

SUSTAINABLE MARKETING MANUAL

Ec@ADVERT.

Innovative Approaches to Digital
Sustainable Marketing by Promoting
Environment-Friendly Practices



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EcoAdvert: Innovative Approaches to Digital Sustainable Marketing by Promoting Environment-Friendly Practices

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Sustainable Marketing Manual (SMM)



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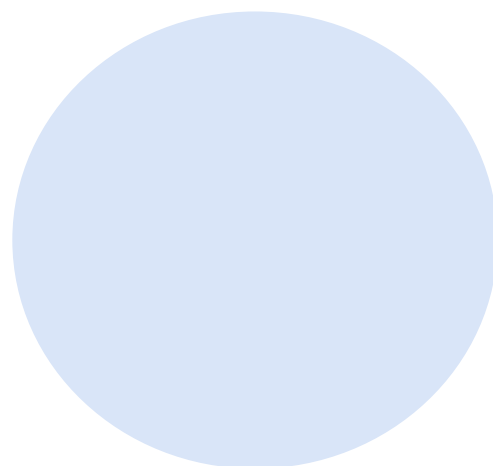
INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DIGITAL SUSTAINABLE MARKETING BY PROMOTING ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY PRACTICES



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1. Introduction

What?

This manual represents the **Sustainable Marketing Manual (SMM)**, developed within the project *EcoAdvert: Innovative Approaches to Digital Sustainable Marketing by Promoting Environment-Friendly Practices*. It is designed as a practical guide to show how marketing can be transformed into a tool for sustainability, social responsibility, and long-term value creation.

Why?

The manual has been created to address the growing challenges related to climate change and the increasing societal expectations that companies must contribute beyond generating profit. Its aim is to support marketing professionals, students, and entrepreneurs in building strategies that are transparent, ethical, and inclusive. At the same time, the manual directly supports the objectives of the **European Green Deal** and the **Digital Education Action Plan**, by providing innovative, accessible, and future-oriented approaches to learning and practicing sustainable marketing.

Who?

The main users are **VET (Vocational Education and Training) trainers**, marketing students, business owners, start-ups, and marketing agencies. Indirectly, public institutions, NGOs, and local communities will also benefit from the positive changes initiated through sustainable marketing practices.

Where?

The manual has been developed in the context of the **European Union**, with contributions from partners in North Macedonia, Italy, and Bulgaria. However, the concepts and strategies presented here are globally relevant and can be applied in different economic and cultural contexts.

When?

The EcoAdvert project runs from **01.05.2025 – 31.07.2026**, but the content of this manual is designed to have long-term value and can be used well beyond the project's completion.

How?

The manual was developed through a **transparent process of research, analysis, and co-creation**, involving focus groups of students, entrepreneurs, and experts. Based on this collaborative work, the content combines theoretical frameworks, practical tools, case studies, and step-by-step strategies for implementation. This ensures that the manual is not only an informative document, but also a **hands-on resource** that readers can immediately apply in their professional and educational settings.

1.1. Why Sustainable Marketing Matters

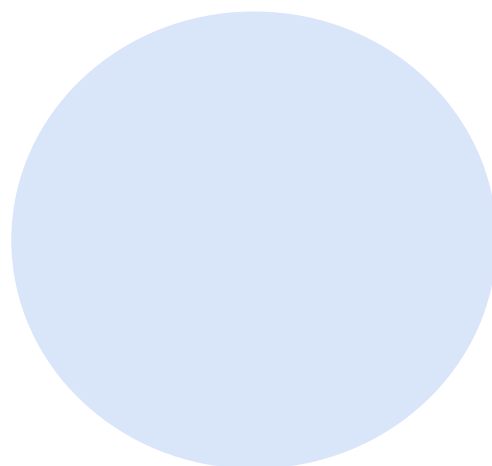
Marketing has always been about connecting with people, telling stories, and creating value. But in today's world, the context in which marketing operates has changed dramatically. Customers,

communities, and stakeholders are no longer satisfied with products that merely deliver performance; they want to know how those products are made, what values the brand stands for, and what impact their choices have on society and the planet. This shift has transformed marketing from a discipline focused on short-term sales into a powerful tool for shaping long-term trust, responsibility, and resilience.

Sustainable marketing matters because it reflects the growing expectation that businesses must do more than generate profit. They must also contribute positively to the environment and to society. This doesn't mean abandoning growth or competitiveness; rather, it means redefining success to include transparency, ethics, and shared value. Companies that integrate sustainability into their marketing are finding that they not only build stronger brands but also deepen customer loyalty, attract talent, and open new opportunities for innovation.

At its core, sustainable marketing is about aligning a company's message with its actions. It is not enough to promote eco-friendly initiatives or ethical practices if they are only surface-level. Authenticity is essential. The brands that thrive in this new era are those that communicate their sustainability commitments honestly, engage customers in meaningful ways, and demonstrate measurable progress over time.

This manual has been created to guide marketing professionals, students, business owners, and start-ups through the principles and practices of sustainable marketing, offering real-world strategies and examples to support lasting impact. By embracing sustainable marketing, organizations can play an active role in shaping the future of business—one where profitability and responsibility go hand in hand, and where marketing becomes a force not just for selling, but for positive change.



2. Sustainable Marketing: Core Principles and Values for a Greener Marketplace

In an era where the global climate crisis, inequality, and resource depletion are no longer distant concerns but urgent realities, marketing cannot remain neutral or value-free. Instead, it must evolve into a strategic tool that not only delivers commercial value but also contributes positively to society and the planet. This chapter expands on the foundational understanding of sustainable marketing, diving deeper into its origins, key principles, educational relevance, and how it transforms business as usual into business for good.

2.1. Understanding Sustainable Marketing: A Strategic Shift

Sustainable marketing is not simply “green marketing.” While green marketing focuses primarily on environmental aspects, sustainable marketing represents a broader and more strategic evolution of marketing thinking. It aims to balance profitability with social responsibility and ecological stewardship.

According to Belz and Peattie (2009), sustainable marketing is “building and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, the social environment, and the natural environment.”

This paradigm shift is shaped by several interlocking factors:

- **Consumer awareness:** People demand transparency and sustainability (NielsenIQ, 2023).
- **Regulatory pressure:** EU Green Deal, SDGs, and ESG reporting obligations are pushing companies to align with sustainable standards (European Commission, 2020).
- **Investor expectations:** Sustainability is increasingly linked to long-term risk mitigation and innovation (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

Sustainable marketing integrates economic, ecological, and social dimensions into every marketing decision and message. It promotes a transition from transactional to relational marketing—where value is co-created, long-term trust is prioritized, and stakeholders beyond shareholder’s matter. Moreover, sustainable marketing is not an isolated department or function. It is a cross-organizational mindset, embedded in strategy, culture, supply chains, and even digital infrastructure. For example, a company may reduce its carbon footprint not only by eco-friendly product design but by switching to green hosting for its website and optimizing its social media assets to reduce digital emissions. In this sense, marketing becomes a platform for systems change.

2.2. Historical Context and Evolution

The roots of sustainable marketing can be traced to several pivotal moments:

- **1970s–1980s:** Emergence of ecological marketing and consumer activism (Peattie and Crane, 2005).
- **1990s:** The introduction of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into business frameworks (Carroll and Shabana, 2010).
- **1997:** John Elkington's Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model formalized the idea that businesses must be accountable not only for profit but also for people and the planet (Elkington, 1997).
- **2000s–2010s:** Growth of ethical consumption, fair trade, and social enterprises.
- **Today:** Integration of sustainability into brand strategy, stakeholder engagement, and marketing curricula in higher education (Martin and Schouten, 2012).

In parallel, several large-scale events accelerated awareness, such as the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, the 2015 Paris Agreement, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and inequality in access to products and services. These macro-level forces helped bring sustainability to the forefront of marketing agendas.

Understanding this trajectory helps us frame sustainable marketing not as a trend, but as a necessary response to systemic challenges that affect markets and societies.

2.3. Core Values Revisited: A Deeper Dive

Sustainable marketing is anchored in a set of interrelated values that guide both decision-making and day-to-day implementation. The six core values presented below form a continuous, reinforcing system—each value supporting and complementing the others.

Environmental Stewardship

This means reducing the environmental footprint of marketing activities (e.g., energy use in digital marketing), selecting sustainable suppliers, minimizing packaging, and integrating lifecycle thinking into product development.

Brands like IKEA and Unilever have pioneered circular economy principles in their marketing strategies. Environmental stewardship also means using marketing campaigns to advocate for behavior change, such as reducing single-use plastics or adopting eco-friendly transportation.

Social Justice and Inclusion

Marketing can amplify voices and shift norms. Inclusive storytelling, gender-sensitive advertising, accessible design, and community-driven co-creation practices are crucial. For example, Ben & Jerry's uses its platform to advocate for racial justice and climate activism. Sustainable marketing in this context is a tool for empowerment—it actively avoids stereotypes, tokenism, and exclusion.

Long-Termism and Intergenerational Thinking

Unlike traditional campaigns focused on immediate conversion, sustainable marketing adopts long-term KPIs such as customer trust, community impact, and carbon footprint. Long-termism is not anti-growth—it is pro-resilience. Businesses that communicate their commitment to intergenerational responsibility tend to build stronger emotional bonds with customers who value purpose-driven brands.

Ethics and Anti-Greenwashing

Transparency, honest reporting, and third-party validation are the backbone of sustainable branding. Over 70% of consumers distrust green claims without certification (Delmas and Burbano, 2011). Ethical marketing also implies admitting trade-offs—such as disclosing when a product is made locally but still contains imported ingredients. Ethical dilemmas should not be hidden—they should be contextualized and addressed.

Participative Stakeholder Engagement

This value extends the marketer’s responsibility to listen and co-create with stakeholders, including suppliers, customers, NGOs, employees, and the natural world. This principle aligns with Freeman’s (1984) Stakeholder Theory. Truly sustainable marketing recognizes that value is not only delivered to but shaped by the market. Participative models include customer advisory boards, collaborative product design, and social media platforms that encourage dialogue, not just promotion.

SMART Goals for Sustainable Marketing

To ensure that long-term impact is not just aspirational but actionable, sustainable marketers apply the SMART framework—setting goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (Doran, 1981). This approach prevents vague commitments like “becoming greener” and instead supports structured progress through clearly defined outcomes.

Table 1 Smart Elements

SMART Element	Key Question to Ask	Example in Marketing Context
Specific	What exactly do we want to achieve?	Replace all plastic packaging with biodegradable alternatives
Measurable	How will we measure success?	100% of packaging certified as compostable
Achievable	Is this realistic with our resources?	Yes, by switching 2 suppliers and redesigning label layout
Relevant	How does this align with our strategy?	It supports our vision of a circular economy
Time-bound	When will this be completed?	By the end of Q2, within 6 months

Below is a practical example of how a SMART goal can be applied in sustainable packaging: When SMART goals are integrated into marketing plans—whether for campaigns, messaging, distribution, or product development—they transform sustainability from an abstract concept into a tangible performance driver. In the long term, SMART-based approaches allow for consistent monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of sustainable marketing strategies.

2.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation

Despite its compelling logic and growing urgency, sustainable marketing faces significant implementation challenges. These must be openly acknowledged to develop solutions that are both realistic and effective.

Misalignment Between Departments

In many organizations, sustainability efforts are siloed within CSR or compliance departments, while marketing continues to function using traditional models focused on short-term sales and growth. Without integration at all levels—including finance, operations, and communications—sustainable marketing remains fragmented.

Lack of Skills and Tools

Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) lack access to training or expertise in sustainability. Marketing staff may be unaware of lifecycle analysis, carbon offsetting, or inclusive design practices. Investment in upskilling and open educational resources is essential (UNESCO, 2021).

Greenwashing Temptation

The pressure to appear “green” without changing practices leads some companies to engage in misleading or superficial marketing. Regulatory frameworks such as the EU Green Claims Directive aim to combat this, but education and internal ethics frameworks are also critical (European Commission, 2023).

Consumer Behaviour Gap

Although many consumers express sustainable values, their purchasing behavior does not always reflect them. Price, convenience, and availability often outweigh sustainability concerns. This highlights the need for marketers to create appealing, accessible, and habit-changing offers.

2.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact

To ensure that sustainable marketing delivers more than good intentions, performance must be measurable. This requires indicators that go beyond classic ROI or conversion rates.

1. Environmental Indicators

- CO₂ emissions per campaign
- Water usage in promotional material production
- % of materials recycled or biodegradable

2. Social Indicators

- Gender balance in advertising representation
- Number of inclusive or community-driven campaigns
- Accessibility compliance in digital assets (e.g., WCAG)

3. Trust and Reputation

- Net Promoter Score (NPS) among sustainability-conscious users
- Third-party certifications earned (e.g., B Corp, Fair Trade)
- Transparency rating (e.g., annual sustainability report score)

By tracking these KPIs, organizations can both prove and improve their sustainability efforts in the marketing domain.

