

A Broader View of Sustainability

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Companies that define sustainability to comprise only environmental initiatives sell themselves short. Perhaps worse, adopting such a singular, “green” view of sustainability—while ignoring other elements of corporate behavior—can potentially even harm a reputation. Strategic and forward-thinking corporate leaders take a broader view of sustainability and commit their entire organizations to changes that matter and benefit all levels of the operation.

A cursory internet search on ‘sustainability’ yields approximately 2 million results. There are clearly plenty of points of view on the topic from all corners of the world. Although hesitant to add to the clutter, I think it worthwhile to attempt to clarify what I see as a common misconception among many business leaders who confine sustainability merely as being “green.”

“Green,” or adopting practices and products that limit one’s impact on the natural environment and its resources, is irrefutably necessary and beneficial society. For example, “green” consumer behavior can inspire—and indeed has inspired—businesses to improve or introduce new products that minimize harm to the air we breathe or the water we drink. As will happen in capitalist markets, this consumer-driven behavior has fueled considerable economic growth through innovative business opportunities and job creation. On the other hand, corporate commitments to “green” initiatives—from purchasing renewable energies to cap and trade programs—also are important ways to augment efforts to conserve, preserve and protect natural resources.

However, to confine sustainability as merely “being green” is naive. In my opinion, environmentally responsible initiatives are today an expectation—a cost of entry—that are incumbent on all businesses and their leaders. I invite you to scan any number of company websites and you are sure to find information about some form of environmental initiative. However, being “green” is not enough.

Consider, for example, the standards established by the Global Reporting Initiative (“GRI”). Based in The Netherlands, GRI (www.globalreporting.org) develops and promotes a framework of principled corporate behaviors that, in addition to environmental performance, also include economic and social parameters such as labor, human rights, society and product

responsibility. Anchored among these standards are expectations of transparency, accountability, sustainability and reporting.

This framework demands a thoughtful and holistic approach and commitment to sustainability in all aspects of its meaning—from sourcing of product ingredients, fair labor practices and working conditions, supply chain management, facility operations, community engagement, corporate governance, philanthropy—to name but a few.

As a public relations professional, I consider how these commitments are communicated to be of critical importance for three reasons.

First, communications about sustainability must embrace more than “green.” As consumers, employees, investors and other stakeholders become more sophisticated and expectations continue to rise, companies must be prepared to talk about more than environmental initiatives. Rather, companies need to understand their broader impacts upon society, and corporate leaders must be prepared to discuss them at all levels of the organization.

Second, words must mirror actions. Companies that promote sustainability in a “green” context while its leadership’s ethics or governance practice are questioned, or while its operations violate safety, labor, environmental, human rights or other standards—at home and abroad—are practicing deception and may likely find themselves in the unenviable position of having to explain these inconsistencies.

Third, communications supporting sustainability must include a dose of humility. Experts in the field agree that sustainability standards and practices continue to evolve. While tremendous progress has been made over the past decade, there are still opportunities for improvement. There is no single sustainability solution for any product, company, market or geography. A transparent and candid dialogue is central to this evolving process towards true sustainability. As stakeholders expect more from corporations, the leaders that govern them are better off sticking to the truth and telling their stories only when they can be backed by evidence.

Adopting a broader view of sustainability and communicating about the larger framework of sustainable initiatives in a convincing and compelling manner takes commitment. At this point in time, however, nothing could be more important.

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