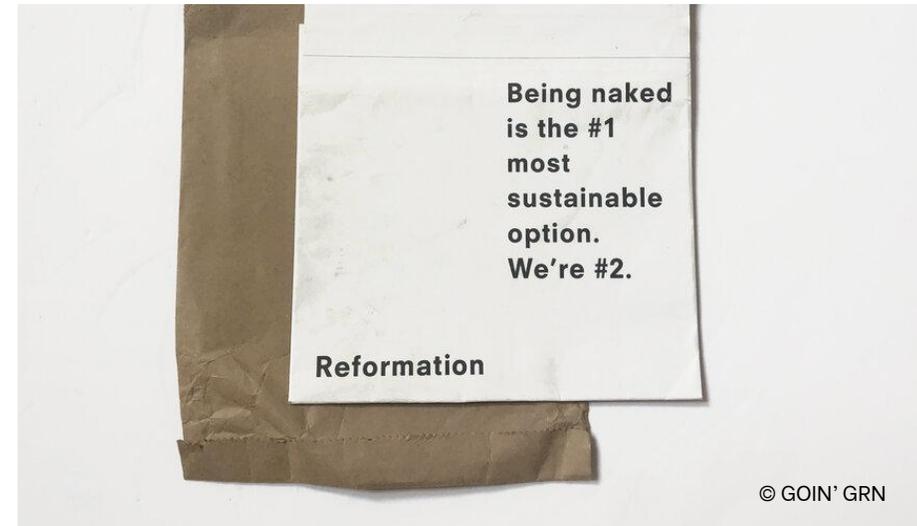


Authentic Feel



Serapian

Italian leather goods brand Serapian specialises in luxury, handcrafted products. Their new line of eco-leather accessories made from grapes is sold in the same way - and at similar prices - as their other “genuine” leather products, normalising the act of a “green” purchase.



Reformation

Reformation’s main activity lies in selling clothes. However, the brand contextualise the act of purchase by disclosing the environmental footprint of each piece, including the CO2 emitted, gallons of water used and pounds of waste produced. They, further, developed their own fiber standards, keeping their tone of voice casual and witty, and ranking them from A for “Allstars” to E like “Eww - never”.

05 Long Game

A brand image takes years to build, but only days to crumble.

Being associated with sustainability is a long-term commitment. Implementing your own sustainability strategy means looking at 5, 10 or 20 years in the future, and waiting to have tangible achievements before you start communicating about sustainability. Some elements to keep in mind include:

- Start internally: make sure your team is on board with your vision, and begin your transition by looking at your own operations for improvement
- Keep your promises: it only takes one faux-pas to ruin your image. Stay transparent and show people that you are really making the world a better place
- Spark conversations: produce content and partner with experts to raise awareness and position yourself as a thought leader in your field, and build a community around your brand

Additionally, historically non-sustainable companies or industries face an added degree of scepticism. BP's name change to Beyond Petroleum may be a representation of its long-term objectives, but the company is still perceived mainly as a polluting oil company.



Brands that play the long game



Orsted A/S

In the course of a decade, Orsted A/S has transitioned from an oil and natural gas energy provider to a fully renewable energy company. Aiming to be attain carbon neutrality by 2025, Orsted A/S wants to “create a world that runs entirely on green energy”. So far they have walked the talk: since 2006, their carbon footprint has shrunk from 18 million to less than 2 million tonnes of CO2 emitted every year by investing heavily in wind farms.



Ikea

Following a wave of environmental scandals in the 1980s, IKEA has embarked on a decades-long experiment to reduce its environmental impact while continuing to “offer good design and function at low prices”. The company adopted its first Environmental Action Plan in 1992, followed by the introduction of a new code of conduct, addressing social, safety and environmental questions. The company is looking at everything from sustainable sourcing and manufacturing to recycling or upcycling products in order to bring down its current carbon footprint by 70% by 2030.

Summary of the five principles

01

Core Business

Build sustainability at the core of the business, not as a sub-brand

02

Benefit Driven

Highlight the tangible stakeholder benefits of sustainability

03

Shared Vision

Engage all stakeholders to build an energising shared vision

04

Authentic Feel

Stay true to the visual and verbal universe of your brand

05

Long Game

Allow time to change the market perception of your brand



Let's hear your story

Building a sustainable future is a collective endeavour.
Let's learn from and help one another, and succeed together.

Get in touch



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Founded in 2015 in Zurich, Creative Supply works in consulting, education and publishing. We partner with clients across industries and locations, assigning to each one a dedicated team of independent creatives led by experienced consultants. We have built close ties with academia, and teach at leading universities such as the Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), ESSEC in Paris, the Geneva School of Business (HEG) and Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne. Building on our consulting and teaching experience, we publish original content to give business owners and executives an edge in growing their brand.



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At eqlosion, we focus on guiding organisations on their sustainable journey. We analyse the consequences of environmental impacts on cities and industry sectors and the related challenges considering regional and global trends. We work with organisations on how to adapt and accelerate the transition toward a sustainable economy. We also create and help co-create new sustainable activities, building and piloting them to develop new sustainable businesses and solutions. To accelerate sustainable transitions, we work on the engagement of employees and citizen.

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