2.6. Self-Assessment Tool: Is Your Marketing Strategy Sustainable?

Sustainable marketing is no longer a “nice to have” — it is a competitive, ethical, and ecological imperative. As consumers, regulators, and future employees demand authenticity, equity, and environmental responsibility, marketers have a powerful role to play. This chapter showed how sustainable marketing is defined not only by what it says but by how it operates, whose voices it includes, and how its impacts are measured.

By moving from awareness to action, and from intent to evidence, sustainable marketing can catalyze systemic change. In the following chapter, we will explore how these values manifest through each element of the marketing mix — product, price, place, promotion, and people — offering hands-on guidance for reshaping campaigns and strategies from the ground up.

To support continued learning and the implementation of sustainable marketing strategies, we recommend the following official EU resources and tools:

Table 2 Official EU resources and tools

Resource	Description	Link
EU Green Deal	The European Commission’s strategic plan for a sustainable economy	https://ec.europa.eu/green-deal
Sustainable Product Policy	Guidelines for designing eco-friendly and circular products	https://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel
SDGs Toolkit for SMEs	A guide to integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into small business practices	https://sdghub.com/sdgs-sme-guide
European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform	Tools, success stories, and collaboration for circular marketing	https://circulareconomy.europa.eu
YouTube Playlist: “Marketing for Sustainability” (EU Education Series)	Short video lessons and case studies for beginners and educators	Watch here

These resources can be used as supplementary materials for workshops, classroom discussions, or self-paced learning.

To help readers reflect critically on their current marketing practices, the following self-assessment tool can be used individually or in group training sessions.

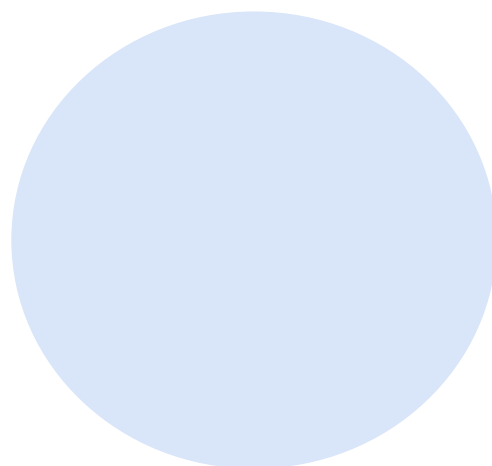
Mini Test – Ask yourself:

1. Have you assessed the environmental and social impact of each part of your marketing strategy?
2. Are stakeholders actively involved in the development of your campaigns?
3. Have you defined any SMART goals related to sustainability for this year?

4. Do you measure the impact of your messages on social justice or consumer behavior?
5. How transparent are your environmental claims and messages?

Result Interpretation:

If you answered “no” to **three or more** of the questions above, it might be time to revisit and redesign your marketing strategy through a sustainability lens.



3. Rethinking the Sustainable Marketing Mix (4Ps) for Sustainability and Impact

In today's volatile world shaped by environmental emergencies, economic disruptions, and social movements, the classical marketing mix (4Ps) must evolve. Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—once created for linear markets focused on consumption and competition—now require deep rethinking through a sustainability lens. This chapter revisits each of the 4Ps and introduces a fifth, crucial “P”: **People**, placing human and ecological well-being at the center of modern marketing practice.

Before we begin rethinking each element of the marketing mix in detail, the table below highlights the fundamental differences between traditional and sustainable approaches across the 4Ps framework.

Why Rethink the 4Ps?

The original 4Ps model developed by McCarthy in the 1960s remains a foundational framework in marketing education. Yet it was built for a different era—one where environmental limits, social justice, and ethical responsibility were rarely considered business priorities. Today, this outdated model must be updated to:

- Reflect **planetary boundaries** (Rockström, J. et al. (2009) ‘A safe operating space for humanity’, *Nature*, 461(7263), pp. 472–475)
- Address **consumer trust and transparency crises**
- Enable businesses to deliver **long-term, shared value** (Porter and Kramer, 2011)

Sustainable marketing demands a transformation: from extractive to regenerative, from persuasive to participatory, from fast to fair.

3.1. Product → Products with Purpose

Sustainable products are not just “eco-friendly”; they are designed with lifecycle thinking, ethical sourcing, and user empowerment in mind.

Sustainable product strategies include:

- Modular and repairable design (e.g., Fairphone, iFixit)
- Cradle-to-cradle principles and biodegradable materials
- Product-as-a-service models (e.g., renting jeans or tools)
- Digital minimalism: apps and digital goods with low carbon footprints

SMART Example:

Replace 80% of plastic components with compostable biomaterials by Q3 2026

SDG Alignment: Goal 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production

3.2. Price → Pricing for Real Value

Sustainable pricing reflects true cost accounting—including environmental and social externalities. It ensures fairness along the value chain.

Sustainable pricing strategies include:

- Sliding scales or solidarity pricing for underserved groups
- Full-cost pricing that includes emissions, water use, or waste
- Supporting fair wages and ethical supply chains
- Transparent pricing breakdowns for consumers

SMART Example: Introduce tiered pricing to increase accessibility by 30% for students and low-income consumers by Q1 2025

EU Context: Aligns with Green Claims Directive and consumer rights transparency

3.3. Place → Distribution with Responsibility

Place is no longer just about shelf visibility or e-commerce reach. It's about ensuring access in ways that reduce ecological impact.

Sustainable place strategies include:

- Local sourcing and micro-distribution models (short supply chains)
- Eco-packaging and consolidated logistics
- Carbon-neutral delivery options
- Virtual access and remote services to reduce travel

Example Case: LOOP's reusable container system reduces single-use packaging in last-mile delivery.

SMART Goal: Reduce CO₂ emissions in product delivery by 40% within two years by switching to green logistics providers

3.4. Promotion → Authentic, Transparent, and Empowering

Sustainable promotion avoids manipulation. It informs, educates, and builds relationships based on shared values.

Effective sustainable promotion includes:

- Storytelling based on real impact and metrics
- Transparency in claims (e.g., verified carbon footprint)
- Co-creation with customers and local communities
- Representation, inclusion, and positive narratives

Avoid:

Greenwashing. Overconsumption messaging (e.g., “Buy more to save the planet!”)

Checklist for Ethical Promotion:

- Is it honest?
- Does it empower?
- Does it align with sustainability goals?

3.5. The Fifth P: People

People are not passive consumers—they are co-creators, stakeholders, and agents of change. Adding “People” to the marketing mix means:

- Human-centered design
- Participatory innovation
- Internal stakeholder engagement (training, culture)
- External partnerships with NGOs, educators, and community groups

Example: Patagonia includes employees and activists in campaign development and product innovation.

Quote: “If you’re not serving people, you’re not serving the planet.”

3.6. Integrated View: Sustainable 5P Table

The sustainable marketing mix is not just a theoretical framework—it is an interconnected system that places environmental, social, and ethical values at the heart of every decision. The figure below provides a visual representation of this holistic approach.

This visual highlight the interdependence of the 5Ps in shaping a sustainable marketing strategy. Yet to implement these principles effectively, each “P” must also be translated into concrete actions, measurable impacts, and aligned with the appropriate sustainability dimensions. The table below breaks down these components to support practitioners in aligning strategic intent with real-world outcomes.

Table 3 Sustainable 5P

P	Reimagined Focus	Example Action	Impact Dimension
Product	Lifecycle and purpose	Modular, repairable shoes	Environmental
Price	Fairness and transparency	Solidarity pricing for students	Social
Place	Low-carbon distribution	Local sourcing and bike delivery	Environmental
Promotion	Truth and empowerment	Verified impact storytelling	Cultural/Ethical
People	Inclusion and agency	Co-design workshops	Social/Ethical

Reflective Questions: Rethinking Your 5Ps

- Is your **product** designed to last and reduce waste?
- Does your **pricing** reflect social equity and environmental cost?
- Can your **distribution** model be more local or digital?
- Is your **promotion** transparent and inclusive?
- Are your **people**—inside and outside your company—truly involved?

If you answered “no” to any of these, your marketing mix may be ready for a sustainable transformation.

To help you reflect critically on your current approach, use the checklist below to evaluate the sustainability of your 5Ps.

Mini Test – Ask yourself:

- Does your product design consider durability, reuse, and end-of-life impact?
- Is your pricing strategy aligned with social equity and ecological cost?
- Does your distribution system reduce emissions and support local economies?
- Are your promotions transparent, inclusive, and free from greenwashing?
- Do your people—both inside and outside the company—participate in shaping your marketing?

Result Interpretation:

If you answered “no” to two or more of these questions, your marketing mix may need a sustainability upgrade.

3.7. EU Resources for Rethinking Your 5Ps: From Mix to Movement

To support the redesign of your marketing mix in alignment with sustainability principles, we recommend the following official EU resources and educational tools:

Table 4 EU Resources for Rethinking Your 5Ps

Resource	Description	Link
EU Green Deal	Strategic roadmap for sustainable economic transformation	https://ec.europa.eu/green-deal
EU Ecolabel & Sustainable Product Policy	Guidelines for sustainable product and packaging design	https://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel
SDGs Toolkit for SMEs	Practical integration of the 4Ps into SDG goals for business	https://sdghub.com/sdgs-sme-guide
European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform	Best practices, case studies, and tools for circular logistics and distribution	https://circulareconomy.europa.eu
YouTube Playlist: “Sustainable Marketing in Practice” (EU Series)	Short video lessons on applying sustainability in the marketing mix	Watch here

The classical 4Ps—Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—have served as a compass for marketers for decades. Yet in the 21st century, they can no longer remain static signposts pointing toward consumption, competition, and growth at all costs. This chapter has shown that when reimaged through the lens of sustainability, the 4Ps evolve into a transformative framework that shifts priorities from profit-only to profit-with-purpose. By adding the fifth “P”—People—we recognize

that human well-being and ecological integrity are inseparable from the success of any marketing strategy.

What emerges is not just a new version of the marketing mix, but a new paradigm:

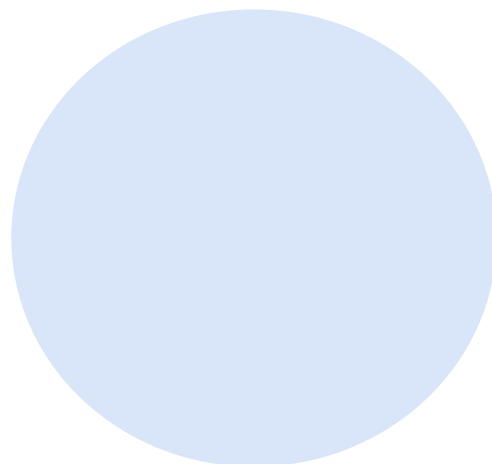
- **Products** are designed with responsibility across their entire lifecycle, contributing to circular economies rather than linear waste.
- **Prices** reflect real value, integrating fairness, transparency, and long-term social and ecological costs.
- **Places** of distribution reduce environmental footprints while enhancing equitable access for communities.
- **Promotions** move away from persuasive manipulation and toward authentic storytelling, empowerment, and accountability.
- **People**, finally, shift from being passive targets to active co-creators, shaping marketing as a participatory practice.

Together, these five dimensions form a coherent system that aligns with the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, the **European Green Deal**, and the growing call for regenerative economies. They also signal that the future of marketing is not about selling more—it is about selling better, with measurable impact on society and the planet.

The sustainable marketing mix is, therefore, more than a managerial tool: it is a **movement**. It invites companies, educators, and practitioners to rethink not just how they market, but why they market. It challenges organizations to treat sustainability not as an add-on or a campaign theme, but as a **core principle that guides every decision and every action**.

Ultimately, rethinking the 4Ps into 5Ps is not about abandoning marketing traditions—it is about future-proofing them. In doing so, marketing becomes a force for building resilient businesses, strengthening community trust, and accelerating the transition toward greener, fairer, and more inclusive economies.

The journey does not end here. The next chapter will show how to translate these principles into concrete actions: developing sustainable campaigns, measuring performance with clear KPIs, and adapting strategies to sector-specific realities. The path forward is clear—**from mix to movement, from vision to execution**.



4. Designing Products with Purpose and Planet in Mind

In a world facing climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality, **product design** has become an ethical and strategic discipline. Businesses and entrepreneurs can no longer focus solely on aesthetics, functionality, or profit margins. Today's competitive advantage lies in offering products that serve a **greater purpose**: ethically sourced, environmentally responsible, and socially beneficial.

This chapter explains how sustainable design principles can guide the creation of products that respect planetary limits and generate long-term value for communities and businesses. It also introduces practical tools, measurable indicators, and EU resources to support VET trainers, learners, and SMEs.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Understand the core principles of sustainable product design.
- Define key product features (durability, biodegradability, recyclability, social fairness).
- Apply measurable indicators and SMART goals to sustainable product development.
- Use EU frameworks and tools (e.g., Ecodesign Directive, EU Ecolabel) to guide design decisions.

Learn from case studies that integrate environmental and social value into product innovation.

4.1. What Is Sustainable Product Design?

Sustainable product design integrates environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability across the entire product life cycle. It is not limited to aesthetics or cost reduction; instead, it seeks to minimize harm and maximize positive contributions from sourcing through use and end-of-life. By applying sustainability principles systematically, businesses can ensure that their products not only meet consumer expectations but also align with global sustainability frameworks such as the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and the **EU Circular Economy Action Plan**.

