

COMMUNICATING SOCIAL
AND ENVIRONMENTAL
ISSUES EFFECTIVELY

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COMMUNICATING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES EFFECTIVELY

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International Sustainability Strategist



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For my godchildren Elspeth, Archie and Léon, who will
inherit the world that we create for them.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Betsy Reed is a Sustainability Strategist and Engagement Expert. Her broad experience over the past 15+ years has included overseeing the design of Scotland's National Recycling Campaign, leading Nestle UK's public engagement work on sustainability, directing a national fair trade organization and working at Director level for a range of integrated communications agencies. She has run her own sustainability consultancy since 2013 and works as an independent strategic advisor around the world.

Born and raised in the US, Betsy has spent the majority of her career in the UK and Europe and has worked in the government, corporate, communications agency and NGO sectors. She brings that experience to her work with leaders and communications professionals, helping them understand and engage with complex social and environmental issues.

Betsy is regularly asked to speak, chair events and deliver trainings and workshops. She is known for an approach that is insightful, honest, humorous and strategic yet practical. She is a Member of the UK PRCA and a Fellow of the UK Royal Society of Arts (RSA), which brings together a global community of fellows to share creative ideas and innovation to solve pressing issues. She is also a B Leader, working with businesses to help them become certified B Corps which is a certification in recognition that businesses can be both good at business and good for the wider world. She holds an MSc in Nationalism Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is currently based in Barcelona, Spain.

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FOREWORD

Public relations (PR) has always been about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you.

But only in the past few years have businesses, government and every other sector grasped the moral and commercial importance of operating ethically and contributing positively to society.

Consumers increasingly choose to engage with brands, whose values align with their own. They expect businesses to make positive contributions to society, and these increased expectations have placed brands under unprecedented scrutiny.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has placed a magnifying glass on corporate behavior. It is no longer possible for brands to make false claims about their social and environmental credentials without being held to account by their stakeholders. And yet these same digital channels provide brands with extraordinary opportunities to bring communities together and inspire positive change.

If we're honest – helping organizations communicate to their external stakeholders has long been the bread and butter of PR professionals. There has been a rapid evolution over the last few years in the reputation and business case for being able to communicate effectively about social and environmental issues. What was once the preserve of people

with the word “environment” or “sustainability” in their job titles is now increasingly a necessary skill for communications professionals - and leaders - in all sectors.

This new paradigm has given rise to things like purpose-driven communication, which brings its own risks in an age of high public expectation and increasing regulation on related issues, from carbon to equal pay. This has revolutionized the expectations of the stakeholders communicators need to reach, as well as pushed our sector to up its game in being able to do this effectively.

We strengthen relationships and shape narratives, but modern communicators must be equally responsible for influencing how the organization or client they work for operates. That means challenging leaders, employers and clients to do what is increasingly acknowledged as the right thing for society and the environment. It's not just business who are called upon to deliver this expectation either; all sectors are equal in this.

There's often an immense gap between how an organization discusses its values and beliefs, and how it operates in the real world. The job of communicators is now, increasingly, to reconcile the say-do gap, ensuring organizations in any sector place ethics at the heart of their operations. It's a core part of the duty of professional communicators.

Nowhere is this matter more pertinent than on issues relating to society and the environment.

There is a widely held belief that governments have collectively failed to deliver on issues such as climate change, and that the private sector – backed by the support of engaged consumers – is primed to take the lead on societal issues.

This is something our industry has to get right. Too many PR professionals still lack an understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with communicating social and environmental issues. This translates into lack of understanding

of when they're actually about to get it wrong – or already have – and means we can be those guilty of ourselves creating a say-do gap. So whether it's understanding the implications of greenwashing, or mapping the complex ecosystem of stakeholders concerned about the environment or about particular social issues, we must deliver the clarity that our audiences seek and expect. It's a great responsibility and it's time for our sector to ensure we all have the awareness and skills to deliver effective communications on these issues.

The risks and rewards of communicating with conviction on social and environmental issues have never been greater. We have a tremendous opportunity to make a positive impact on our sectors and on society, and I remain entirely convinced that we will seize this chance and that the Framework outlined in this book is an opportunity to help our sector to do precisely that.

Francis Ingham
Director General, PRCA
Chief Executive, ICCO

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank the experts who have contributed to the Framework outlined in the following pages. Many of these invaluable colleagues are acknowledged throughout the book. I would also like to give a thanks to those who have contributed less formally but just as valuably as I've gathered my thoughts to write this book: Ed Gillespie, Will Gardner, Adrian Wheeler, Danny Whatmough and Jo Owen. I am grateful to the employers, clients, colleagues, friends and mentors who have contributed to my own experience and development over the course of my career as a sustainability expert. We each stand on the shoulders of the giants who have come before us, and I am privileged to have known and worked with a few of them. Thank you.

