

Research Findings

SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION



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Finding themselves at the crossroads of an uncertain future, companies are seeking ways to increase the sustainability of their products, processes, and operations. This article outlines ideas for making corporate communications more sustainable, and examines the role of communication professionals in promoting sustainable development. We introduce the concept of sustainable strategic communication, which considers the economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainability in relation to the different impact levels of corporate communications.



Authors

Ulrike Roettger
Lennart Rettler
University of Münster

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Society is undergoing a *Great Transformation* towards sustainable development (Schneidewind & Singer-Brodowski, 2015). Established corporate practices in all areas are being challenged by government regulations and stakeholder expectations. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Environmental Social Governance (ESG) standards have become critical benchmarks for businesses in every sector. Ensuring that sustainability is a key focus in corporate operations also encompasses sustainable corporate communications. It is vital for establishing credibility in an era where consumers' expectations as well as skepticism about the sustainability of corporations and their communication of it remain high (Viererbl & Koch, 2022).

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Moreover, a commitment to sustainability is increasingly expected by both current and especially potential future employees (Non et al., 2022).

Some corporations have introduced highly publicized sustainability initiatives. For example, in 2023, REWE, one of Germany's biggest grocery retailers, gained public attention when it discontinued its printed shopping pamphlets and switched to digital channels, proclaiming the positive effect this would have on the climate and the environment. And back in 2021, the beauty brand Lush decided to shut down most of its social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok) to protect users from harmful content. These initiatives exemplify what we refer to as sustainable strategic communication.

THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

When defining sustainable strategic communication, it is worth remembering a key point in the Communications Trend Radar 2021 (Zerfass et al. 2021) that remains just as relevant today: The authors advocated a switch from sustainability communication, which focuses on the topics and content of corporate communications, to sustainable communication, which emphasizes the sustainability of the processes, platforms, media, and products used in corporate communications. This shift underscores the importance of not only communicating sustainability, but also communicating sustainably.

Research design

To characterize sustainable strategic communication, we adopted a threefold approach:

- 1 First, we modeled a heuristic of sustainable strategic communication based on existing literature.
- 2 We then conducted expert interviews to discuss this approach. We asked 14 experts in strategic communications and/or sustainability (five academic professors, four CCOs, three leading representatives of communication agencies, and two sustainability experts) about the interrelations between strategic communication and sustainability.
- 3 Finally, we conducted an action research workshop with 21 professionals specializing in sustainability and communication to discuss hands-on ideas to implement sustainable strategic communication. Collaborating with these professionals ensures the direct applicability of the proposals and serves as a “reality check” for researchers, allowing them to discuss their findings with the stakeholders involved.

This multilevel approach enabled us to gather a diverse range of insights on this complex issue, which we will explain in the following sections.

Additionally, considering the environmental and social consequences of communication practices (Kannengießer, 2020) and viewing sustainability as a moral compass in communications (Weder et al., 2019) are important elements.

Building on these insights, we proclaim sustainable strategic communication as a framework for corporate communications that uses resources responsibly – economically, ecologically, and socially – and aims to contribute to a broader societal transformation towards sustainability. This concept serves as a mental construct that enables professionals to align corporate communications with contemporary challenges regarding sustainability.

ALIGNING CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS WITH SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

Based on the literature review and expert interviews, we developed a heuristic for sustainable strategic communication (see table next page). It combines the traditional communication evaluation framework, which distinguishes between four evaluation levels – input, output, outcome, and outflow (Rolke & Zerfass, 2010) – with the well-established dimensions of sustainability: ecological, economic, and social (WCED, 1987; Elkington, 1997).

This heuristic is designed to help professionals analyze and adjust their communication processes, platforms, media, and products towards sustainability.

This heuristic is designed to help professionals analyze and adjust their communication processes, platforms, media, and products towards sustainability. Each level addresses a specific part of a communication process. Although professionals may consider sustainability on each level separately, in practice the levels merge into each other and should be viewed as an idealistic, theoretical concept.