The following table outlines the **core features of sustainable product design**, their definitions, and measurable indicators that practitioners can apply in real-world settings. This structured view helps businesses translate broad sustainability concepts into actionable criteria for design, production, and assessment.

This framework illustrates that sustainable design cannot be evaluated on a single dimension. A product may be recyclable but not durable, efficient but socially unfair, or fairtrade-certified but energy-intensive. True sustainability emerges when **all five dimensions are considered together**, ensuring that environmental goals are not achieved at the expense of social justice or long-term usability.

For practitioners, the indicators serve as **practical benchmarks**: companies can track average lifespan and reparability to strengthen durability, monitor energy and water inputs to increase efficiency, measure compostable or recyclable content to assess end-of-life options, and require supplier certifications to ensure fairness across the supply chain.

Table 5 Core Features of Sustainable Product Design

Core Feature	Definition	Practical Indicator
Durability	Ability to remain functional over time, resist wear, and be easily repaired.	Average lifespan, reparability index
Energy & Resource Efficiency	Minimal energy, water, and raw-material use during production and use.	kWh/use, litres water/unit
Biodegradability	Capacity of materials to decompose harmlessly.	% compostable content
Recyclability	Ease of disassembly and material recovery.	% components recyclable
Social Fairness	Respect for labour standards, equity, and community benefit.	% suppliers with certifications

For practitioners, the indicators serve as **practical benchmarks**: companies can track average lifespan and reparability to strengthen durability, monitor energy and water inputs to increase efficiency, measure compostable or recyclable content to assess end-of-life options, and require supplier certifications to ensure fairness across the supply chain.

By embedding these metrics into product development processes, organizations can move beyond vague commitments and demonstrate **evidence-based accountability**. Ultimately, sustainable product design is not just about reducing harm—it is about creating products that **actively contribute to regenerative systems**, empower users to make informed choices, and support resilient economies.

4.2. Purpose-Driven Design: Aligning Products with Societal Goals

Purpose-driven product design focuses on creating offerings that **actively contribute to solving environmental and social challenges**, rather than simply minimising harm. It asks: “*What positive role can this product play in society?*”

This approach strengthens a brand’s credibility and resonates with increasingly values-oriented consumers. Research shows that products positioned around sustainability grow faster and command higher loyalty when the benefits are clearly communicated (McKinsey, 2020).

Environmental Alignment

Purpose-driven products embed environmental stewardship into their very DNA:

- Reducing **single-use plastics** and unnecessary packaging.
- Substituting virgin raw materials with **recycled or bio-based alternatives**.
- Designing for **energy efficiency**, water conservation, and low emissions.

- Supporting **biodiversity** by sourcing from regenerative agriculture or certified forestry

Social and Ethical Value

A product with purpose also generates benefits for people:

- Promoting **fair trade** and living wages across supply chains.
- Encouraging **local employment** or training initiatives.
- Supporting cultural heritage and traditional craftsmanship.
- Ensuring **accessibility** for users of different abilities, ages, or income levels.

Economic and Community Impact

Purpose-driven design can open new markets and strengthen community resilience:

Affordable solar lamps or clean cookstoves improve energy access and reduce indoor air pollution. Repair services or leasing models (e.g., furniture-as-a-service) foster circular business models and stable income streams.

Collaborations with NGOs or social enterprises enhance trust and widen distribution channels.

Alignment with Global & EU Policy

Designing with purpose means ensuring that products align with key policy frameworks. This includes the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**—particularly Goal 8 (Decent Work), Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption), and Goal 13 (Climate Action).

It also embraces the **EU Green Deal** and the **Circular Economy Action Plan**, which encourage resource efficiency and product longevity. In addition, the **Ecodesign Directive** sets mandatory requirements for product performance, reparability, and recyclability. *Trainer tip:* ask learners to map their product idea against at least one SDG or EU policy priority and identify which features support these goals.

Communication Matters

Having a clear purpose is not enough if users do not understand or trust it. Designers should use clear storytelling to explain how their choices deliver environmental or social value. They should provide evidence—such as certifications or impact metrics—to substantiate their claims, and actively engage customers in feedback loops, inviting them to co-create, return, or upgrade products. For example, a reusable water bottle brand might share how each purchase funds clean-water projects, using a QR code to display real-world results.

4.3. Environmental Considerations: Designing for the Planet

Designing products with environmental integrity requires looking beyond immediate production costs to understand impacts **across the entire life cycle** — from “cradle” (resource extraction) to “grave” (end-of-life). This perspective enables businesses and learners to identify “hotspots” and prioritise interventions that yield the greatest sustainability gains.

Eco-design relies on several key strategies that minimise environmental impact throughout a product’s life cycle. A first step is to **select renewable or recycled inputs**, such as FSC-certified timber, post-consumer plastics, organic fibres, or recycled metals, while supporting regenerative agriculture or sustainably managed forests.

Eco-design relies on several key strategies that minimise environmental impact throughout a product's life cycle. A first step is to **select renewable or recycled inputs**, such as FSC-certified timber, post-consumer plastics, organic fibres, or recycled metals, while supporting regenerative agriculture or sustainably managed forests.

Table 6 Life-Cycle Stages and Key Questions

Stage	Typical Impacts	Questions for Designers
Raw material extraction	Resource depletion, deforestation, mining waste, biodiversity loss	Can we use certified, recycled, or bio-based inputs?
Manufacturing	Energy consumption, process emissions, chemical discharge	Are there cleaner technologies or renewable energy options?
Transport & packaging	Fuel use, CO ₂ emissions, excessive plastic or cardboard	Can we localise suppliers, optimise loads, or reduce packaging volume?
Use phase	Energy or water demand, maintenance waste	How efficient is the product during everyday operation?
End-of-life	Landfill waste, toxic leakage, loss of valuable materials	Is the product easy to disassemble, recycle, or safely biodegrade?

Another priority is **durability and repairability**. Designers can build robust components and modular systems so that users can replace or upgrade parts—examples include Fairphone or IKEA's "spare-parts forever" model. Publishing repair guides or partnering with local repair cafés further extends product life.

Reducing **energy and water use during operation** is also crucial. Electronics can be optimised for low standby power and aligned with recognised standards such as the EU Energy Label or ENERGY STAR. For water-intensive products like washing machines, targeting the highest efficiency classes helps limit resource consumption.

Attention should also be given to **minimising packaging and logistics impacts**. Compostable or mono-material packaging, refill stations, and bulk options for consumables can reduce waste. Consolidating shipments or adopting electric vehicles for last-mile delivery further decreases the carbon footprint.

Finally, it is essential to **facilitate end-of-life recovery**. Products should be designed for disassembly, using standard fasteners, clear material labelling, and avoiding glued composites. Return schemes or deposit incentives can encourage take-back, while biodegradable items must be tested to confirm they decompose under real-world conditions—whether in industrial or home composting environments.

Tools and Standards

- **Life Cycle Assessment (LCA)** – ISO 14040/44 methodology for quantifying impacts across stages.

- **EU Product Environmental Footprint (PEF)** – a harmonised approach to measure environmental performance.
- **Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs)** – transparent, third-party verified summaries of life-cycle results.
- **Ecodesign Directive & Circular Economy Action Plan** – set requirements for energy efficiency, reparability, and material recovery.

4.4. Human and Social Dimensions of Design

Sustainability also covers people:

- **Inclusive & accessible design** – ensuring usability for all abilities and cultures.
- **Ethical sourcing & labour rights** – adopting certifications (Fairtrade, SA8000).
- **Community empowerment** – co-design with local groups to meet real needs. *Example:* IDEO.org collaborates with communities to design solutions for public health and education.

Table 7 EU and International Tools

Tool	Purpose	Application
Ecodesign Directive	Sets EU rules for energy-related products to reduce environmental impact.	Guides energy efficiency & reparability criteria.
EU Ecolabel	Certifies products with verified environmental excellence.	Benchmark for product certification.
ISO 14006	Integrates eco-design into environmental management systems.	For SMEs embedding eco-design processes.
Cradle to Cradle (C2C)	Encourages materials that are endlessly reusable or biodegradable.	For circular product strategies.

Measurable Indicators

- % of recycled or certified materials used. Average product lifespan vs. industry benchmark.
- Repairability score or spare-parts availability.
- Carbon or water footprint per unit.
- % suppliers audited for social standards.

4.5. Case Study: Fairphone – Ethics and Environment in Your Pocket

Fairphone, a social enterprise based in the Netherlands, offers a compelling case study in sustainable and purpose-driven design. Its mission is to produce smartphones that are environmentally sustainable, ethically sourced, and designed to last.



Key Features of the Fairphone Approach:

- **Modular Design:** The phone is built with replaceable components — such as the camera or battery — that users can swap out themselves, significantly extending the device's lifespan.
- **Fair Materials:** Fairphone uses conflict-free minerals and recycled plastics and is continually working to improve transparency in its supply chain.
- **Social Responsibility:** The company partners with factories that ensure safe working conditions and pay fair wages. It also invests in worker welfare programs.

Fairphone's innovative approach challenges the mainstream electronics industry's reliance on short product lifespans and opaque supply chains. Despite being a niche brand, it has influenced industry conversations around ethical design and helped raise consumer awareness.

4.6. Designing products: Forward Outlook

Designing products with purpose and planet in mind is no longer optional—it is a **strategic imperative**. This chapter has demonstrated that sustainable product design is a holistic practice, integrating **environmental integrity, social fairness, and economic viability** across every stage of a product's life cycle. It reframes design not as a matter of aesthetics or profit margins, but as a discipline of responsibility and innovation that responds directly to the global crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and inequality.

By embedding durability, efficiency, biodegradability, recyclability, and fairness into design, companies and entrepreneurs can ensure that products **last longer, waste less, and give back more**—to communities as well as to ecosystems. Purpose-driven design goes a step further by asking what **positive role** products can play in society: reducing single-use plastics, supporting fair wages, protecting cultural heritage, and opening new opportunities through circular and inclusive business models.

The chapter also underlined the **environmental lens of eco-design**, stressing life-cycle thinking, energy and water efficiency, minimised packaging, and end-of-life recovery. At the same time, the **human and social dimensions**—inclusivity, labour rights, and community empowerment—must be treated as inseparable from environmental goals. Together, these approaches align with key EU frameworks such as the **Ecodesign Directive**, the **Circular Economy Action Plan**, and the **EU Ecolabel**, while also supporting global frameworks including the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

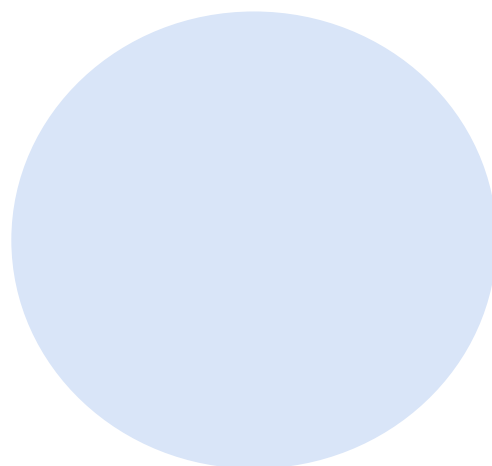
The **Fairphone case study** illustrated how these principles are not abstract ideals but actionable strategies. By combining modular design, fair materials, and ethical labour practices, Fairphone proves that even in highly competitive industries, sustainability can differentiate brands, foster transparency, and inspire systemic change.

For **VET trainers, learners, and SMEs**, the practical tools and measurable indicators presented in this chapter offer concrete entry points: from setting SMART goals for durability and resource efficiency, to adopting recognised EU standards, to engaging users in co-design and transparent storytelling. These tools enable organisations to move from good intentions to **evidence-based accountability**.

Looking forward, sustainable product design must be seen not only as a technical or managerial task but as a **driver of innovation, competitiveness, and social resilience**. Companies that embrace this mindset will unlock:

- **Innovation** – new materials, modular systems, and circular business models.
- **Market advantage** – loyalty from values-driven consumers and credibility with regulators.
- **Systemic impact** – reduced emissions, fairer supply chains, empowered communities, and healthier ecosystems.

The transition is clear: products designed with purpose and planet in mind are not just better products—they are the foundation for a better future.



5. Promotion and Authentic Communication

In today's environmentally conscious marketplace, sustainable marketing communication has emerged as a critical component of brand strategy. This module explores the relationship between authentic communication, brand identity, and the persistent challenge of greenwashing in sustainability marketing. As consumers become increasingly skeptical of environmental claims, with consumer trust in sustainability assertions dropping to just 44% globally (Rato Communications, 2024), organizations must navigate the complex landscape of communicating their environmental initiatives while maintaining credibility and avoiding accusations of misleading marketing practices. The module examines how authentic communication serves as the foundation for effective sustainable marketing, distinguishing between genuine environmental stewardship and superficial green marketing tactics. Students will explore the theoretical frameworks that underpin sustainable communication, understand the various manifestations of greenwashing, and learn to develop communication strategies that build trust while driving meaningful environmental action.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the fundamental principles of authentic sustainable marketing communication;
- Identify and analyze different types of greenwashing practices and their impact on consumer trust;
- Develop frameworks for creating transparent and credible sustainability messaging;
- Evaluate real-world case studies of successful and unsuccessful sustainable marketing campaigns; and
- Apply best practices for avoiding greenwashing while effectively communicating environmental initiatives.

