The eco has landed: Your guide to sustainable brands & green branding

Category: Branding
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Brands can change the world.

A great brand is more than just a logo and an excellent brand strategy and engaging marketing campaign.

The right brand taps into the emotion of a target audience, drives action and cultivates change. Just think about how Walkers managed to convince 778,636 people to vote for their favourite flavour of crisp last year.

So, what would happen if instead of concentrating entirely on profits and engagement, brands started using their influence to make an impact on issues that really matter, like climate change and global warming? That's the question that sustainable brands seek to answer.

As human beings grow increasingly more aware of the damage our lifestyles are having on the world around us; we're beginning to search for effective ways to protect our environment. Part of that transformation means teaming up with socially-conscious brands who put the needs of the planet before their profit margin.

Corporate social responsibility or "CSR" is more than just a way for brands to stand out. Sustainable branding is starting to become an expectation for today's consumers. In fact, ethical spending in the UK has doubled in the last ten years, and household companies all the way from Cadbury to Starbucks have jumped to alter their image accordingly.

From sustainable luxury brands to sustainable fashion brands that strive to stitch together a better tomorrow, the future of branding is emotional, responsible, and driven by the quest for a healthier world.

Welcome to the era of the sustainable brand.



Be the change you want to see: What defines a sustainable brand?

So, what is a sustainable brand?

Ultimately, whether you're looking at sustainable clothing brands or environmentally-friendly tech companies, a sustainable brand comes down to the organisation's vision. Search for "Sustainable fashion brands UK" on Google, and you'll find thousands of businesses defined by their commitment to values that go beyond making money.

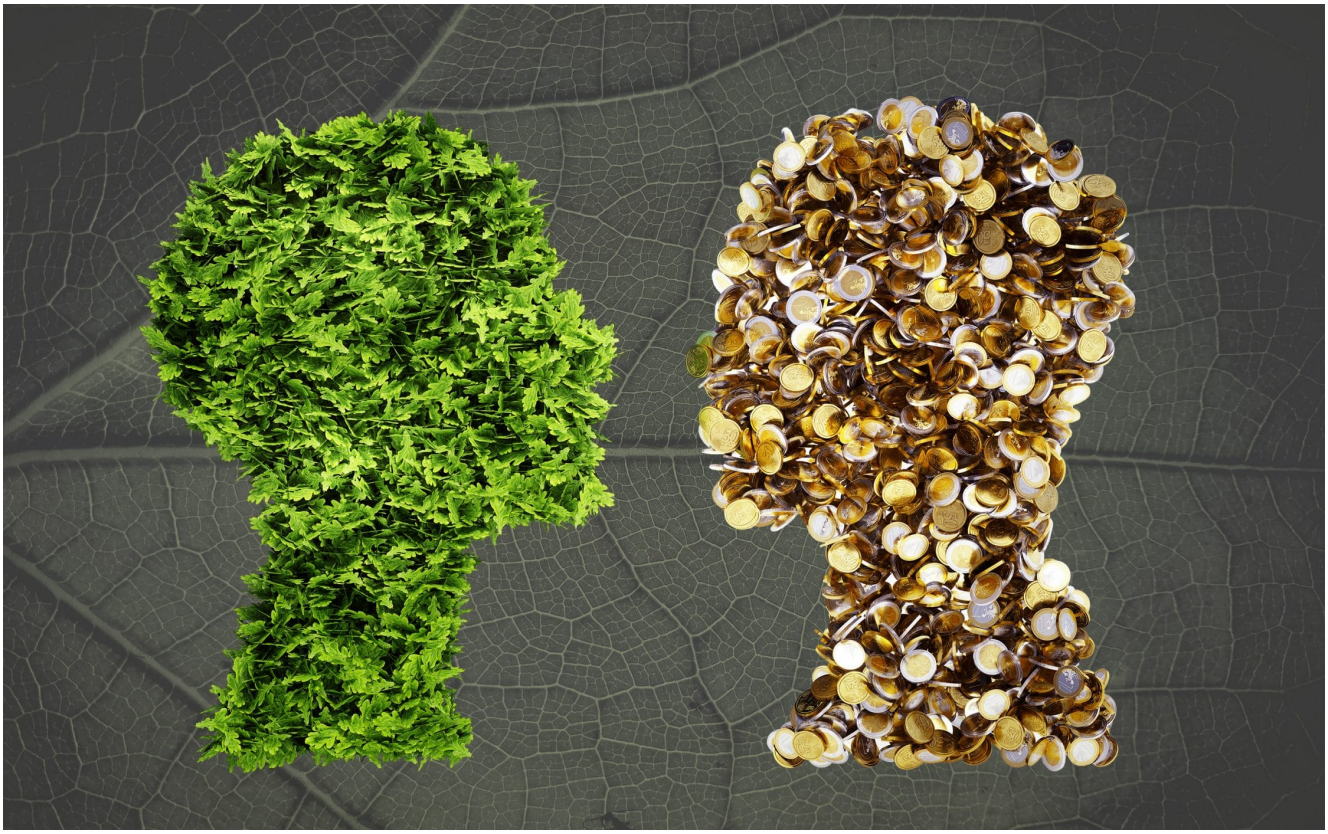
Sustainable fashion brands and sustainable companies in any other sector want to do more than just make money. They're

