FLEISHMANHILLARD
CLIMATE & SUSTAINABILITY UNIT

Sustainability, Communications & Climate Confusion

July 2023

Climate action is both needed and welcomed by society, with 74% of adults in Great Britain worried about climate change according to the latest ONS data[1]. Yet we face frustrating hurdles that often make it difficult to feel confident any impactful climate action is being taken. From erratic policy priorities to inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, confusing jargon and competing issues dominate the news. Communications, it seems, is adding to this tension rather than helping to bridge it.

Most UK consumers are confused about sustainability claims made by brands about their products. Just 41% say they're confident they understand what 'Certified Carbon Neutral' means, for example, with even less (35%) clear on 'Carbon Negative'. Yet look around any supermarket aisle and you'll likely see these claims scattered across most items that make it into your weekly shopping basket. If shoppers don't understand the language brands are using, what impact are those products having?

If businesses and consumers aren't speaking the same language, not only are we losing out on engaging environmentally-minded shoppers, but the overall impact of more sustainable products on the market – something we desperately need – is weakened. This comes despite the fact over half of shoppers feel environmental sustainability is important when making a purchasing decision and are willing to pay more for sustainable products, even amidst the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

Brands that are able to clearly and succinctly communicate their climate ambitions will win on multiple fronts – delivering desperately needed impact for both the UK and the global green economy, while driving greater trust and protecting market share in a challenging business environment.

It's an easy decision to prioritise authentic, clear climate communications. Isn't it?

Imogen Sackey,
Associate Director,
Corporate Communications
& Sustainability

[1]ONS, 'Worries about climate change, Great Britain: September to October 2022'
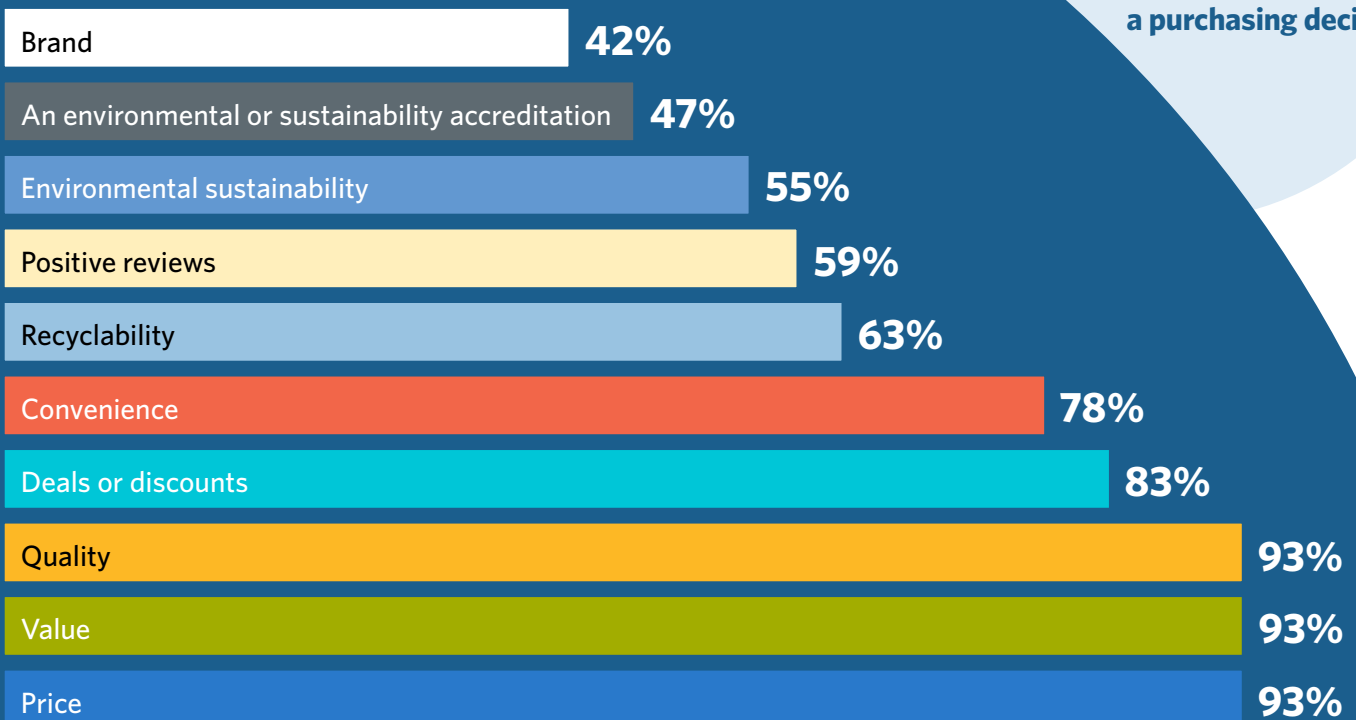
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What consumers want

With the cost-of-living crisis continuing to bite and interest rates showing no signs of falling, all of us are having to think more carefully about how we spend our money. Against this challenging economic backdrop, it is unsurprising perhaps that price, value and quality remain the priority considerations for consumers when purchasing a product.