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1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

WELCOME TO THE BRAVE NEW PARADIGM

It is now more widely understood by leaders and communications professionals that the ability to both address and then communicate skillfully around social and environmental issues is no longer fringe. Whether it's climate change, ocean plastics, worker exploitation, migration, transgender issues or sexual harassment, a range of social and environmental issues have exploded into the forefront of organizational and, therefore, communications priorities.

The ability to understand and communicate about them effectively is now core to the skillset expected of business leaders, communicators, marketeers, political figures and, well, anyone who is required to communicate with others. Whether or not leaders and communications people realize this and have the skills to keep up with trends is another matter – and why I've created the Framework contained in this book.

I have spent my whole career focused exclusively on sustainability and have watched the world shift. I've surfed through most

sectors by now, via an international career spent mostly in the UK. I've worked in the public sector, have run a non-governmental organization (NGO), developed and led multiple national behavior change and advocacy campaigns, become a behavior change specialist, worked for the world's biggest food company and trained communications professionals in social and environmental issues. I've seen social and environmental activity and communications through the lens of most sectors and have watched the world change. Public expectations have shifted. Both political and corporate focus have incorporated social and environmental issues as a matter of priority. But I've seen the communications sector struggle to keep up. The skills needed to effectively and authentically communicate social and environmental issues haven't been updated quickly enough to keep pace.

What was once considered the preserve of specialists and "eco types" is now understood by many (or even most) leaders and communications professionals to be essential to core business and the future sustainability of an organization itself. Whether or not your organization or client acts as if this is the case is another matter.

Fortunately, the communications sector has finally woken up to the need to "up its game". The ability to understand and effectively communicate social and environmental issues has never been more crucial. The potential for getting it terribly wrong is more potentially risky than ever as well.

This is a time of great opportunity for leaders and communications people to upskill in order to communicate issues that are incredibly complex and often quite varied. Consider climate change and gender equality as two examples. Both are important issues but are likely of different levels of importance to different stakeholders and might require entirely different approaches to communicate about effectively. Both types of issues could fall under the heading of "sustainability communications," are important now, and will continue to be.

Unfortunately, and all too often, it's been communications people who are guilty of creating messages or marketing campaigns that are misinformed at best, misleading at worst around their brand, organization or client's actual social and environmental credentials. It's time for the communications sector to catch up with trends, and the good news is that, if you're reading this book, you already recognize this. You know that these issues are complex and risky to get wrong.

This book, therefore, is needed now more than ever. There are already many great books on PR theory and practice, as well as stacks of books on sustainability communications for brands and business, in particular. Because there are already lots of great resources, what the communications sector needs is principles and real-world practice to first understand, then communicate social and environmental issues effectively.

This book is, therefore, intentionally light on theory and heavy on practical application, providing a Framework that can be taken in pieces or as a whole. The information and guidance in this book aims to equip anyone who needs to craft and deliver a message or communications approach on social and environmental issues with what they need.

I have aimed to make this Framework relevant to all sectors, from government to business, charitable sector to academic institutions. Guidance and books for those working for brands, in particular, abound. So this book is for brands ... *and* everyone else. It is an homage-of-sorts to the hard-working, lone Sustainability Officer at a university, to those tasked with creating effective climate change communications for a local authority, as well as to those working in small businesses and those working for brands and communications agencies.

May this Framework be of use to all of you. I welcome future contact and feedback on how it's been of use and how it might be improved for future editions. My contact information can be found in the Appendix.

Let's move on to making the business case for effective social and environmental communications and outlining the content you'll find in in this book.

AN OVERVIEW OF RELEVANT TRENDS

Below are several proof points that illustrate why it's crucial to not just communicate about social and environmental issues, but to communicate them effectively.

In October 2018, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report that created a seismic shift in public discourse and action on climate change. The report warned that humankind has until 2030 to address and curb climate change in order to avoid a 1.5 °C rise in temperature that will dramatically raise the risk of floods, drought, extreme heat and food security for millions of people (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2018).

Mintel, a reputable global market research provider, publishes an annual report on consumer food and drink trends, as well as general consumer trends. Their food and drink report for 2018 said that:

In a world of post-truth politics and unsubstantiated media, consumers are looking for brands to court them with transparency, simplicity and evidence. Consumer distrust in governments and media is spreading to companies, and so is the clamour for truth and transparency in ingredients and behind-the-scenes processes. We'll see greater accountability in politics, media and employment.
(Cope & Cottney, 2017)

The top trends in Mintel's global consumer trends report for 2030, published in 2019, includes predictions that

consumers will have a greater focus on human rights, especially in developing markets; consumption of red meat will move “from mainstream to taboo”; consumers will be “looking for wellbeing across everything they do”; and there will be “government-led changes to water consumption” (Crabbe, Lieberman, & Moriarty, 2019).

