

**12-STEP S•P•A**  
**SUSTAINABILITY PERCEPTION AUDIT**

**Guilty of Greenwash? Bad at Good News? Unclear on Transparency?**

**12-Step S•P•A: Measure and Manage your Sustainability Message**

**PRINCIPLE • POLICY • PRACTICE**

Engage a 'Critical Friend'.

Commission a Perception Audit of the strategic success and everyday effectiveness of your existing Public Relations & Public Affairs policy and practice on matters of Sustainability.

For External and Internal Communications alike, from online marketing, to print advertising, from corporate reporting, to stakeholder engagement, the simple 12-step questions needed to be asked and answered are:

**What message are you sending?**

**What audience are you reaching?**

**What is their perception of you?**

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**1. CONTENT**

**2. CONTEXT**

**3. CREDIBILITY**

**4. CONSISTENCY**

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**5. COMPETITIVENESS**

**6. CREATIVITY**

**7. CONTINUITY**

**8. The CHAIN**

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**9. CULTURE**

**10. CUSTOMERS**

**11. COMMUNITY**

**12. CHARACTER**

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**MEASURE • MANAGE • MESSAGE**

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## THE MESSAGE

### 1 CONTENT

Is the language used in your PR, marketing and advertising free from greenwash? Are the images employed also accurate and appropriate? For example:

- It is not acceptable to use vague claims such as 'eco-friendly', or 'energy-smart' without qualifying your statements; nor is it OK to throw about words like 'natural', or 'fair' without explanation or justification.
- It is not appropriate to employ a suggestive picture of a summer meadow to promote a high-rise urban roadside development called 'Greenfields Tower'.

### 2 CONTEXT

Are your claims and statements reasonable in relative terms and presented in fair proportion? For example:

- It is not reasonable to claim your product sold in the UK is 'recyclable' in full knowledge that, whilst technically possible, the only recycling facility for the material content is in the US and it would be neither economically nor environmentally viable to transport the waste across the Atlantic.
- It is not appropriate to boast that your new product is your 'greenest ever', when the only previous model was designed 50 years ago and comprised of many material components now considered toxic to human health and banned by law.

### 3 CREDIBILITY

Third-party validation and accreditation is important to assure customers and clients that promised ethical or environmental attributes are genuine and any claims tried and tested.

### 4 CONSISTENCY

Brand confidence is undermined if there appears to be no consistent policy on Sustainability for, say, a range of products, or suite of services. Equally, if the company's message changes substantially from year to year, switching forward and back, assuming incompatible positions, then stakeholders start having doubts. In short, pointing to one peach in a barrel of rotten apples, or patently blowing hot and cold, fools nobody.

## MEASUREMENT MANAGED

### **5 COMPETITIVENESS**

Is your company perceived as being ambitious in its targets for Sustainability, pushing the proverbial envelope, raising the bar, ahead of the pack? Or are you resting on your laurels, doing merely the minimum required, essentially an ordinary compliance-driven outfit? Are your standards higher than most? Are you known for attention to detail, for walking the talk? Is it a differentiator for your product or service? Is it an area of excellence and achievement? Might customers and clients, staff and suppliers expect you to be up for awards?

### **6 CREATIVITY**

Ambitious targets for excellence in Sustainability can often inspire creative and counterintuitive thinking, innovative technical solutions, intelligent problem-solving. Sometimes, even brilliantly simple solutions only result from simply brilliant work. When it comes to Sustainability, are you seen as a company with ideas and talent? Is your approach original? Do you shine?

### **7 CONTINUITY**

Do you have programmes for quality and continuous improvement, professional development, training and advancement, research and investment that promise ongoing delivery against environmental and ethical performance standards. Or are you perhaps seen as a one-hit wonder, a flash in the pan?

### **8 The CHAIN**

Managing your supply chain responsibly and robustly, applying leading-edge assurance and accreditation tests rigorously, plus communicating expectation clearly and consistently to (sub-)contractors and suppliers is the hallmark of a sustainable business. Are you thought to be knowledgeable about operations and accountable for impacts occurring downstream? Or are you perhaps perceived as probably turning a blind eye to polluting processes and unfair practices, as long as they are happening somewhere else, to nobody you know, or employ? If not downright guilty of ignorance or neglect, are you at least selective about what you allow and admit? Are some of your 'white lies' really green ones? For example:

- When calculating your carbon footprint, have you costed-in externalities, or made convenient omissions? Is unSustainability out of sight, out of mind and off record?

## MANAGEMENT MEASURED

### 9 CULTURE

Is the Sustainability message you are sending, the same (or at least suitably similar) throughout your organisation, up and down all levels of staff and across all areas of the business, all locations, departments and divisions. For example:

- If asked, would you all largely tell the same story of the company's strengths in Sustainability, or would there be as many tales as tellers?

Sustainability is very much a team game - do you have a learning and winning culture on Sustainability issues? For you, is Sustainability systemic?

### 10 CUSTOMERS

If asked about your Sustainability credentials and record, would your clients and customers give the same answers to questions as you, your colleagues, your (sub-)contractors and suppliers? If not, why not?

### 11 COMMUNITY

As regards social Sustainability, are you an active, popular and respected member of your various communities? For example:

- Is the answer the same, whether talking about the community literally local to your place(s) of business; the extended-family community of staff, (sub-)contractors and suppliers; the virtual community you inhabit online; the professional business community of peers and partners, and/or marketing and PR perception community of brands with which you might be associated or compared?

Some might say, you can judge a company or brand by its friends: A good company keeps good company and keeps it well. Are you a good friend?

### 12 CHARACTER

One simple final question to ask your clients, customers, suppliers, and/or staff:

- When it comes to Sustainability, can they trust you?

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