driven by an underlying ambition to change the world for the better. Lately, sustainable branding has become so popular, that organisations like the “Sustainable Brands” organisation and “Sustainable Brands Copenhagen” group launch their own events each year.

This year, the Sustainable Brands conference outlined the essential characteristics that any eco-friendly company’s roadmap should include:

- System-wide brand influence.
- Net-positive products and services.
- Purpose beyond profit.
- Regenerative operations (recyclable materials and sustainable processes).
- Transparent and proactive governance.

Now that 80% of consumers say that they would feel more loyal to brands that value community and environmental growth over money and status, sustainable branding has really hit its stride.



Why does sustainable branding matter? What can it do for you?

Sustainable brands aren't a new concept, but they are seeing a boost in popularity across recent years. In part, this is because the way that customers connect with companies is changing. Today's consumers want to feel an affinity with their favourite businesses, based on shared ideals.

According to a branding professional called Wally Olins, branding is a manifestation of the human condition, and it's about convincing your customers that they belong to your "tribe." One particularly commonplace to see the impact of this need for belonging is with sustainable fashion brands. UK customers and fashion lovers around the world choose to wear specific logos because the business behind them represents a particular set of beliefs.

When people connect with sustainable brands, they also show the world that they care about sustainability. Since the

environment is something we're all more concerned about these days, this affinity with sustainable clothing brands helps us to join a gigantic community of eco-friendly people.

61% of consumers today say that they're "very" concerned with the environmental problems facing the planet. If your company can show its customers that you share that concern, then you're one step closer toward building that all-important connection that leads to loyal consumers.

More loyal and committed customers also lead to more significant profits. In 2014, a study found that 55% of global consumers are willing to pay extra for products and services from companies committed to positive social change. A more recent report by CDP in 2017 found that sustainable brands get an 18% higher return on their investment than businesses without a CSR strategy.

Ultimately, a sustainable branding strategy has become the modern company's way to adhere to the changing needs of customers who don't just want products and services. Your fans today want to see that you care about something important so that they can be a proud part of your tribe.

You don't need to look far to find the evidence that sustainable brands are the way forward. Unilever's selection of "Sustainable Living" brands, including Ben & Jerry's, Dove, and Hellman's delivered more than 60% of the company's growth over the last 2 years.



Sustainable luxury: Brands that put the planet first

We've reached a point in modern brand building that dictates companies need to be more than just innovative and insightful. They need to be emotional.

Companies aren't just there to drive profit anymore; they're expected to step up and do something about the issues they see in the world. Fortunately, many organisations are already stepping up to embrace their new role, with brand initiatives and activities that are transforming the way that we live.

Currently, over 1,200 companies worldwide are looking for a price on carbon, while others set targets to become 100% powered by renewable energy.

It's these forward-thinking organisations that transform the status quo and achieve the most loyal customers with their disruptive actions. Here are a few lessons you can learn from

the sustainable luxury brands of the modern era.

1. Teamwork matters

Many of the smartest sustainable brands on the market today have realised that astronomical changes are easier to accomplish when they're not going it alone. You need employee advocates, investors, customer communities, and sometimes even the support of your competition to achieve a shared goal.



Take Ford, for instance. Like most automobile brands in the world today, Ford has been dedicating a lot of their R&D budget towards sustainable strategies like hybrid and electric cars. However, Ford has also begun to think about the quest for renewable energy beyond the transportation industry. With partners like Infineon, Whirlpool, and others, they created the "MyEnergi Lifestyle" program in 2014 to fuel more environmentally-friendly lifestyles.