However, even in today's tough economic climate **over half (55%) of British shoppers feel environmental sustainability is important when making a purchasing decision**. This is significantly more important than brand preferences, which sits at 42%. This figure increases to 63% when looking at recyclability, a more established and well-known sustainability claim.

In an environment where the UK is being accused of losing 'leadership' on climate change, the data presents a case for optimism. Even when faced with rising bills and shopping basket inflation, there remains a desire to shop sustainably wherever possible. In fact, over half of respondents said environmental sustainability is already an important consideration as part of their supermarket shop. Resilient consumer demand for sustainability means businesses can be assured that it makes both ethical and commercial sense to prioritise sustainable products, standards and innovation.
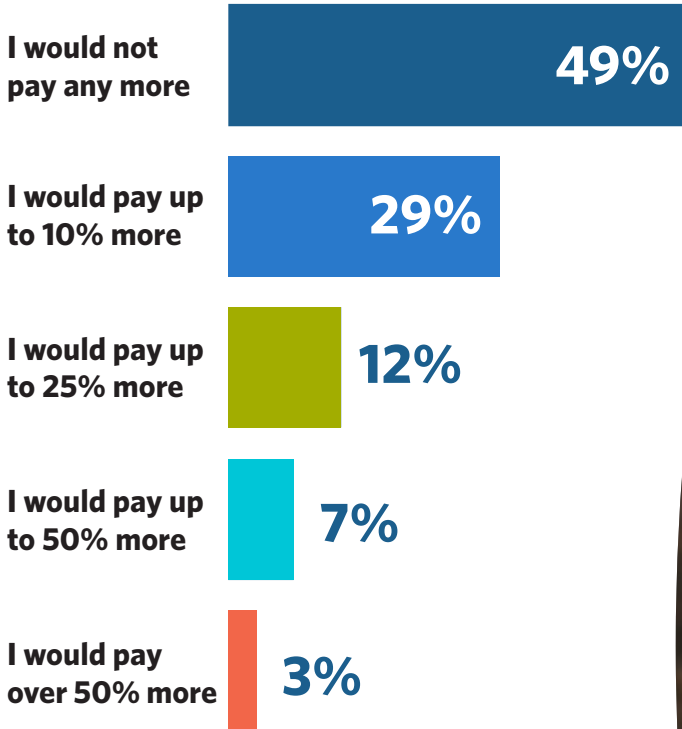
What's more, nearly 1/3 (31%) of British shoppers say that environmental sustainability claims on packaging directly impact whether or not they'll buy a product. Even more importantly 51% say they would pay more for a product with environmental sustainability claims.

55%

of British shoppers feel environmental sustainability is important when making a purchasing decision

Thinking about your supermarket shop (including food, drink and household products), how important are the below factors when purchasing a product, if at all?

Factor	%
Brand	42%
An environmental or sustainability accreditation	47%
Environmental sustainability	55%
Positive reviews	59%
Recyclability	63%
Convenience	78%
Deals or discounts	83%
Quality	93%
Value	93%
Price	93%

Would you pay more for a product with environmental sustainability claims?

I would not pay any more	49%
I would pay up to 10% more	29%
I would pay up to 25% more	12%
I would pay up to 50% more	7%
I would pay over 50% more	3%

This new data presents a clear business case to prioritise sustainable products with consumers outlining where they want to see brands concentrating their sustainability efforts:

1. **Recyclability:** 69% of consumers want to know that a product and/ or its packaging can be recycled

2. **Waste-free:** 65% of consumers want to be confident that the product has been produced in a way that creates less waste

3. **Plastic-free:** 63% of consumers want to know that product packaging is plastic-free or using less plastic

What happens next is less clear.