Heuristic for sustainable strategic communication

	Input Regarding sustainability in present conditions	Output Regarding sustainability in communication products	Outcome Regarding sustainability in communication effects	Outflow Regarding sustainability in communication impacts
Economic	Financial resources required	Economic aspects of communication processes and characteristics	Intended economic effects	Economic value created
Ecological	Ecological resources required	Ecological aspects of communication processes and characteristics	Intended ecological effects	Ecological value created
Social	Human resources required	Social aspects of communication process and characteristics	Intended social effects	Social value created
Question for professionals	How do we deal with present resources?	How do we communicate?	How do we affect stakeholders?	How do we impact our organization and society?
Potential friction	Present conditions significantly lack sustainable standards	Tradeoff between pursuing sustainability and achieving communication goals	Established metrics interfere with sustainability demands	Limited scope of action

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Source: The heuristic is based on an evaluation of relevant literature on the topic of sustainability and strategic communication.

INPUT: RESOURCES REQUIRED

At the input level, communication departments should consider how they manage and influence the economic, ecological, and social resources within their organization. The experts emphasized the importance of the ecological usage of everyday resources, such as heating and electricity. Responsible practices such as energy conservation can lead to both ecological and economic benefits. Offering training or nudging can foster sustainable behavior on a day-to-day basis.

Short-term thinking tends to result in intensive, short-lived resource consumption that fails to produce a lasting impact.

Mobility is another crucial aspect of responsible daily behavior. The experts noted that using sustainable transportation methods not only supports environmental goals but also enhances organizational credibility. For instance, a CCO we spoke to recalled arriving at a press conference on a bicycle and the positive impression this made on a journalist.

When it comes to social resources, communication departments need to ensure that working conditions are adequate for professionals. The experts deliberated on the significance of addressing diversity and inclusion issues, improving the work-life balance, and accommodating part-time work. These aspects are particularly pertinent to communication professionals and are becoming increasingly important within communication departments, according to one of the experts.

The experts all highlighted the importance of long-term thinking and development regarding the economic resources and strategic planning required. This approach promotes sustainable resource utilization. Conversely, short-term thinking tends to result in intensive, short-lived resource consumption that fails to produce a lasting impact.

Bridging the input and output levels, the experts stated that corporate communications professionals should reconsider how they interact with agencies and other service providers. The sustainability commitments of these external partners are often overlooked, yet they form an integral part of the corporate communications supply chain.

On the input level, friction may arise when traditional practices within an organization clash with the goals of sustainable resource usage. This can lead to the continued usage of energy-intensive technologies despite the availability of more sustainable alternatives.

OUTPUT: SUSTAINABILITY IN COMMUNICATION PRODUCTS

On the output level, the sustainability of communication products and the underlying production processes need to be considered. It is important to note that all communication products have some kind of environmental impact, as highlighted by a Global Senior Manager Sustainability: “From emails to Google searches, everything has a footprint, not just brochures and newsletters.”

Professionals need to assess the sustainability of their communication products. Is it necessary to shoot an advertisement in South Africa? Should a campaign rely heavily on posters or flyers? Can the resources used for communication products somehow be recycled? Is there a need for printed employee or customer magazines, or can they be digitized?

Many experts and professionals stated that events such as stakeholder dialogues, conventions, and press conferences, as well as internal gatherings, often produce a

significant footprint. They are resource-intensive, both tangibly and intangibly. The travel required usually contributes to environmental pollution. The shift to digital platforms during the coronavirus pandemic presented a more environmentally friendly alternative, although it was noted that digital events sometimes fail to achieve the desired outcomes. Additionally, there was general concern among the experts and professionals about the lack of adequate methods to measure the environmental impact of digital products, often referred to as the “digital footprint.”

This presents a dilemma in sustainable strategic communication as prioritizing sustainability may mean altering or canceling existing communication products, potentially at the cost of desired outcomes. It is vital to evaluate whether supposedly more sustainable approaches are functionally equivalent to less sustainable ones. A balance needs to be struck between maintaining communicative impact and sustainability. For instance, one workshop participant described a debate about an internal event in Germany attended by employees from all over the world. Despite sustainability concerns regarding travel, the event was deemed crucial for fostering community spirit among employees.

Despite these challenges, integrating sustainability into the production process often results in equivalent or even improved outcomes, as confirmed by several participants. At the action research workshop, we asked the 21 professionals to think of and rate measures that can be taken to align corporate communications with sustainability requirements while maintaining the communicative impact. The suggested measures (some of which may overlap) were ranked by importance by the participants (see table next page).