5.1. The Four Pillars of Authentic Communication

Contemporary research identifies four fundamental pillars that guide effective sustainability communication: authenticity, transparency, engagement, and consistency. These pillars align with global standards such as the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) principles and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) quality reporting guidelines (Mehta, 2024).

Authenticity requires companies to align their messaging with their true brand identity and values. This involves demonstrating genuine commitment to sustainability beyond marketing communications, integrating environmental considerations into business operations, and openly acknowledging both achievements and areas for improvement (Lafleur, 2025). Authentic brands walk the talk, ensuring their environmental claims are supported by concrete actions and measurable outcomes.

Transparency involves open sharing of clear and accessible information about sustainability goals, progress, and challenges. Transparent communication builds credibility by providing stakeholders with honest assessments of environmental performance, including setbacks and lessons learned. This openness helps companies avoid accusations of greenwashing while building trust with increasingly discerning consumers.

Engagement transforms sustainability communication from a one-way broadcast into a meaningful dialogue with stakeholders. This pillar emphasizes involving customers, employees, communities, and other stakeholders in sustainability initiatives, creating opportunities for feedback and collaboration. Engagement strategies include social media interactions, community partnerships, and participatory sustainability programs.

Consistency ensures that sustainability messages remain coherent and reliable across all communication channels and over time. Consistent messaging reinforces brand credibility and demonstrates long-term commitment to environmental stewardship rather than short-term marketing campaigns. This pillar requires careful coordination across all touchpoints and consistent application of sustainability principles.

Exercise: Communication Audit

Choose a company (real or hypothetical) and assess its sustainability communication across the four pillars: authenticity, transparency, engagement, and consistency. Create a short table identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

Actionable Tip: Before launching a campaign, develop a short “Pillar Checklist” where every message must meet at least three of the four criteria.

One example of false and misleading sustainability communication is Greenwashing. Greenwashing is the practice of marketing a company or organization to appear more environmentally friendly than it actually is. The term, first coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, describes the deliberate or inadvertent misleading of consumers regarding a company’s environmental practices or the environmental benefits of its products.

Contemporary greenwashing manifests in various forms, each presenting unique challenges for consumers and regulators (Watson, 2016). The European Commission’s screening of websites revealed that half of all green claims lack evidence, highlighting the prevalence of unsubstantiated environmental assertions: 42% of online products with green claims could qualify as greenwashing (European Commission, 2021).

Exercise: Spot the Greenwash

Review three advertisements with environmental claims (these can be sourced from online ad databases or class examples). Categorize each claim according to the types of greenwashing in *Actionable Tip: Use third-party certifications (e.g., EU Ecolabel, FSC) as evidence anchors in campaigns to avoid “no proof” or “vagueness” errors.*

The Business Case for Authentic Communication

Authentic sustainable communication yields significant business benefits while avoiding the costly consequences of greenwashing. Companies that successfully communicate their sustainability

efforts authentically experience increased brand loyalty, enhanced reputation, and improved financial performance (Toluna, 2022; Bernoville, 2023).

From a strategic perspective, authentic communication serves as a differentiator in saturated markets, especially where sustainability credentials are becoming key decision-making criteria across generational cohorts.

Integrating authentic communication within sustainable marketing strategies offers not only an ethical compass but a commercially sound approach that mitigates reputational risks, enhances market positioning, and catalyzes innovation across the value chain

Table 8 Types of Greenwashing: descriptions and examples (Koons, 2024).

Type	Description	Example
<i>Hidden trade-offs</i>	Focusing on one green attribute while ignoring other environmental issues	Paper products labeled as ‘recycled’ while ignoring deforestation or toxic chemical use
<i>No proof</i>	Making claims without evidence or third-party certification	Products claiming to be ‘carbon neutral’ without providing data or verification
<i>Vagueness</i>	Creating fake certifications or using misleading imagery	Products marketed as “eco-friendly” or “all natural” without explanation
<i>False labels</i>	Creating fake certifications or using misleading imagery	Products displaying nature imagery or fake eco-certification logos
<i>Irrelevance</i>	Making truthful but meaningless environmental claims	Claiming products are ‘CFC-free’ when CFCs are already banned by law
<i>Lesser of two evils</i>	Claiming to be greener than competitors in inherently harmful industries	Tobacco companies promoting ‘organic’ cigarettes as healthier alternatives
<i>Fibbing</i>	Making outright false environmental claims	Companies claiming zero emissions while continuing to pollute

Authentic sustainability communication strengthens consumer relationships by aligning with the values of environmentally conscious buyers, though it also subjects companies to increased scrutiny, as modern consumers can quickly detect insincere claims (Forrester, 2022; rePurpose Global, 2022). By effectively conveying genuine sustainability efforts, businesses can achieve competitive advantage, especially in markets where environmental concerns significantly influence consumer choices and brand loyalty (rePurpose Global, 2022). Moreover, authentic communication serves as a critical risk mitigation strategy, protecting companies from the reputational, legal, and financial consequences of greenwashing, which may include regulatory fines, customer loss, and long-term damage to brand equity and employee retention. Finally, the pursuit of credible sustainability narratives often necessitates innovation in products and

operations, prompting firms to devise new solutions that reinforce their environmental commitments and enhance both efficiency and market positioning (*Ivi*).

Exercise: Cost–Benefit Scenario

Draft a scenario where a company either (a) invests in authentic sustainable communication or (b) engages in greenwashing. Compare potential outcomes in terms of customer trust, regulatory risks, and brand equity.

Actionable Tip: Translate sustainability benefits into measurable financial language (e.g., loyalty, reduced churn, access to green finance).

5.2. Developing Authentic Communication Strategies

Creating effective authentic sustainable communication requires a strategic approach that integrates environmental considerations into all aspects of brand messaging and operations. Successful strategies move beyond superficial green marketing to embed sustainability into the organizational culture and business model (Braga *et al.*, 2024). Authentic sustainable communication is grounded in a genuine commitment to environmental protection, which requires embedding sustainability into a company's core mission, values, and strategic objectives rather than treating it as an isolated marketing effort. This foundational approach mandates alignment between environmental commitments and the company's operations, supply chains, and governance structures.

Credibility in sustainability communication further depends on a data-driven approach, where environmental claims are substantiated with verifiable metrics, independent certifications, and transparent progress reporting. Such practices enable stakeholders to assess the organization's environmental performance based on concrete evidence. In addition, effective communication entails continuous stakeholder engagement, involving active dialogue with consumers, employees, communities, environmental advocates, and regulators to integrate their perspectives into sustainability strategies. This participatory model also helps organizations identify blind spots and enhance collective support. Authenticity in sustainable communication necessitates a long-term perspective that emphasizes consistent progress, honest reflection on challenges, and visible improvement over time. Sustained commitment reinforces trust and counters growing skepticism about superficial or opportunistic environmental messaging.

Exercise: Strategy Design

In small groups, design a mini communication strategy for a sustainable product. The strategy should include target audience, chosen channels, a transparency mechanism (e.g., open data, sustainability reports), and a stakeholder engagement activity.

Actionable Tip: Involve stakeholders early (e.g., consumer advisory boards, community groups) to co-create credible narratives.

5.3. Measuring Communication Effectiveness

Effective sustainable communication requires robust measurement systems that track both communication performance and environmental outcomes. Traditional marketing metrics like reach and engagement, while useful, fail to capture the deeper behavioral and environmental changes that authentic sustainability communication aims to achieve (Golob, Podnar and Zabkar, 2023; Braga *et al.*, 2024).

Organizations should develop metrics that directly link communication activities to **environmental outcomes**. These metrics might include changes in consumer behavior, adoption of sustainable practices, community engagement levels, and measurable environmental improvements resulting from communication campaigns.

Key performance indicators should encompass carbon footprint reduction, energy efficiency improvements, waste reduction, and social impact measures.

Trust is the currency of sustainable marketing. No matter how advanced or innovative an organization's environmental strategies may be, they will have little value if stakeholders doubt their credibility. Greenwashing scandals, vague claims, or inconsistent reporting can quickly erode public confidence and undermine long-term relationships with customers, employees, and investors.

Table 9 Measuring sustainability communication.

Metric	Description	Operationalization
Carbon Emissions Reduction per Campaign	Measures CO ₂ savings linked to specific communication initiatives.	Tonnes of CO ₂ reduced due to behavior change campaigns (measured via Life Cycle Assessment or offset claims).
Energy Efficiency Awareness Uplift	Measures change in energy-saving behavior among target groups.	Change measured as % of survey respondents reporting behavior change (pre/post-campaign comparison)
Waste Reduction Impact	Quantifies waste reduction tied to messaging campaigns.	Kilograms or % reduction in waste generated by consumers using promoted practices.
Sustainable Action Conversion Rate	Tracks how many people take measurable sustainable action due to communication.	# of users downloading a sustainability guide, switching to eco-products, or attending eco-events.
Eco-label or Certification Awareness	Assesses recognition of environmental standards promoted.	% increase in recognition of ecolabels like FSC, EU Ecolabel, or Energy Star in post-campaign survey.

To avoid this, organizations must treat trust not as an abstract value but as a **measurable outcome** of their communication practices. This requires systematically tracking perceptions of credibility, transparency, and engagement. By collecting data on how stakeholders interpret and respond to sustainability claims, organizations can identify weaknesses in their communication, adapt strategies, and demonstrate accountability.

Table 10 below outlines **key metrics for measuring stakeholder trust**, with clear descriptions and operational methods. These indicators help organizations move beyond intuition and provide evidence-based insights into how well they are building (or losing) trust in their sustainability communication.

Table 10 Measuring stakeholder trust.

Metric	Description	Operationalization
Brand Environmental Trust Index	Aggregates perceptions of credibility in green claims.	Measured as composite score combining brand trust surveys, Net Promoter Score (NPS), and third-party verification audits.
Greenwashing Perception Score	Indicates if stakeholders view sustainability communication as credible.	% of stakeholders perceiving the brand as transparent, measured via Likert-scale survey questions.
Transparency Rating	Degree to which stakeholders find sustainability info accessible and honest.	Score based on GRI-compliant disclosures, ESG reports, and open data platforms (e.g. CDP transparency score).
Consumer Confidence in Claims	Measures belief in advertised sustainability outcomes.	Measured as % agreement with survey statements such as 'I believe this brand's sustainability efforts are real.'
Engagement in Feedback Mechanisms	Stakeholder participation in feedback loops.	# of feedback submissions, social media interactions related to sustainability topics, and survey completion rates.

Measuring trust in this structured way transforms it from a vague aspiration into a **tangible performance indicator**. Each of these metrics offers unique insights: while the *Brand Environmental Trust Index* provides a holistic view, the *Greenwashing Perception Score* highlights risks of reputational damage. Meanwhile, *Transparency Ratings* and *Consumer Confidence in Claims* show whether organizations are communicating clearly and convincingly. Finally, *Engagement in Feedback Mechanisms* demonstrates whether stakeholders feel empowered to participate in the sustainability journey.

By embedding these measurements into regular reporting cycles, organizations not only strengthen their accountability but also create a feedback-driven culture of continuous improvement. In the long term, trust metrics can be benchmarked against industry standards, linked to ESG performance, and used as strategic levers to enhance both stakeholder loyalty and competitive advantage.

Ultimately, sustainable communication is not just about **what is said**, but also about **what is believed**. Trust metrics ensure that organizations are not only broadcasting sustainability messages but are also genuinely earning the confidence of the people and communities they serve.

Table 11 Measuring stakeholder behavioral change.

Metric	Description	Operationalization
Sustainable Product Adoption Rate	Increase in sales or usage of eco-friendly alternatives.	% increase in sales volume of eco-certified products post-campaign.
Employee Sustainability Program Participation	Internal adoption of environmental behaviors.	% of workforce enrolled in energy saving, waste reduction, or sustainability ambassador programs.
Supplier ESG Compliance Rate	Level of supplier alignment with communicated sustainability values.	% of suppliers meeting ESG benchmarks (e.g. ISO 14001 certified or Code of Conduct compliance).
Community Event Engagement	Measures local involvement in eco-initiatives promoted.	# of attendees at local cleanups, eco-workshops, or sustainable living events attributed to outreach.
Digital Behavior Metrics	Tracks online interaction with sustainability content.	Measured as change in click-through rate (CTR), average time-on-page, and bounce rates for sustainability content versus general content.

Authentic sustainable communication should drive measurable changes in **stakeholder behavior**. Organizations should track metrics such as consumer adoption of sustainable products, employee participation in environmental initiatives, supplier compliance with sustainability standards, and community engagement in environmental programs. These indicators demonstrate the real-world impact of communication efforts beyond traditional marketing metrics.