69%

RECYCLABILITY

of consumers want to know that a product and/or its packaging can be recycled

65%

WASTE-FREE

of consumers want to be confident that the product has been produced in a way that creates less waste

63%

PLASTIC-FREE

of consumers want to know that product packaging is plastic-free or using less plastic

The challenge of climate comms

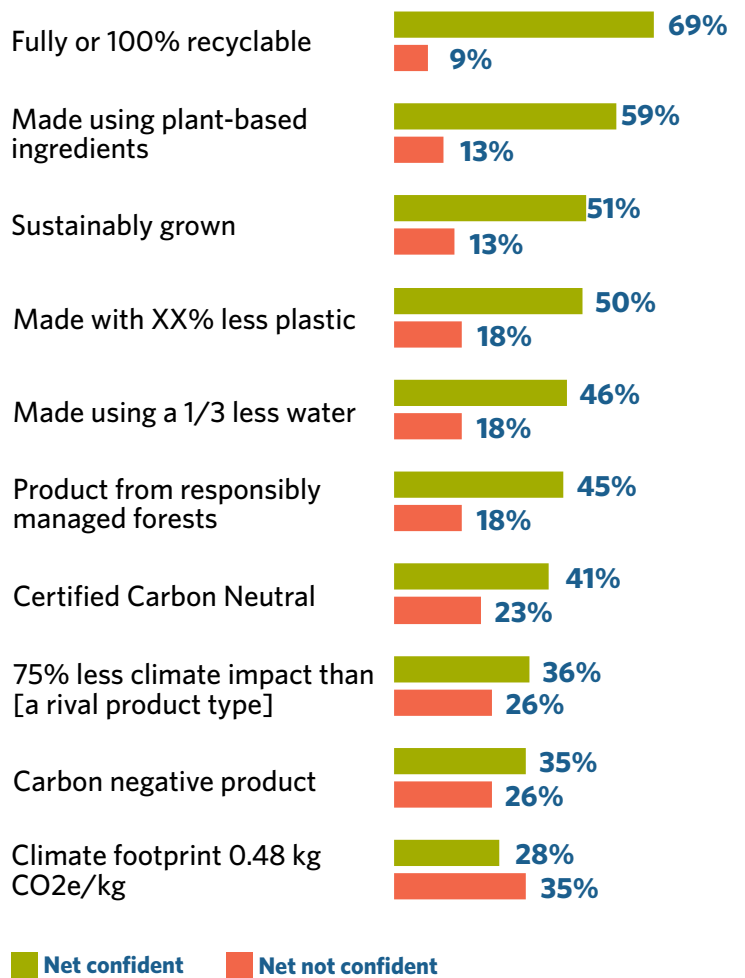## If demand for sustainable products persists, then what is the problem?

It's a fair question but the challenge businesses face is that not enough of today's consumers feel confident in their knowledge or truly understand environmental language and sustainability claims. Against this backdrop, if shoppers don't understand the language brands are using, not only are businesses missing out on winning over environmentally minded shoppers but the impact of more sustainable products on the market is diminished. Presenting a lose-lose scenario.

Clearer climate communications is key to breaking the chain.

Already, some claims undoubtedly resonate more strongly than others. Simple claims such as 'recyclable' or 'made with less' are easy to understand and have been around for a long time – but for newer terminology or more complex performance data, a lack of explanation and education make it difficult for consumers to understand the impact of the claims they are being presented with.

This is evidenced by the fact that under 50% understand what 'made with 1/3 less water' really means. Similarly, only 41% of people feel confident they understand what 'certified carbon neutral' means, and the figures drops even further for 'carbon negative' (35%) and specific climate footprint calculations (28%). This presents a greater need for businesses to move beyond quantifying their environmental impact when using technical metrics such as 0.48kg CO2e/ kg and make sure they really qualify it. What do the figures equate to? How can terminology be related to everyday use and life? These simple questions are key for delivering clear climate communications.

How confident are you that you understand the following environmental sustainability claims?

Claim	Net confident	Net not confident
Fully or 100% recyclable	69%	9%
Made using plant-based ingredients	59%	13%
Sustainably grown	51%	13%
Made with XX% less plastic	50%	18%
Made using a 1/3 less water	46%	18%
Product from responsibly managed forests	45%	18%
Certified Carbon Neutral	41%	23%
75% less climate impact than [a rival product type]	36%	26%
Carbon negative product	35%	26%
Climate footprint 0.48 kg CO2e/kg	28%	35%

■ **Net confident**   ■ **Net not confident**

Yet the lack of confidence in today's sustainability claims is not for lack of trying. The research showed a surprisingly high proportion of consumers are actively looking for more information to understand sustainability claims about products and to verify what they really mean when making purchasing decisions. To this end, we asked consumers what actions they often take after seeing environmental/sustainability claims on packaging.
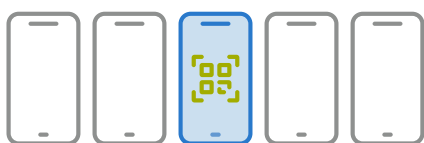
The results painted a positive picture:

27%
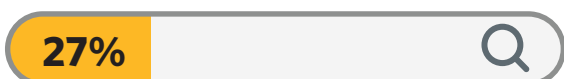
27% Google or search online for more information
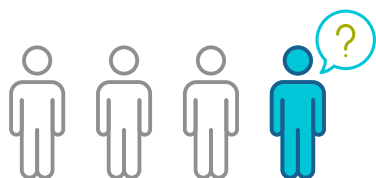
25% talk to friends and family about it

19% visit a website (e.g. linked via a QR code)

18% visit the social channels of the product

Clearer climate communications is key to breaking the chain.