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Cultivating Sustainability

Ideas for cultivating sustainability on the output level of corporate communications as put forward by communication professionals in the action research workshop:

Target group-specific communication

- ▶ Individualization (to minimize scatter loss)
- ▶ Efficient, targeted communication strategies
- ▶ Targeted selection of groups and channels
- ▶ Strategic channel selection
- ▶ Using clear, simple language
- ▶ Adopting a “less is more” approach to communication

Implementing environmentally considerate measures

- ▶ Zero-kilometer communication
- ▶ Reduction of travel
- ▶ Green IT
- ▶ Rigorous evaluation of printing needs
- ▶ Expanding use of digital formats
- ▶ Incorporating sustainability into performance metrics
- ▶ Setting sustainability goals (benchmarks) for communication

Utilizing synergies and enhancing collaboration

- ▶ Promoting a sharing economy within communication practices (e.g. sharing best practice cases)
- ▶ Fostering collaboration through transparency
- ▶ Recycling and intelligent reuse of existing outputs
- ▶ Collaborating with competitors to achieve common goals

OUTCOME: EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION

The connection between the output and outcome levels is pivotal. Embracing a “less is more” philosophy, as advocated by the professionals, involves reducing output while maintaining (or even enhancing) outcome. As one professional put it: “Less quantity, more quality. Less output and more outcome.” This approach necessitates a reevaluation of how communication impacts its audience. And it prompts important questions about the sustainability of metrics used in communication efforts.

Take for example dwell time. Communication departments often aim to prolong user engagement on websites due to SEO considerations. However, is this an accurate and sustainable measure? “We should adopt a user-centered approach to allow users to quickly access the information they need and then move on,” declared one expert.

Communication departments need to rethink how they want to capture attention and how to prevent information fatigue.

Communication demands attention – one of scarcest resources we have in today’s age of overstimulation (Stieglitz et al., 2024). Communication departments need to rethink how they want to capture attention and how to prevent information fatigue. Participants stated that employees sometimes feel overwhelmed by messages from internal communication.

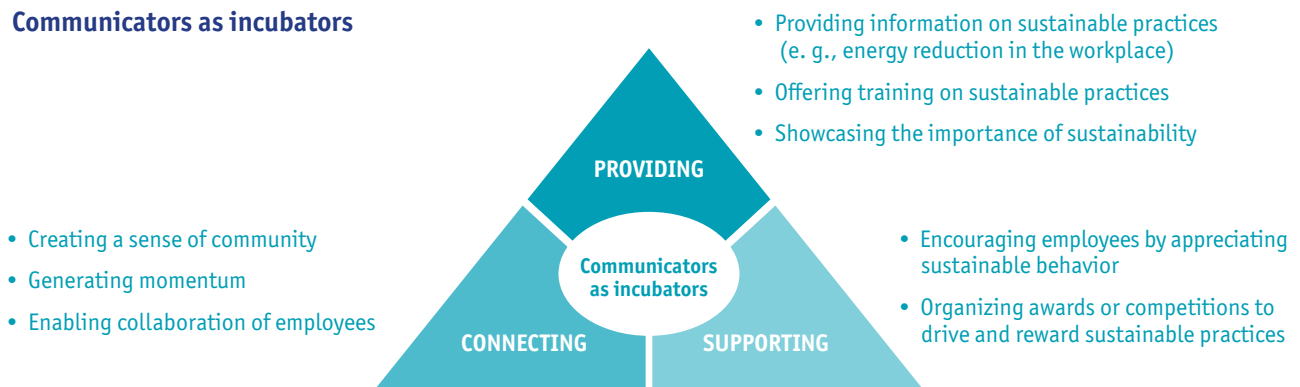
Some participants equated sustainability with longevity, emphasizing lasting impact over brief engagement. Thus, aiming for long-term relationships with stakeholders should also be considered when discussing sustainability.