The best sustainable brands don't let the issue of competition stop them from achieving their goals. They're willing to partner up and engage in new concepts to create a better

world.

2. Innovation is key

Sustainable brands are usually disruptive. After all, they aim to make a difference to the world that we live in, by rethinking the strategies and concepts that we rely on every day. If you want to implement your own sustainable branding strategy, you may need to go back to the drawing board with your brand mission and think about what you can do differently to protect the planet and support the initiatives that matter to you.



Credit: Mike Mozart

For example, Target recently implemented their sustainable strategy to help them promote an eco-friendlier identity for their business. The Target approach to sustainability is particularly creative because it's not just about recycling products or using fewer fossil fuels. In 2017, Target took its first step in creating sustainable clothing brands with an eco-friendly fashion line.

The new line of garments maintains the low-cost value that Target has built its reputation on up to now. The difference is that the fabric is environmentally-sound and limits our reliance on using raw products. At the same time, Target also supports a host of other sustainability programs in the areas of environmental conservation and education.

3. Sustainable brands put profits aside

Perhaps the most important lesson you can learn from sustainable brands is that these companies are willing to ignore profit in the quest for better reputations and environmental support. Perhaps the best example of a brand who seemingly overlooks earnings in favour of putting the planet first is Patagonia.

The king of sustainable fashion brands, Patagonia made their values evident in 2011 when they ran a full-page ad in the New York Times telling people not to buy their best-selling jacket. The company asked customers to buy fewer items of clothing, and spend more time using what they already have.



For those who thought the 2011 ad was just a publicity stunt, Patagonia proved their commitment again in 2016, when they donated all the profits from Black Friday to local organisations dedicated to protecting the environment. Though Patagonia makes obvious social and political statements with their advertising, they also know that taking these drastic steps means improving their relationships with their customers – people who love the great outdoors. Though sales for Black Friday in 2016 reached 2 million for Patagonia, the brand still made a whopping $10 million in profits after giving those initial profits away.

Sustainable brand examples: Guidance for going green

As mentioned above, you don't need to look far these days to find sustainable brand examples. Companies all the way from Coca-Cola to McDonald's are changing the way they manage their supply chain, produce their products and connect with customers, with sustainability in mind.

The sector that's most driven by sustainability of late seems to be the fashion industry. In fact, sustainable clothing brands are everywhere now that the world has shown how disgusted they are with the environmental dangers of mass-produced clothes. We discovered that cotton farming was responsible for almost a quarter of the world's pesticides, and sustainable fashion brands instantly started popping up to fix the problem.

Sustainable luxury brands like Barabara I Gongini champion sustainability by using recyclable materials to create clothing that not only looks good but protect the planet too. Even designers like Stella McCartney have been proving for years that sustainable materials, innovation, and long-lasting design can earn the loyalty of your target market.

Of course, it’s not just sustainable fashion brands paving the way to a brighter tomorrow. Other companies outside of the clothing industry include:

1. Dell

Leading computing company Dell is committed to reducing their impact on the environment with the creation of sustainable computer equipment and recyclable packaging. Dell focuses on using renewable energy like solar panels in their plants to reduce their impact on the environment. They’re also investing in removing up to 86 million metric tons of plastic from the world’s oceans , and they’re using those resources to create new products.



Dell even promotes the safe disposal of its computers with a friendly recycling plan. You can give your tech equipment back to Dell for free and ask them to dispose of it for you – which encourages the safe destruction of potentially dangerous products.

2. Apple

One of the biggest and most famous names in tech, Apple has also made the move towards its own sustainable branding strategy in recent years. Apple is committed to creating products that are not only highly innovative but environmentally-friendly too. They're aiming to power all of the Apple facilities in the world with 100% renewable energy soon, and they're well on their way to meeting that goal. In fact, Apple consumes 70% less power today than they did 10 years ago.



Apple is also investing in new technology to help boost the environmental friendliness of their operations. For instance, they've created their own disassembly robot to make getting rid of technology safe and easy. They're also leading the industry when it comes to making tech products safer for both the earth and the people on it.