We also explored authenticity, which is undoubtedly the backbone of any communications programme – sustainability focused or not. Are consumers really believing the environmental promises being made to them? In a world where greenwashing is rife and everybody is trying to be seen as sustainable, it is right, and certainly encouraging, to see consumers interrogating these messages. It is encouraging, however, that even in an environment where a small selection of 'bad players' are seeking to mislead the public, public trust persists. Specifically, 48% of consumers either 'completely trust' or 'somewhat trust' claims of a product's environmental sustainability.

Specifically, shoppers are more likely to believe sustainability messages found on product packaging (67%) than on other means, presenting an opportunity to win over consumers at the final touchpoint in the purchasing decision-making tree. This is followed by a brand website (62%), stories about the brand read or seen in the news (60%) and advertising (56%).

This opens up a wealth of new opportunities for communications and marketing to work hand-in-hand to ensure sustainability communications approaches are truly integrated and to guarantee key messages are reiterated at every point in the consumer journey.

Five key take-aways

The good news is that the research shows an easily solvable problem when it comes to climate communications. There is an evident need for greater conversation between consumers and business to ensure we're speaking a shared language.

It's not enough to share sustainability accreditation and claims in one-off communications and assume their value has been understood. Communications must make technical progress simple and make sure that environmental sustainability claims are, when put out into the world, correctly and easily understood.

Here are 5 easy steps we believe all businesses can embrace to end climate confusion.

1 Be clear on the facts:

Any environmental communication leaving the business should be routed in data and evidence, to ensure that the reputation you build is authentic and holds up to ever-rising scrutiny. The first step of sustainability communications starts with fact. Without it, the rest will fail to pack a meaningful punch.

2 Use simple language:

The need to tackle climate change is clear, but solutions can be technical and convoluted – particularly in highly-regulated categories. Don't let complex contexts steer you away from simple language. Consumers want to engage on sustainability and are willing to educate themselves but to do so businesses must speak a shared language. Avoid jargon, use simple phrases, qualify as well as quantify the impact you are having.

If you have to use complex language, take the time to explain yourself. Then repeat your explanation across channels to avoid confusion.

3 Meet consumers where they are:

67% of shoppers believe messaging on environmental and sustainability claims on product packaging. This presents a significant opportunity to speak to shoppers where they make most of their final purchase decisions - in store or online.

Businesses of all sizes should seize the opportunity to relay the most influential information on pack and make it easier for shoppers to have a positive impact (and build brand loyalty in the process).

4 Optimise on trust:

Don't be swayed by doomsday headlines. 48% of British shoppers still somewhat trust or completely trust the environmental claims businesses make. Against a widespread lack of faith in government action and negative media reporting on sustainability targets and progress, there is an onus on business to maintain hope and drive climate action forward.

5 Integrated solutions:

All businesses should take a fully integrated approach to communications to tell their sustainability story across channels: from product packaging, to an up-to-date website, to the messaging you empower your customer services teams with and, of course, across social.

Many consumers are looking and listening to multiple brand touchpoints as they build conclusions about brand reputation on sustainability. Don't let a siloed approach to sustainability storytelling dampen the genuine impact of your business' actions.

METHODOLOGY

Results for 'Sustainability, Communications & Climate Confusion' are based on an 11-question survey among a nationally representative sample of the general population in the UK. The online survey was conducted by FleishmanHillard's research and analytics practice, TRUE Global Intelligence in June of 2023 in partnership with Vitreous World.

The panel of 2,000 respondents is nationally representative for ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. Results are reported at the 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/- 2.2%.

ABOUT FLEISHMANHILLARD CLIMATE AND SUSTAINABILITY UNIT

At FleishmanHillard, we help companies, governments and organisations understand the complex intersection of their sustainability ambitions, society's and stakeholders' expectations, and the associated reputational risks.

Using data, insights and our expertise, we then shape and guide authentic communications as companies translate their ambition into action.

Want to know more about how we can help? Get in touch at **sustainability@fleishman.com**