OUTFLOW: IMPACT CREATED

Lastly, the outflow level considers the value created by corporate communications for their surroundings, specifically how they contribute to sustainable development within organizations and society. Here, we focus on the organizational level. The experts we interviewed ascribed an important role to corporate communications in spearheading internal changes towards sustainable development. "I'm sure that communication plays an important, if not central, role in this transformation process, both externally and internally," said one expert. Another remarked: "I see it as our duty to actively initiate and lead behavioral change." But what strategies can professionals employ to fulfill this role? Four factors can be considered important for communication departments and professionals aiming to drive sustainable development internally and establish a culture of sustainability:

- 1 **Securing sustainability know-how:** It is important to find the right amount of sustainability know-how for those working in communication departments. While communication professionals are often expected to be jacks-of-all-trades, our workshop participants emphasized that their primary role in sustainability remained that of "translators". Some sustainability expertise may be important, but the ability to communicate this knowledge remains the main task. As one professional noted: "Too much know-how can sometimes also be a hindrance. Being the technical expert can also mean missing the bigger picture – essentially becoming a technical idiot."
- 2 **Collaborating with other organizational units:** Because communication professionals often work as translators, collaboration is needed. Organizational transformation requires the collaboration of all organizational units. Creating synergies with other departments like HR and, crucially, sustainability departments is essential for cultivating a culture of sustainability in companies. Additionally, collaboration with corporate units in other countries appears to be fruitful. Furthermore, forming competency groups such as sustainability councils can institutionalize and enhance these collaborative efforts.
- 3 **Fulfilling a role as incubator:** The role of communication professionals in leading internal sustainability transformation can be described as that of an incubator, a term borrowed from finance and startups. An incubator is a supportive institution, leveraging its capabilities to help others achieve their goals. Communication professionals can aid internal sustainable transformation by fulfilling three tasks: providing, connecting, and supporting (see figure below).
- 4 **Securing top-level commitment:** Without top-level commitment, establishing a culture of sustainability within a company remains a difficult task. Communication needs to be supported by the C-level to initiate the sustainable development of corporate processes and help instill a sustainability culture.

Communicators as incubators



There are three roles through which communication professionals support sustainable internal development, as outlined by several professionals in the action research workshop.

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OUTLOOK: AN ONGOING CHALLENGE

Adjusting corporate communications to meet the demands of sustainable transformation remains an important yet difficult task. Ways to accurately measure the environmental impact of communicative output, especially in the digital realm, are lacking. Similarly, ensuring the effectiveness of communication while aligning practices and output with sustainability is still under development. Despite these challenges, the urgency to implement sustainable standards in communication is undeniable; it is not a question of if but rather how. The insights from this explorative research may serve as a first step toward applying these methods in the daily practice of corporate communications and for further research in this field. Moreover, industry-wide standards need to be developed. Several associations of communication agencies are already working on programs and guidelines to steer their profession towards sustainable development, as shown in the table below.

Overview of GPRA and GWA sustainable development initiatives

GPRA The GPRA defines sustainability as something that has real, measurable positive impact. Accordingly, it focuses on three areas: 1) footprint – reducing resource use and negative carbon impact; 2) handprint – increasing positive impact through ecological and social progress; 3) brainprint – building and spreading relevant knowledge for sustainable development.



Deutschlands
führende
Agenturen

The GWA Forum Sustainability has published the “GWA Green Guide – Four Steps to a Sustainable Agency.” It is a practical guide on how agencies can drive the transformation towards sustainability out of conviction, to meet clients’ requirements, to create added value, and to ensure regulatory compliance. In addition to theory, the publication contains tools, checklists, and best practices.

Source: GPRA, 2023; GWA, 2023

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AUTHORS



Ulrike Roettger is a professor of Strategic Communication at the University of Münster, Germany. Her research focuses on trust, sustainability, university communication, and communication consulting.

✉ ulrike.roettger@uni-muenster.de



Lennart Rettler is a PhD candidate at the University of Münster. His research explores the relationships between organizations and stakeholders, specializing in social media-based strategic communication.

✉ lennart.rettler@uni-muenster.de

RESEARCH PROJECT



Study Details: This research project “Sustainable Strategic Communication: How can communication management be done sustainably”, was carried out from summer 2023 to spring 2024 by the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Münster. The project team comprised Professor Ulrike Roettger, Lennart Rettler, Hannah Oetting, Anastasia Stelmach, and Patrick M. Dietz. The project was funded by the Academic Society for Management & Communication.



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📍 Nikolaistrasse 27 – 29, 04109 Leipzig, Germany
✉ info@akademische-gesellschaft.com
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