Exercise: KPI Dashboard

From Tables 9-11, select three KPIs most relevant to a campaign you design. Outline how you would collect data, measure results, and report findings.

Actionable Tip: *Always include at least one behavioral indicator (e.g., % adoption of sustainable products) and one trust indicator (e.g., Brand Environmental Trust Index) in campaign evaluation.*

5.4. Comparative Case Studies

Case Study 1: Patagonia – Authentic Sustainable Communication in Action

Patagonia’s “Don’t Buy This Jacket” campaign of 2011 represents a hallmark example of authentic sustainable marketing communication (Kersnowski, 2011). Rather than pushing for increased sales during Black Friday, the brand published a full-page advertisement urging consumers to refrain from unnecessary purchases and instead focus on repair, reuse, and recycling. The initiative was



not merely a provocative message but aligned with Patagonia's broader operational commitments, including its *Worn Wear* program, lifetime product guarantees, and significant investment in environmental activism. The outcome was paradoxical yet instructive: while the campaign sparked debate and boosted sales, it simultaneously reinforced Patagonia's credibility as a brand willing to act consistently with its values. This demonstrates how a bold stance, when grounded in genuine corporate practices, can strengthen trust and consumer loyalty.

Reflective Question: *In what ways did Patagonia ensure that its message was more than a marketing slogan? How can companies verify that their campaigns are substantiated by operational practices?*

Case Study 2: KLM – When Sustainability Messaging Crosses into Greenwashing

By contrast, KLM Airlines faced legal challenges in 2023 when a Dutch court ruled that its “Fly Responsibly” campaign misled consumers (Sterling, Plucinska and Plucinska, 2023). The advertisements suggested that carbon offset programs and investments in biofuels could significantly reduce the environmental harm of flying. However, the court concluded that such claims gave an overly optimistic impression of sustainability, neglecting the fact that aviation emissions remain fundamentally incompatible with climate neutrality in the near term.



The judgment highlighted the dangers of vagueness, exaggeration, and lack of verifiable data, which collectively constitute greenwashing. The case illustrates how organizations risk reputational damage and legal repercussions when communication strategies overstate environmental progress without transparent substantiation.

Reflective Question: How could KLM have framed its environmental initiatives more transparently to avoid accusations of greenwashing?

Key Takeaways: Authentic sustainable marketing communication moves beyond traditional promotion by prioritizing transparency, evidence, and long-term stakeholder engagement. Its effectiveness rests on genuine organizational commitment, with authenticity embedded in operations and culture rather than manufactured through messaging. Guided by the four pillars of authenticity, transparency, engagement, and consistency, this approach builds trust while avoiding the pitfalls of greenwashing. Success requires measuring not only communication reach but also tangible outcomes such as behavioral change, community participation, and environmental improvements. Companies that adopt this model benefit from stronger loyalty, competitive advantage, and reduced reputational risks, while those relying on superficial claims face growing regulatory and consumer scrutiny. In an increasingly sustainability-conscious marketplace, credible and transparent communication has become both an ethical necessity and a strategic advantage.

- Authentic sustainable communication requires three essential ingredients: **authority, authenticity, and education**, ensuring that environmental claims are backed by verifiable action.
- The **four pillars of authentic communication** – authenticity, transparency, engagement, and consistency – provide a practical framework to build and maintain trust.
- **Greenwashing** remains a prevalent threat: over 40% of green claims online lack evidence, highlighting the importance of avoiding vague or misleading messages.
- The **business case for authenticity** is clear: companies that communicate transparently experience stronger consumer loyalty, improved reputation, and reduced risk of reputational or legal damage.
- Developing an effective communication strategy means embedding sustainability into **core operations and culture**, not treating it as a superficial marketing add-on.
- Effective measurement goes beyond reach and impressions: it must capture **behavioral change, trust, and measurable environmental outcomes** through robust KPIs.
- Ultimately, **authentic communication cannot be manufactured**; it emerges from genuine, long-term commitment to environmental stewardship, supported by transparent reporting and consistent stakeholder engagement.

Authentic sustainable marketing communication demonstrates how credibility depends on aligning words with actions. Patagonia’s “Don’t Buy This Jacket” campaign showed that bold, counterintuitive messages can succeed when backed by consistent practices such as repair, reuse, and activism, ultimately strengthening trust and loyalty. In contrast, KLM’s “Fly Responsibly” campaign highlighted the risks of exaggeration, as vague and overly optimistic claims about carbon offsets were deemed misleading, resulting in legal and reputational damage. These cases illustrate the fine line between authentic communication and greenwashing, underlining the need for transparency, verifiable data, and genuine corporate commitment. The four pillars—authenticity, transparency, engagement, and consistency—offer a practical framework for companies to build credibility and avoid greenwashing. Measuring outcomes beyond communication reach, such as behavioral change or environmental impact, ensures accountability. In today’s sustainability-driven marketplace, authentic communication is both an ethical obligation and a strategic advantage.

6. Place: Delivering Sustainability Across the Supply Chain and Digital Space

The “Place” element in sustainable marketing represents the critical pathways through which products and services reach consumers while minimizing environmental impact and maximizing social value. This element encompasses distribution channels, logistics operations, retailers, and the emerging digital commerce ecosystem. In an era where consumers increasingly demand transparency and environmental responsibility, sustainable place strategies have evolved from optional differentiators to essential business imperatives (GEP Blogs, 2023; Holloway, 2025). Modern sustainable place strategies integrate multiple dimensions: environmental considerations through carbon-neutral logistics and green packaging, social responsibility through fair labor practices across the supply chain, and economic viability through circular economy models that extend product lifecycles (Jensen, 2024). The digital transformation of commerce has created new opportunities for sustainability, enabling businesses to optimize distribution networks, reduce physical infrastructure requirements, and provide transparent supply chain information to consumers (MGT Commerce, 2025).

Learning objectives for this section include:

- understanding the interconnected nature of sustainable distribution systems,
- mastering the application of circular economy principles in place strategies,
- evaluating the role of technology in enabling sustainable distribution,
- and being able to evaluate and improve sustainability performance across distribution channels.

6.1. Foundations of Sustainable Distribution

Sustainable distribution fundamentally reimagines traditional logistics and supply chain management by integrating environmental and social considerations throughout the entire process of moving goods from production to consumption (Deepika, 2024; Weitnauer Group, 2024). This approach recognizes that distribution activities contribute significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions, with transportation accounting for approximately 25% of all produced emissions (Ivi).

The concept encompasses several key principles. First, it prioritizes efficiency optimization through route planning, load consolidation, and multimodal transportation strategies that reduce fuel consumption and emissions (MIT Center for Transportation and Logistics, 2024). Second, it emphasizes the circular economy model, where products are designed for durability, repairability, and recyclability, minimizing waste and extending product lifecycles (Jensen, 2024). Third, it integrates technology solutions that enable real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and transparent communication with stakeholders (Holloway, 2025; MGT Commerce, 2025).

6.2. Green Logistics and Transportation Strategies

Green logistics represents the systematic application of environmentally conscious practices throughout the transportation and warehousing processes (Deepika, 2024). Leading companies have demonstrated significant success through comprehensive green logistics programs. DHL's GoGreen initiative exemplifies this approach, utilizing biofuels for fleet operations, implementing renewable energy sources in warehouses, and providing detailed carbon emission reports to customers for transparency and accountability (DHL, 2025; Toxigon, 2025).

Transportation optimization strategies focus on several key areas. Route optimization using advanced algorithms and data analytics can reduce transportation distances and fuel consumption by up to 19%, as demonstrated in Siemens Advanta's sustainable logistics concept (Siemens Advanta, 2025).

Modal shift strategies, such as Ocean Spray's transition from road to rail transport, achieved 65% emission reductions while saving over 40% in transportation costs (MIT Center for Transportation and Logistics, 2024).

Table 12 Comparison of Green Logistics Strategies

Strategy	Description	Environmental Impact	Cost/Operational Impact
Route Optimization	Use of advanced data analytics to minimize distances, optimize loads and routes.	Reduces fuel consumption and emissions significantly; improves efficiency.	Lower transport costs through fuel savings; requires digital tools and planning.
Modal Shift	Switching freight from high-emission modes (e.g., road) to lower-emission modes (e.g., rail, sea).	Major reduction in CO ₂ per unit transported; scalable on long routes.	Potential cost savings; requires infrastructure and longer lead times.
EV Adoption	Use of electric vehicles (EVs), hybrids, or biofuel-powered fleets for last-mile and bulk deliveries.	Eliminates direct emissions in last-mile delivery; improves urban air quality.	Higher upfront investment, but lower long-term fuel/maintenance costs.

Nokia's implementation of multimodal express solutions, combining ocean, road, and air freight, resulted in a 68% reduction in carbon emissions on the China-Brazil trade route (DHL, 2025). Energy-efficient vehicles and alternative fuels play crucial roles in sustainable transportation.

Companies are increasingly investing in electric vehicles, hybrid technologies, and biofuels to reduce their carbon footprint (EOXS, 2025; Toxigon, 2025). Moreover, IKEA's commitment to achieve 100% electric vehicle delivery by 2025 demonstrates the scalability of sustainable transportation solutions (Ivi).

Case Box 1 – DHL GoGreen Initiative

DHL has positioned itself as a pioneer in green logistics through its GoGreen program. The initiative integrates biofuels across fleet operations, renewable energy in warehouses, and customer-facing carbon emission reports. This transparency not only reduces the company's environmental footprint but also provides clients with clear sustainability metrics that enhance trust and accountability.

Case Box 2 – Nokia's Multimodal Transport Solutions

Nokia collaborated with DHL Global Forwarding to implement a multimodal express transport solution on the China–Brazil route. By combining ocean, road, and air freight, the company achieved a 68% reduction in carbon emissions compared to traditional logistics chains. This demonstrates how integrated, multimodal planning can yield significant sustainability gains without compromising delivery efficiency.

6.3. Sustainable Packaging and Materials Management

Packaging represents a critical component of sustainable place strategies, with the retail industry accounting for 40% of global plastic usage (GEP Blogs, 2023). Sustainable packaging solutions focus on three primary approaches: material innovation, design optimization, and circular systems implementation. Material innovation involves transitioning from conventional plastics to biodegradable alternatives, recycled materials, and innovative solutions such as mushroom packaging and seaweed-based wraps (MGT Commerce, 2025). Design optimization emphasizes right-sizing packaging to minimize material use while maintaining product protection, utilizing data-driven tools and artificial intelligence to ensure optimal packaging dimensions (*Ivi*). Circular packaging systems, exemplified by programs like Loop, enable reusable packaging models that significantly reduce waste generation (*Ivi*). These systems require collaboration between manufacturers, retailers, and consumers to create closed-loop processes that maintain packaging materials within the economic system for extended periods. Its impact is very significant, as reports indicate that people tend to prefer buying products with sustainable packaging (Eickenberg, 2025).

6.4. Digital Transformation and E-commerce Sustainability

The digital transformation of commerce has created unprecedented opportunities for sustainable place strategies. E-commerce platforms enable businesses to optimize inventory management, reduce physical store footprints, and implement direct-to-consumer models that eliminate intermediary transportation steps (CODICA, 2025). Artificial intelligence and machine learning applications enhance sustainability through demand forecasting that minimizes overproduction and inventory waste (*Ivi*). These technologies can reduce inventory levels by 20-30% while improving customer satisfaction through better product availability. Route optimization algorithms powered by machine learning can reduce fuel consumption and emissions by up to 15% through efficient delivery planning (MGT Commerce, 2025). Blockchain technology enhances supply chain transparency, enabling consumers to trace product origins and verify sustainability claims.

This transparency builds consumer trust and enables businesses to demonstrate their commitment to environmental and social responsibility.

6.5. Circular Economy Models in Distribution

Circular economy principles transform traditional linear “take-make-dispose” models into regenerative systems that prioritize resource retention and value preservation (Jensen, 2024). Successful implementation requires designing products for longevity, implementing take-back programs, and developing secondary markets for refurbished or recycled goods. IKEA’s circular economy practices and model demonstrates practical application through repair services, trade-in programs, and transparent supply chain communication (Amarasinghe, 2025): the company achieved a 30% reduction in transportation-related carbon emissions through route optimization and energy-efficient vehicle implementation. Retail giants like IKEA have integrated circular principles through product design for disassembly, materials recovery programs, and renewable energy utilization across their distribution network (Amarasinghe, 2025; Toxigon, 2025). These initiatives demonstrate how large-scale operations can successfully implement circular economy principles while maintaining operational efficiency and profitability.

Case Box 3 – IKEA’s Circular Distribution and Transport Strategy

IKEA has committed to achieving 100% electric vehicle delivery by 2025 and has already achieved a 30% reduction in transport-related emissions through route optimization and energy-efficient vehicles. At the same time, its circular economy approach integrates product take-back programs, repair services, and renewable energy use across its logistics chain, ensuring that sustainability is embedded in every stage of distribution.