3. Coca-Cola

As one of the world's most popular brands, Coca-Cola isn't immune to the rising demand for sustainable brands in the modern world. In recent years, the company has made significant strides in achieving its three most important environmental goals, including water preservation, sustainable packaging, and energy and climate protection.



Coca-Cola has embraced the environmental management system standard to ensure that all of their bottles include 24% less plastic in recent years. They've also reduced gas emissions by transforming their production line.

Your sustainable branding strategy: Tips for success

Companies everywhere are beginning to see the benefits of launching a more sustainable brand. From sustainable clothing brands that are creating a community out of people committed to showing their love for the planet through their fashion, to

eco-friendly tech companies – sustainability is everywhere.

The question for most budding brands today, is how can they capitalise on this growing trend of green branding? How do you create a company that uses sustainability to create a shared sense of community?

1. Know what you stand for

If you stand for nothing, then you'll fall for anything.

Sustainable brands can access the love and loyalty of a broader range of customers. However, it's not enough to simply jump on any environmental bandwagon. You need to convince your clients that you're genuinely committed to your cause, and that means building the right story around your business.

Go back and look at the purpose of your brand and ask yourself how you can link your business vision, to the concept of a better future.

Remember to be specific in your choice of a sustainability story. You'll need your efforts to be relevant to the products you offer, and the beliefs of your business. It's no good telling your customers that you're committed to reducing water wastage if you're a technology company who rarely deals with water. Instead, choose a cause that you can get behind in your business processes and the products you produce. This will help to create a more authentic and impactful story that lingers in the minds of your target audience.

2. Design your image carefully

Once you've got your narrative, it's important to make sure that your image reinforces the identity you're trying to create. It's not going to work to tell people that you're all about renewable resources and then package all your products in three inches of plastic.

Make sure that you're aware of every material you use and where it comes from before you bring it into your product cycle. You can also show your sustainable branding strategy in various other parts of your image too. For example, Lush focuses strongly on environmental friendliness on their website, in their stores, and even in the products they sell.

Think about how you can convey your sustainable nature in everything from your web design to your logo.



3. Create a positive tone of voice

Just as the right images support the credibility of sustainable brands, the right tone of voice can determine whether your customers choose to trust your company or not. It's essential to have a distinct and consistent voice that reminds your clients of your values wherever possible.

Be transparent, authentic and honest in everything you do. Today's consumers expect sustainable brands to be truthful and genuine – unlike the standard commercial brands of the past.

However, just because you need to be authentic doesn't mean you can't have a bit of fun. Get on social media and connect with your customers. Be positive and show videos that demonstrate how your sustainable initiatives are taking off.

While sustainable topics are inherently serious at their core, it's important to let your personality shine through if you want your consumers to connect with you on a deeper level.

4. Cultivate a community

Finally, with a voice that's designed to speak to your customers, an image that supports your sustainable narrative, and a focus on the right values, you're ready to begin building your tribe. Sustainable brands are all about community and participation. To start drawing the right people towards your company, make sure that you know exactly who you're targeting by constructing a few user personas. Once you have the image of your ideal customer in mind:

- **Attract conversations:** Set yourself up as a thought leader in your space. Write articles, record podcasts and take part in Q&A sessions with other experts who know about the issue you're trying to address.
- **Show don't tell:** Don't just tell people that you're making the world a better place, show them. Provide a full insight into the materials you use to create your sustainable clothing brands or the packaging strategies you use to reduce carbon emissions. Give your customers evidence that you're truly committed to a cause.
- **Encourage action:** Invite people to come and help you achieve important goals. Run charitable events that raise money for local issues. Give a portion of your profits back to a non-profit group. Make your community feel as though they're connecting with you to make the world a better place.



Set up your sustainable strategy: Invest in green branding

In a world where it’s increasingly difficult for brands to differentiate themselves, sustainability could be the way forward.

After all, if you want to stand out among your competitors, all you need to do is establish a connection with your target audience. Today’s customers are driven by and devoted to companies that share their values. Sustainability is quickly becoming the new mantra for strategic positioning.

While sustainable brands can face some complicated challenges, a green branding strategy can also lead to better brand equity, a stronger reputation, and bigger profits. Countless household names, disruptive brands, and iconic companies are climbing to new heights today thanks to their very own sustainability plan.

If you can put the right processes in place at every level of your organisation to achieve the goals that matter to your target audience, then you'll never have to worry about competing on price again. Sustainable brands stand the test of time.

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