

It Doesn't Have to Be so Complicated: How to Engage Consumers in Sustainability

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In a March survey, nearly two-thirds of Americans said they're willing to pay more for sustainable products, but most (74 percent) don't know how to identify them. So, how can brands communicate with consumers about sustainability and help them understand how their purchases and behaviors impact the planet?

There's no getting around it: This space is complex, and creating products that truly carry less impact on the environment requires a host of considerations. But communicating with consumers doesn't have to be complicated, and rising public awareness of sustainability is an open invitation for brands to turn consumer passion into engagement, loyalty and trust.

"In general, we're seeing tremendous growth in the interest in sustainability features and benefits of products," said Ellen Jackowski, chief sustainability and social impact officer at HP. "The average person is starting to feel the impacts of climate change. They're starting

to understand the impact humans are having on the planet at a level that hasn't been recognized in the past"

"We know sustainability is important to our customer, and we want to lead, not follow, consumer demand," added Savannah Sachs, CEO of skincare and wellness brand **Tula**. We spoke with these two executives about how to communicate around a specific segment of the sustainability space – responsible forestry – to get a sense of how to break down complicated topics in an accessible way.

Communicating with consumers about responsible forestry

Responsible forestry has received well deserved attention in recent years as an **essential component of a low-carbon future**. But it's a deceptively complicated topic that can easily confuse consumer audiences. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which brings together environmental, social and economic interests to promote responsible forest management, applies 10 principles and **57 distinct criteria** for verifying that forests around the world are well managed. There's a lot to unpack with that.

Still, even if the nuances that make for a well managed and sustainable forest aren't familiar to the average person, the basics around why forests are important for a healthy planet are easier to understand. "Forests clean the air we breathe and the water we drink, [and they] provide habitat for 80 percent of terrestrial biodiversity. 1.6 billion people depend on forests for their livelihoods," Chris McLaren, chief marketing officer for FSC U.S., **told us earlier in this series**.

Once this basic understanding is reached, it's a pretty short leap to educate consumers around how their daily habits can impact forests and how to make more responsible choices. "Whether consumers are familiar with the Forest Stewardship Council or not, the truth is we still all have a responsibility to our planet, and communicating our mutual goal of preserving the world's forests is ultimately what's most important," said Sachs of Tula.

A consumer marketplace for certified sustainable products opens the door for dialogue

In April, FSC launched an online portal to make it easier for U.S. consumers to buy products sourced from responsibly managed forests. On the new portal, **OneSimpleAction.org**, consumers can shop hundreds of products from popular brands and retailers, including HP, Tula, Seventh Generation and Charmin.

The site also provides information about how consumer purchases of FSC-certified products can protect forests, using simple but evocative language – "One Simple Action can protect forests for all, forever" – to address consumers directly and make the call-to-action compelling and clear. "The new OneSimpleAction.org creates a powerful and convenient way for consumers – and the companies supplying the products they use – to make a big difference," McLaren of FSC, **said in a press statement**.

HP, a longstanding FSC partner, is a founding sponsor of the platform along with Procter & Gamble. "FSC plays a really important role in helping to communicate with customers,"

Jackowski said. "Increasing the awareness of what FSC is and all of the momentum they've gotten behind that certification helps us simplify how to communicate to consumers as well."

Action items for sustainability communication that works

Embrace simplicity. "Simplify your messages," Jackowski advised. "This space is really complex, so try to figure out the simplest message. By partnering with someone like FSC, you can also leverage the power of their logo and existing brand to continue that drive for awareness around sustainable forestry and management"

Ensure transparency. "There's this concept of 'plant a tree,' but we all know planting a tree isn't enough," Jackowski said. "It really is about forest restoration, protection and responsible management, so be clear about exactly what your efforts are supporting and how you're following the guidelines the science is directing us toward."

Invite customers along. "Sharing news and updates on our sustainability initiative and partnerships across multiple platforms allows us to impactfully communicate our sustainability message to our customers," Sachs told us. "This also gives them the opportunity to learn how they can participate with us on the path to a more sustainable and green planet. Through our partnerships with organizations like TerraCycle and Cloverly, we are thrilled to offer different ways for our community to join us as we all do our part in protecting the planet"

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