Omnichannel Sustainability Strategies

Omnichannel approaches integrate online and offline distribution channels to optimize resource utilization and enhance customer experience while reducing environmental impact (Schwartz, 2023). Effective omnichannel sustainability strategies focus on inventory optimization, fulfillment network design, and customer education. Inventory optimization across multiple channels reduces waste through better demand forecasting and stock allocation. Smart inventory management systems utilize real-time data to minimize overstock situations and reduce product obsolescence. Fulfillment network design leverages retail locations for last-mile delivery, reducing transportation distances and emissions (Ivi). Customer education programs communicate sustainability benefits and encourage environmentally conscious purchasing decisions (Eickenberg, 2025). These programs include carbon footprint disclosure, sustainable shipping options, and guidance on product care and disposal.

6.6. Supply Chain Transparency and Communication

Transparency in supply chain operations has become essential for building consumer trust and demonstrating commitment to sustainability. Effective transparency strategies require comprehensive data collection, clear communication protocols, and third-party verification systems (Holloway, 2025). Data collection systems must capture environmental and social metrics



throughout the supply chain, including carbon emissions, water usage, labor practices, and material sourcing. Advanced technologies such as IoT sensors, blockchain systems, and satellite monitoring enable real-time data collection and verification (*Ivi*). Communication strategies must translate complex supply chain data into accessible information for consumers and stakeholders. This includes product labeling, digital content, and sustainability reports that clearly communicate environmental and social impacts. Third-party certifications and audits provide independent verification of sustainability claims, reducing greenwashing risks and building stakeholder confidence (*Ivi*).

Practical Examples

1. Use Route Optimization Apps in Promotional Logistics. When organizing product samples or campaign materials distribution (e.g., flyers, demo products), students can adopt simple route planning tools (like Google Maps multi-stop planner or Routific) to reduce fuel usage and transport time.

2. Suggest Modal Shift Alternatives in Campaign Execution. For events or campaign-related shipping, propose alternatives such as using rail instead of road transport where feasible.

3. Promote Reusable Display Materials and Circular Giveaways. In trade shows or pop-up campaigns, marketing students can encourage clients or employers to use reusable stands, signage, and sustainable giveaways like biodegradable tote bags or items that are part of a deposit-return system.

4. Leverage Green E-commerce Tools. Students managing small online shops or advising on digital campaigns should promote direct-to-consumer models that skip intermediaries, minimizing transport steps.

5. Integrate Blockchain Tools for Supply Chain Storytelling. In content creation or digital marketing strategies, students can suggest including blockchain-verified product journeys or QR codes linking to sourcing information, as a method to build trust through transparency.

6. Apply Circular Thinking in Product Campaigns. When promoting a product, marketing students can emphasize services such as take-back programs, repair options, or resale value, encouraging longer product life cycles.

7. Educate Consumers in Omnichannel Campaigns. In managing or designing omnichannel strategies (e.g., combining in-store and online promotions), students should include messaging about low-impact delivery options or carbon-neutral shipping, and encourage in-store pickup when efficient.

8. Design Marketing Collateral with Digital Sustainability in Mind. Students creating visuals or managing social media should optimize images for web (compressed formats), avoid unnecessary videos, and use darker interfaces where appropriate (which save energy on OLED screens).

6.7. Key Takeaways and Conclusions

Sustainable place strategies represent a fundamental shift in how businesses approach distribution and logistics, integrating environmental and social considerations throughout the entire supply chain. The key principles include:

- efficiency optimization through technology-enabled route planning and multimodal transportation,
- circular economy implementation through product design and take-back programs,
- and transparency enhancement through blockchain and real-time monitoring systems.

This section connects sustainable marketing theory to real-world application by focusing on how distribution, logistics, and digital infrastructure shape environmental outcomes. It complements other parts of the manual by showing how sustainability must be embedded not just in messaging or product design, but in the very systems that deliver value. Understanding “Place” ensures learners can implement sustainable strategies across the entire marketing chain.

Successful implementation requires holistic approaches that address multiple dimensions simultaneously. Companies must optimize transportation networks while implementing sustainable packaging solutions, integrate digital technologies while maintaining human-centered approaches, and balance economic viability with environmental responsibility. The most successful organizations view sustainability not as a constraint but as a driver of innovation and competitive advantage.

Technology plays an increasingly critical role in enabling sustainable place strategies. Artificial intelligence, blockchain, IoT systems, and advanced analytics provide the tools necessary for optimization, transparency, and continuous improvement. However, technology must be coupled with strategic thinking, stakeholder engagement, and long-term commitment to achieve meaningful sustainability outcomes. The business case for sustainable place strategies continues to strengthen as consumers increasingly demand.

environmental responsibility, regulations become more stringent, and operational efficiencies generate cost savings. Organizations that proactively implement comprehensive sustainable place strategies position themselves for long-term success while contributing to global sustainability goals.

7. Price: Fair Pricing for Sustainable Value

Price is more than a number on a label; it is a strategic lever that communicates value, fairness, and responsibility. In sustainable marketing, pricing decisions shape how businesses balance profitability, environmental stewardship, and social equity. A clear and credible approach to pricing can foster consumer trust, incentivize sustainable production, and ensure long-term competitiveness.

This chapter explains how fair and sustainable pricing differs from conventional models, presents practical strategies, and highlights real-world applications for SMEs and VET learners.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Recognize the business and societal value of creating products with purpose.
- Identify key strategies and tools for integrating sustainability into product development.
- Learn from real-world examples that have successfully implemented sustainable design thinking.
- Understand the core principles of sustainable product design.

7.1. Understanding Sustainable Pricing

Sustainable pricing integrates economic viability, environmental responsibility, and social fairness into price formation. Unlike traditional pricing, which focuses on cost, competition, and profit margins, sustainable pricing accounts for the true cost of goods and services — including externalities such as carbon emissions, resource depletion, or underpaid labour.

Table 13 Traditional vs. Sustainable Pricing

Aspect	Traditional Pricing	Sustainable Pricing
Focus	Profit maximisation	Shared value & long-term resilience
Cost basis	Direct production costs	Full lifecycle & externalities
Transparency	Limited	High – open cost structures
Beneficiaries	Company/shareholders	Company, workers, planet, communities

7.2. Why Fair Pricing Matters

Fair pricing is not only a technical calculation but also an ethical and strategic commitment to aligning business success with sustainability goals. It sends a clear signal to consumers,

employees, and suppliers about a company's priorities and creates incentives for responsible practices across the value chain.

A robust fair-pricing approach supports several dimensions:

- **Environmental stewardship** – By embedding the real cost of resource use, carbon emissions, and waste management into prices, companies can encourage eco-efficient design and responsible consumption. For example, some firms adopt internal carbon pricing or incorporate the cost of water use to steer innovation and reduce their footprint (UNEP, 2022).
- **Social equity** – Fair prices ensure that workers along supply chains receive living wages, safe working conditions, and opportunities for skills development. Research by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) shows that transparent and equitable pricing agreements help improve job security and social protection.
- **Market trust and brand differentiation** – Transparent pricing logic reduces the risk of “greenwashing” and builds credibility. A McKinsey (2020) study revealed that consumers are more willing to accept sustainability-related price premiums when businesses clearly explain the benefits (e.g., durability, ethical sourcing, or lower environmental impact).
- **Long-term resilience** – Pricing models that integrate externalities and anticipate resource scarcity protect businesses from regulatory shocks, reputational risks, or raw material volatility. For SMEs, adopting fair-pricing practices early can ease compliance with emerging EU directives and help secure funding from sustainability-focused investors.

Policy and Standards Context

- **EU Green Claims Directive (2023):** Requires businesses to substantiate environmental claims, helping justify price differences linked to sustainable practices.
- **Sustainable Consumption & Production Action Plan (European Commission, 2020):** Encourages life-cycle costing and circular-economy tools in pricing decisions.
- **OECD Due Diligence Guidance (2018):** Supports integrating human-rights and environmental considerations into commercial agreements, including price negotiations.

7.3. Strategies for Pricing Sustainable Value

Pricing for sustainability requires more than adding a “green premium.” It is about choosing approaches that reflect the **true value** of environmental and social performance while staying accessible and competitive.

Below are key strategies widely applied by SMEs and larger organisations alike.

Value-Based Pricing

Value-based pricing sets prices according to the perceived benefits that customers attribute to a product or service, beyond its basic function. In a sustainability context, this means accounting for:

- Reduced environmental footprint (e.g., lower CO₂ emissions, certified materials).
- Positive social impact (e.g., fair wages, community projects).
- Long-term savings for users (e.g., reusable or energy-efficient products).

Example: A producer of biodegradable cleaning solutions charges slightly more than mainstream brands, highlighting cost savings over time (less dosage needed), non-toxic ingredients, and safer manufacturing for workers.

Tiered or Segmented Pricing

Tiered pricing allows businesses to offer different price levels for different customer segments or service bundles:

- A **basic option** with essential sustainable features, affordable for price-sensitive buyers.
- A **premium option** with additional environmental or social value (e.g., carbon-neutral shipping, extended warranty, donation to local initiatives).
- A **subscription or deposit model** supporting product take-back, maintenance, or reuse.

Example: EcoMug, a Portuguese start-up, uses three tiers: student-friendly rates, standard retail, and a deposit scheme for cafés to finance washing and logistics.

This approach helps widen access to sustainable products while keeping advanced features available for customers willing to pay more.

Lifecycle Costing (LCC)

Lifecycle Costing evaluates the **total cost of ownership**: acquisition, operation, maintenance, and disposal. Pricing informed by LCC encourages designs that are durable, repairable, and resource-efficient.

Key benefits:

- Encourages producers to minimise waste and design for longevity.
- Allows customers to compare short-term price tags with long-term savings.

Example: Fairphone prices its smartphones based on transparent data about sourcing fair-trade minerals, modular repairability, and take-back services.

Toolbox: EU Product Environmental Footprint (PEF), ISO 14040/44 (Life Cycle Assessment standards), and the Social Hotspot Database can provide data for lifecycle evaluations.

Cost-Plus with Sustainability Adjustments

Traditional cost-plus pricing can be adapted by adding explicit sustainability mark-ups or deductions:

- Add a “responsibility margin” to cover fair wages, renewable energy, or certification fees.
- Deduct costs saved through eco-efficiency (e.g., less packaging, optimised logistics).

This is useful for SMEs with limited research capacity, as it builds on familiar accounting practices while making sustainability explicit.

Incentive and Dynamic Pricing

Some organisations use pricing as a **behavioural tool**:

- Discounts or rebates for returning used items (deposit-refund systems).
- Time-of-use pricing for sharing platforms (e.g., lower rates for off-peak car-sharing to reduce congestion).
- Loyalty schemes rewarding repeat sustainable purchases.

Example: Outdoor apparel companies offer vouchers to customers who bring back worn gear for repair or recycling.

Pricing is one of the most powerful levers in sustainable marketing because it directly shapes consumer choices and signals brand values. Traditional approaches that focus only on margins or competitor benchmarks often fail to reflect environmental and social impacts.

Table 14 Summary of Approaches

Strategy	Key Focus	Best For	Challenges
Value-Based	Customer perception of eco/social value	Brands with strong storytelling	Requires research into willingness to pay
Tiered	Accessibility across segments	SMEs wanting broader reach	Risk of cannibalising premium segment
LCC	Long-term cost and impact	Durable/repairable products	Data and analysis may be complex
Cost-Plus (adjusted)	Transparent cost structure	Early-stage SMEs	Must justify mark-ups
Incentive/Dynamic	Changing behaviours	Circular economy models	Monitoring redemption & costs

Pricing is one of the most powerful levers in sustainable marketing because it directly shapes consumer choices and signals brand values. Traditional approaches that focus only on margins or competitor benchmarks often fail to reflect environmental and social impacts.

Sustainable pricing strategies, on the other hand, integrate transparency, fairness, and long-term value. The table below summarises several approaches that companies and SMEs can adopt, highlighting their key focus, best-fit contexts, and potential challenges.

Each pricing strategy has advantages and trade-offs, and no single model fits all businesses. Value-based and tiered pricing work well for brands seeking to balance accessibility with perceived impact, while LCC (life-cycle costing) is essential for durable or repairable goods. Early-stage SMEs may benefit from transparent cost-plus methods to build trust, but must carefully explain their mark-ups.

Incentive and dynamic pricing models can drive behavioural change in circular economy contexts, though they require robust systems for monitoring and evaluation. By carefully selecting and combining these approaches, companies can design pricing structures that support financial sustainability, enhance consumer trust, and accelerate the green transition.

7.4. Challenges and Trade-Offs

Implementing fair and sustainable pricing is rarely straightforward. Businesses must balance ethical ambitions with market realities, operational constraints, and customer expectations. The following challenges illustrate common tensions and suggest ways to address them.

Affordability vs. Integrity

One of the greatest dilemmas is how to keep products affordable while ensuring prices reflect living wages, responsible sourcing, and environmental investments. Small and medium-sized enterprises often work with narrow margins, which makes it difficult to absorb all sustainability costs without alienating price-sensitive customers.