Mintel’s prediction of 2030 trends around food and drink is useful as a lens to consider wider trends that are useful for communicators to understand. They predict that businesses who are “forces for change on important societal issues” will be those who succeed in the next decade. More people will consider and take pride in their efforts to ensure the ethical and environmental impacts of how they consume and behave are positive ones. As a result, consumers will support companies (and probably other types of organizations), who help them to be more conscious and low-impact in their use of resources (Zegler, Moore, Beckett, Maiseviciute Haydon, & Faulkner, 2018).

The 2017 edition of Edelman’s well-regarded Trust Barometer showed a global implosion of public trust in the world in institutions of government, business, media and NGOs (Harary et al., 2017). Their 2018 report showed no change and stated the importance of communications, saying “silence is now deeply dangerous.” One area they highlighted was that CEOs who speak out on trust issues, like social and environmental ones, regained some public trust (up from 33% to 45%) (Ries, Bersoff, Armstrong, Adkins, & Bruening, 2018). The 2019 report revealed an 11% increase in people who want CEOs to take the lead on change over issues like equal pay, sexual harassment and the environment rather than waiting for change to be regulated by government (Ries et al., 2019). Tracked over three years, it is safe to say that trust is built on what actions organizations take and how they communicate around social and environmental issues, and this is a trend that isn’t likely to go away.

The UK's PR and Communications Association (the PRCA) is the largest PR association in Europe and has an incredible amount of perspective on trends, skills and ethics in the PR industry, all of which is relevant to what we're discussing here. Its UK PR Council, of which I was previously a member, finally announced in early 2018 that its core focus for the year would be on establishing the social value and purpose of PR. At the time of writing, they are still possibly the only PR body in the world who have created such a formal focus on these issues. PR Council Chair Jon Chandler, previously of Coca Cola and now the CEO of a UK-based communications agency, said,

Moving forward, successful organisations won't only succeed based on their innovations, or even by being seen to do the right thing; reputation management is no longer enough. Everything from their internal culture through to the way they conduct their business around the world, will have equal impact on a brand's bottom line. As communicators, it will be our job to help the C-suite and Board level identify the business imperative of the ethical imperative. We need to be better in order to do better. (Gardiner, 2018)

The PRCA has continued its commitment to helping communications professionals get to grips with crucial social and environmental issues by establishing a group in 2020 focused on B Corps, a certification system whereby businesses can demonstrate through a rigorous assessment process that they have embedded social and environmental good at their heart, and in everything else they do. The group is focused on "improving the PR industry for profit, planet, and people by

helping agencies navigate, understand, and implement B Corp principles. Certified B Corporations are businesses that meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose. B Corps are accelerating a global culture shift to redefine success in business and build a more inclusive and sustainable economy.” (PRCA, 2020)

FOUR KEY POINTS

I want to highlight four key points at the start of this book, as elements I have observed as lacking in a fair share of communicators’ mindsets and skillsets, though this is changing. May this book help to accelerate this change!

Sustainability is about *Both* Society
and the Environment

Using “sustainability” to refer solely to environmental issues is unhelpful and inaccurate. It also serves to limit an understanding of wider related issues and, therefore, the ability to communicate them effectively. Throughout this book, I’ll refer to “social and environmental issues” rather than “sustainability.” This should hopefully reiterate the accurate definition, firmly implant itself as a lens for readers and shape the communications sector’s concept of sustainability.

The standard definition of sustainability, and the one that I’ll use as the basis of a shared understanding throughout this book, is the one published in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), in a report now referred to as the “Brundtland Report.”

Sustainability is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

– The Brundtland definition (1987)

That means that whatever is good for society and the environment is sustainable and whatever is not...is *unsustainable*. Hopefully that creates a crystal-clear picture. It is, therefore, crucial to remember that sustainability includes a range of issues, including social issues like equal pay, #MeToo and LGBTQI issues, as well as those that straddle both social and environmental matters like climate refugees.

Communicators in Every Sector Need to be
Able to Communicate Social and
Environmental Issues Effectively

If you work in or with the public sector, academia, NGOs, corporates, small- or medium-sized businesses or any other type of organization and are reading this book, you already know the truth of this section’s heading. I have written this book to be relevant to communicators and leaders in a range of sectors. I have worked with many of them in many sectors and have incorporated that experience into the information and approaches in this book.

Use this book to learn, to practice, to collaborate with others and to challenge yourself and others you work with to do better. The rewards can be high, and the risks in not doing so are equally high.