Possible solutions include introducing changes gradually, seeking public procurement opportunities or grants for eco-innovation, and adopting tiered offers so that basic versions remain accessible. For instance, a bakery that switched to organic flour faced a 15 % cost increase; by offering two price points—a classic range and an “organic plus local” line—it maintained inclusivity while rewarding premium buyers.

Data Gaps and Complexity

Accurate information on supply-chain emissions, labour standards, or lifecycle costs is often lacking, particularly among small suppliers. Although EU tools such as the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) and Life Cycle Assessment (ISO 14040/44) can help, they may require external expertise. Collaborative platforms, such as sectoral databases or cooperative purchasing groups, can ease the burden of gathering reliable data.

Consumer Behaviour Gap

Despite surveys showing high concern for sustainability, many shoppers still prioritise price and convenience—an “attitude-behaviour gap.” Effective communication must focus on value rather than cost, highlighting durability, health, and social impact. Nudging techniques, such as presenting the sustainable choice as the default, and educational storytelling can increase willingness to pay. A McKinsey study (2020) found that products marketed as sustainable grew twice as fast as their category peers, provided that clear messaging about benefits was in place.

Competition and Market Pressure

Price competition from less responsible rivals can discourage companies from investing in sustainability. Differentiation through transparency, certifications such as the EU Ecolabel or Fairtrade, and strong community engagement helps protect against pure price wars. Partnerships among SMEs, including collective branding or joint logistics, can also reduce unit costs and strengthen negotiating power.

Regulatory Uncertainty and Compliance Costs

Keeping pace with evolving EU directives—such as the Green Claims Directive or the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive—may involve audits or third-party verification, which increase fixed costs. Early adoption and alignment with recognised standards reduce long-term risks and can position businesses as leaders in sustainable practice.

Organisational Culture and Skills

Finally, pricing for sustainability requires collaboration between finance, marketing, procurement, and sustainability teams, yet many SMEs lack trained staff or effective internal coordination. Investing in vocational education and training, building peer-learning networks, or appointing a “sustainability pricing champion” can strengthen organisational capacity.

7.5. Case Studies: Fairphone – Ethics and Environment in Your Pocket

Fairphone, a social enterprise based in the Netherlands, offers a compelling case study in sustainable and purpose-driven design. Its mission is to produce smartphones that are environmentally sustainable, ethically sourced, and designed to last.

Key Features of the Fairphone Approach:

1. **Modular Design:** The phone is built with replaceable components — such as the camera or battery — that users can swap out themselves, significantly extending the device’s lifespan.
2. **Fair Materials:** Fairphone uses conflict-free minerals and recycled plastics and is continually working to improve transparency in its supply chain.
3. **Social Responsibility:** The company partners with factories that ensure safe working conditions and pay fair wages. It also invests in worker welfare programs.

Fairphone's innovative approach challenges the mainstream electronics industry's reliance on short product lifespans and opaque supply chains. Despite being a niche brand, it has influenced industry conversations around ethical design and helped raise consumer awareness.

7.6. Indicators & Tools for Practitioners

Fair and sustainable pricing works only when it can be demonstrated, not just declared. For this reason, organisations must be able to **measure, monitor, and communicate** how their prices reflect social equity and environmental value. Indicators are crucial—they translate abstract goals into **concrete, trackable evidence**. When applied systematically, they build accountability and guide continuous improvement.

Table 15 Key Indicators (KPIs) for Sustainable Pricing

Dimension	Indicator	Description	Example Target
Transparency	% of cost elements disclosed to customers	Measures openness in showing cost structure (materials, labour, logistics, sustainability fees).	≥ 80% disclosed on product page
Environmental Impact	CO ₂ e cost per unit / Environmental cost indicator	Expresses the hidden environmental burden of production, per item.	< 1 kg CO ₂ e per cup
Social Fairness	Share of price covering fair wages/community benefits	Portion of final price allocated to living wages, training, or local initiatives.	≥ 15% of price

Market Uptake	Customer willingness-to-pay (WTP) index	Ratio of buyers accepting sustainability-related premium.	60%+ acceptance
Circularity	% of products returned for reuse/recycling	Assesses end-of-life success in circular business models.	50% return rate
Profitability	Margin after sustainability reinvestments	Ensures the model remains financially viable while reinvesting in impact.	10% net after reinvestments

While KPIs provide a quantitative lens, organisations also need structured frameworks and internationally recognised standards that anchor these measurements in global practice. Such frameworks — including ISO norms, EU Green Claims Directive guidelines, or GRI reporting standards — establish a shared language that enables businesses to demonstrate transparency and accountability.

Table 16 Tools and Frameworks Supporting Sustainable Pricing

Tool / Standard	Use Case	Benefits
EU Product Environmental Footprint (PEF)	Assess life-cycle environmental impacts of products.	Standardised EU method; validates sustainability claims.
Life Cycle Assessment (ISO 14040/44)	Quantifies environmental impacts over a product's life.	Reliable baseline for LCC-informed prices.
True Cost Accounting (TCA)	Integrates environmental & social externalities into costs.	Reveals hidden subsidies of unsustainable products.
Social Hotspot Database	Maps social risks along supply chains.	Identifies hotspots for fair-wage or safety premiums.
Carbon or Water Footprint Calculators	Estimate climate or water impacts per unit.	Supports internal carbon/water pricing.
Fairtrade Minimum Price Framework	Benchmarks ethical sourcing prices.	Provides guidance for agricultural SMEs.

These tools not only validate internal claims but also ensure comparability across sectors and countries, which is increasingly essential in a marketplace subject to strict regulatory oversight and growing consumer and investor scrutiny. By aligning their pricing models with these recognised benchmarks, companies reduce the risk of greenwashing and strengthen the credibility of their sustainability narratives. Used together with KPIs, these frameworks transform sustainable pricing from a niche experiment or isolated pilot into a credible, evidence-based system that can be replicated, audited, and continuously improved. This combination allows organisations not only to communicate impact but also to embed sustainability as a measurable, verifiable component of long-term business strategy.

Together, indicators and frameworks form the **dual foundation** of fair and sustainable pricing: KPIs provide measurable targets, while tools and standards ensure credibility and comparability.

This integrated approach empowers organisations to go beyond the outdated “cost + margin” logic, embedding **life-cycle thinking, social fairness, and ecological accountability** directly into their pricing models.

For VET learners and SMEs, this means two things:

1. Sustainable pricing is achievable when broken down into measurable steps and supported by trusted standards.
2. Communicating these efforts transparently builds **trust and loyalty**, reducing reputational risks and securing long-term competitiveness.

Ultimately, sustainable pricing becomes more than an accounting method—it evolves into a **strategic lever for systemic change**, rewarding responsibility, ensuring fair returns, driving eco-innovation, and strengthening the bond between businesses, consumers, and society at large.



8. Sustainable Marketing Strategies – Crafting Strategies for Long-Term Success and Positive Impact

Sustainable marketing is not a side campaign. It is a long-term strategic orientation that redefines the way businesses operate, communicate, and grow. In this chapter, we focus on how organizations can build sustainable marketing strategies rooted in purpose, evidence, and real-world impact. Rather than adding a green message on top of existing structures, this is about changing the very logic of marketing.

8.1. Why Strategy Matters in Sustainable Marketing

Strategy bridges the gap between vision and action. It transforms ambition into structure and purpose into implementation. Without a clear strategy, sustainability efforts can easily become fragmented across departments, inconsistently applied, or worse—reduced to surface-level green claims that audiences recognize as greenwashing.

A well-designed sustainable marketing strategy offers the following benefits:

- **Alignment across departments** – ensuring that sustainability is not confined to marketing, but integrated into product development, HR, logistics, and finance.
- **Continuity across campaigns** – so that every message contributes to a cohesive brand purpose.
- **Clarity for stakeholders** – allowing investors, consumers, partners, and employees to understand the company’s long-term intentions.
- **Credibility with customers and regulators** – establishing the trust necessary to differentiate from competitors and meet policy or reporting standards.

Most importantly, strategy shifts marketing from **short-term promotion to long-term value creation**. It creates the foundation for making meaningful decisions in complex environments and ensures that sustainability is not reactive, but proactive, forward-looking, and resilient. Without strategy, sustainability is a promise; with it, it becomes a plan.

Strategic Environmental and Social Analysis

Start with a comprehensive understanding of the environmental, social, and ethical dimensions of your brand and industry. This includes:

- Carbon footprint, energy usage, water intensity, packaging waste
- Social risks: gender pay gap, labor conditions, representation gaps
- Stakeholder mapping and ecosystem influence

Tool: SWOT for Sustainability – identifying strengths (e.g. ethical sourcing), weaknesses (e.g. high emissions), opportunities (e.g. ESG investing), and threats (e.g. greenwashing accusations).

Vision and Mission Anchored in Purpose

Purpose-driven brands outperform competitors over time. Your sustainability strategy must be rooted in a clear mission that aligns with global challenges (e.g. climate change, inequality, digital inclusion).

Example: “To empower local artisans through sustainable fashion and fair trade practices.”

Another Example: “To reduce digital pollution through carbon-aware marketing tools and transparent reporting.”

SMART Goals and Measurable Outcomes

Every strategic objective should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound⁴.

Sample SMART Goals:

- Reduce campaign-related CO₂ emissions by 30% within 12 months.
- Train 100% of marketing staff in sustainability literacy by Q1 2026.
- Launch an inclusive design audit across all digital assets by Q3 2025.

Stakeholder Co-Creation

Stakeholders are not just audience segments—they are knowledge sources, creative partners, and accountability agents. Involving them in the strategy design phase ensures that sustainability is not imposed top-down but co-developed with those it affects. This participatory approach fosters:

- **Relevance of content**, because messages are tailored to real community needs and expectations
- **Diversity of perspectives**, by including underrepresented voices in the creative process
- **Trust and transparency**, as people are more likely to believe in what they helped shape

Stakeholder co-creation can take many forms—from community listening sessions and co-branded social impact initiatives to ethical focus groups and inclusive storytelling.

Case Example: IKEA's “Better Living” app was co-designed with users and tested in different cultural contexts to ensure functionality, accessibility, and behavioral relevance. This not only increased app adoption but strengthened the company’s brand as a citizen-focused enterprise.

8.2. From Strategy to Execution: A Roadmap

Implementing sustainable marketing is not a linear checklist but a **systemic process** that requires alignment, experimentation, and continuous learning across the entire organisation. To succeed, companies must bridge the gap between strategic intent and day-to-day execution, ensuring that sustainability is embedded in culture, operations, and communication. The following roadmap outlines the four critical steps, complemented by **key performance indicators (KPIs)** that provide evidence of progress and accountability.

Step 1: Align Across Departments

Sustainability cannot be confined to a single unit. Product design, operations, finance, HR, and marketing must collaborate from the outset, recognising that sustainability is **systemic, not departmental**. Early alignment avoids siloed approaches and ensures that every decision reinforces shared goals.

Step 2: Translate Goals into Actions

Strategic sustainability goals only matter if they are converted into **concrete actions**. This means developing campaign calendars with sustainability milestones, introducing eco-packaging innovations, creating inclusive language guides, and embedding transparency protocols into communication.

Step 3: Pilot and Learn

Change requires experimentation. Small-scale pilots—such as reusable point-of-sale (POS) displays or zero-ad-waste campaigns—allow organisations to test new ideas, gather feedback, and learn from real-world contexts before scaling.

Step 4: Monitor and Adapt

Sustainability is a moving target. Quarterly checkpoints, scenario planning, and adaptive dashboards that integrate social and ecological KPIs ensure organisations remain agile and accountable, while continuously improving their impact.

Table 17 Roadmap Steps and Key KPIs for Sustainable Marketing

Roadmap Step	Core Focus	Example KPIs
Align Across Departments	Cross-functional collaboration	% of departments involved in sustainability planning; # of joint initiatives launched
Translate Goals into Actions	Turning strategy into tangible outputs	% of campaigns with eco/ethical focus; # of sustainable product innovations
Pilot and Learn	Testing and refining new approaches	# of pilots launched; % of pilots scaled; stakeholder satisfaction survey results
Monitor and Adapt	Continuous accountability and improvement	Frequency of KPI dashboard updates; % of sustainability targets met per quarter

This roadmap underscores that sustainable marketing is not a one-off campaign but an **ongoing organisational commitment**. By aligning departments, translating goals into clear actions, piloting new solutions, and monitoring progress with robust KPIs, companies ensure that sustainability efforts are both credible and impactful.

Crucially, success lies in **coherence and accountability**: coherence between strategy and execution, and accountability through measurable evidence and transparent communication. Organisations that adopt this cycle position themselves not only as market leaders but also as trusted actors in driving the transition toward greener, fairer, and more resilient economies. In this way, sustainable marketing delivers enduring value—for people, planet, and profit.

8.3. Indicators and KPIs for Sustainable Marketing

Measuring progress is the cornerstone of credible sustainable marketing. Without clear indicators, even the most ambitious strategies risk being perceived as vague promises.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) connect strategic objectives to measurable outcomes, allowing organisations to track improvements, communicate transparently, and align their efforts with the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

The table below illustrates how objectives can be linked to KPIs, their measurement frequency, and corresponding SDGs.

This structure helps organisations move beyond rhetoric by embedding sustainability into ongoing monitoring systems.

Table 18 Indicators and KPIs for Sustainable Marketing

Objective	KPI Example	Frequency	Linked SDG
Reduce digital carbon footprint	CO ₂ per website visit or campaign	Monthly	SDG 13
Improve brand trust	Net Promoter Score (NPS)	Quarterly	SDG 16
Expand ethical sourcing	% of suppliers meeting ethical code	Bi-annually	SDG 8
Increase inclusive representation	% of diverse identities in campaigns	Each campaign	SDG 10

KPIs like these provide dual benefits: they strengthen accountability internally while also signalling transparency to external stakeholders such as customers, investors, and regulators.

Avoiding Pitfalls: Common Strategy Mistakes

Even well-designed strategies can fail if common pitfalls are ignored. Organisations often fall into traps such as **vagueness** (“We want to be more sustainable”), **misalignment** (marketing campaigns that promote sustainability without operational backing), **invisibility** (lack of transparent reporting), or **overstretching** (pursuing too many goals at once). Recognising these risks early allows companies to focus, align, and communicate realistically.

Reflective Questions: Is Your Strategy Future-Ready?

Future-ready strategies require alignment with global challenges, SMART goals, and engaged stakeholders. The reflective questions below help organisations critically assess whether their sustainability strategy is mission-driven, measurable, and adaptable over time.

- Is your strategy mission-driven and aligned with global challenges?
- Are your goals SMART and tied to real outcomes?
- Have you mapped and involved your stakeholders?
- Are your indicators measurable, relevant, and tracked over time?
- Do you have a feedback system for learning and adaptation?

These questions encourage teams to look beyond surface-level achievements and evaluate whether their approach is resilient enough for long-term impact.

Self-assessment ensures that organisations hold themselves accountable before external scrutiny arrives.

The following **mini test** allows teams to reflect on critical elements of sustainability strategy design.

✓ Mini Test – Ask yourself:

- Is your mission clearly aligned with sustainability and stakeholder needs?

- Have you defined SMART objectives with measurable environmental or social KPIs?
- Are internal teams and external stakeholders involved in the strategy design?
- Is your sustainability performance tracked and reported transparently?
- Are you continuously learning from pilots, feedback, and results?

Result Interpretation: If you answered “no” to two or more of these questions, consider building a **sustainability action squad** with staff from marketing, operations, and HR to re-align your strategic process.

This tool transforms reflection into action, ensuring that gaps are identified and corrected before they grow into reputational or operational risks.

8.4. EU Resources for Strategic Implementation

No organisation operates in isolation. The EU provides a range of frameworks and platforms that support alignment with global sustainability agendas. Leveraging these resources helps businesses strengthen credibility, validate their actions, and learn from best practices across Europe.

Table 19 EU Resources for Strategic Implementation

Resource	Description	Link
EU Green Deal	Framework for climate-neutral economic transformation	https://ec.europa.eu/green-deal
GRI Standards	Global Reporting Initiative – sustainability reporting framework	https://www.globalreporting.org
EU Climate Pact	Collaborative platform for climate action and citizen engagement	https://climate-pact.europa.eu
SDG Compass	Business alignment with Sustainable Development Goals	https://sdgcompass.org
SME Fund – IP and Sustainability	Support for SMEs to integrate IP protection with green transition	https://euipo.europa.eu/sme-fund

These resources ensure that organisations do not reinvent the wheel but instead align their strategies with recognised standards and EU policy priorities. By doing so, they gain legitimacy, reduce compliance risks, and strengthen their long-term competitiveness.

Bringing it all together, indicators, reflective tools, and EU resources form a **comprehensive ecosystem for strategic sustainability**. Indicators and KPIs ensure measurability, reflective questions and self-assessment tools guarantee internal alignment, while EU frameworks provide external guidance and legitimacy.

For SMEs, VET learners, and large organisations alike, the message is clear: sustainable marketing must be **data-driven, transparent, and globally aligned**. Success lies in embedding sustainability into both culture and operations—where every objective is measurable, every action accountable, and every result communicated openly.

8.5. Conclusion: Strategy as a Living Practice

Strategy is not a document. It is a living, evolving culture of decision-making, aligned with a higher long-term purpose that goes beyond quarterly results. In the context of sustainable marketing, strategy is both a compass and a canvas: it provides direction and space for co-creation, experimentation, and learning.

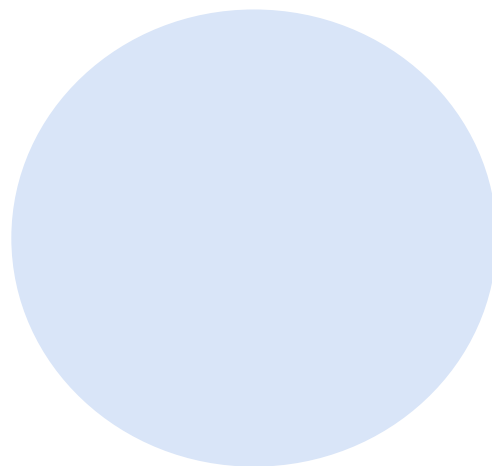
Successful strategies do not just align internal functions—they engage stakeholders, inspire teams, and embed accountability. They are inclusive by design, enabling marketers to co-develop campaigns with communities, adapt based on environmental feedback, and respond to social shifts in real time.

Moreover, strategy becomes meaningful only when it is translated into action. Dashboards, feedback loops, stakeholder check-ins, and measurable KPIs help bring strategic intent into daily operations. When sustainability becomes embedded in the organizational DNA—reflected in language, leadership, incentives, and branding—marketing transforms from a message into a movement.

Sustainable marketing strategies thrive when they:

- Prioritize **systems thinking** over silos;
- Embrace **transparency** over perfection; and
- Focus on **long-term regeneration** over short-term gains.

Ultimately, strategy is not about having all the answers—it's about committing to a journey, guided by shared values, powered by data, and shaped by people who care.



9. From Plan to Action: Practical Steps for Sustainable Marketing

Having a sustainability plan is essential. But a plan without implementation is simply a promise — and increasingly, stakeholders expect more than promises. In today's business environment, consumers, employees, investors, and regulators demand **real, measurable progress** toward sustainability. This requires translating high-level goals into concrete marketing practices that can be tracked, verified, and continuously improved.

Sustainable marketing is not a one-off campaign or a CSR add-on; it represents a **strategic transformation embedded across the value chain**. From supply chain messaging to customer engagement and innovation, sustainability must become part of how a company communicates, delivers, and captures value.

This chapter offers a **roadmap of eight actionable steps**, enriched with tools, frameworks, and European case studies. The goal is to ensure that sustainability is not only promised but practiced. Readers are invited to use this roadmap as a living guide that can adapt to their organisational context, size, and sector.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Understand the key stages of implementing a sustainable marketing strategy.
- Integrate sustainability into brand identity, messaging, and campaigns in ways that are authentic and measurable.
- Apply recognised tools and frameworks (SMART goals, SWOT, SDGs, Ad Net Zero, RACI) to guide implementation.
- Recognise common pitfalls such as greenwashing and develop preventive safeguards.
- Translate strategies into operational actions with **timelines, roles, and budgets** that guarantee accountability.

Sustainability in marketing goes far beyond eco-friendly slogans or green visuals. It must be **anchored in the organisation's purpose** and consistently reflected in product design, pricing, distribution, and communication. Achieving this integration requires a **mindset shift**, strong internal alignment, and a structured roadmap.

A strong plan must answer two guiding questions:

- *What needs to change?*
- *How will it be implemented, tracked, and improved over time?*

9.1. Building a Sustainable Marketing Roadmap

Step 1: Embed Sustainability in Brand Purpose

Sustainability must align with the company's core mission and brand identity. Brands with a clear purpose beyond profit inspire greater loyalty and credibility. For example, Patagonia's *business to save our home planet*, " permeates product design, campaigns, and advocacy. In the EU context, IKEA integrates circular design into both brand and operations. Companies should regularly review their mission statements: do they reflect environmental and social responsibility? Can they mobilise stakeholders to trust and support commitments?

Step 2: Conduct a Sustainability Audit

Before action comes clarity. A sustainability audit sets the baseline by analysing environmental and social impacts of current marketing practices. Typical areas include:

- Product life cycles and packaging materials
- Carbon and energy use in campaigns and events
- Accuracy of sustainability claims (to avoid greenwashing)
- Digital carbon footprint from websites, ads, and servers

A SWOT analysis for sustainable marketing helps teams map strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. For SMEs, free EU tools such as the *European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform* can provide benchmarks and self-check frameworks.

Step 3: Set SMART Sustainability Goals

Clear goals transform ambition into accountability. They should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Examples include:

- Reduce single-use plastics in packaging by 50 % by 2026.
- Train 100 % of marketing staff in sustainable communication by 2025.
- Achieve 100 % renewable energy use for marketing events within 18 months.

Whenever possible, goals should be linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the EU Green Deal, giving them international recognition and comparability.

Step 4: Reimagine the Marketing Mix

The classical 4Ps — Product, Price, Place, Promotion — acquire new meaning when reframed for sustainability:

1. Product: durable, repairable, circular, and ethically sourced.
2. Price: fair, transparent, and reflective of real social and environmental costs.
3. Place: distribution channels that prioritise local supply chains, low-emission logistics, and accessible digital platforms.
4. Promotion: honest, evidence-based communication, avoiding manipulative or misleading claims.

People (5th P): engaging consumers and employees as active co-creators of value.

This reframing ensures that sustainability is not a side activity, but embedded in every decision.

Step 5: Align Internal Teams and Assign Roles

Sustainable marketing requires cross-departmental collaboration — between procurement, logistics, HR, finance, and communications. A sustainability task force helps maintain focus, while a RACI matrix (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) ensures transparency in responsibilities. Integrating sustainability KPIs into performance reviews embeds accountability.

Step 6: Allocate Resources and Plan Budgets

Without resources, plans remain aspirational. Budgets should reflect both costs and savings of sustainable choices. Examples:

- Allocate funds for certified suppliers (e.g., FSC-approved printers).
- Invest in training staff to build sustainability competencies.
- Switch to green digital infrastructure (eco-hosting, low-energy website design).
- An implementation calendar linking tasks, budgets, and deadlines secures discipline in execution.

Step 7: Engage Customers Through Participation

Modern marketing is not one-way; it thrives on dialogue and participation. Examples include:

- Recycling challenges or return schemes for packaging.
- Repair and upgrade programmes that extend product life.
- User-generated storytelling that personalises sustainability.

The *#WhoMadeMyClothes* campaign by Fashion Revolution demonstrates how customer participation can drive transparency and accountability across industries.

Step 8: Monitor, Report, and Iterate

Credibility depends on consistent measurement and transparent reporting. Key indicators include:

- Carbon footprint of campaigns;
- Share of sustainable suppliers;
- Customer participation in eco-initiatives; and
- ESG scores, brand trust surveys, and certifications.

Regular dashboards or sustainability marketing reports allow teams to adapt quickly, while external verification (e.g., EU Ecolabel, B Corp certification) strengthens trust. Iteration ensures strategies remain relevant as expectations and regulations evolve.

9.2. From Promises to Proof: Building a Culture of Action

Putting sustainable marketing into practice requires **structure, discipline, and accountability**. The roadmap outlined here shows how businesses can transform intentions into **measurable impact**:

- Anchoring sustainability in brand purpose and mission.
- Conducting audits to establish a transparent baseline.
- Setting SMART goals aligned with SDGs and EU frameworks.
- Reimagining the 4Ps + People through a sustainability lens.
- Aligning internal teams with clear roles, responsibilities, and KPIs.
- Backing commitments with adequate budgets and resources.

- Treating customers as partners in co-creating sustainability.
- Monitoring and reporting transparently, while adapting over time.

Ultimately, sustainable marketing is not about what organisations say but about what they **consistently do**. By embedding sustainability into every stage of marketing strategy and execution, companies build trust, create long-term value, and secure a competitive advantage in markets where responsible growth increasingly defines success.

10. Emerging Trends Driving the Future of Sustainable Marketing

Sustainable marketing is rapidly evolving as organizations respond to global environmental, social, and economic challenges. The future of marketing is increasingly defined by the integration of sustainability principles, innovative technologies, and shifting consumer expectations. This module explores the emergent trends shaping sustainable marketing, providing a roadmap for practitioners and students to anticipate and leverage these developments.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the key emergent trends influencing sustainable marketing.
- Analyze how digital transformation, consumer behavior, and regulatory landscapes are reshaping marketing strategies.
- Identify practical examples and strategies for implementing sustainable marketing initiatives.
- Develop critical insights into the future direction of sustainable marketing.

10.1. The Digital Transformation of Sustainable Marketing

The convergence of **digital transformation** and **sustainability consciousness** has reshaped the landscape of modern marketing, creating unprecedented opportunities to engage with consumers who are increasingly environmentally and socially aware (Verhoef et al., 2021). Digital platforms have become the central stage for sustainability narratives, enabling brands to use **data analytics**, **artificial intelligence (AI)**, and **immersive technologies** to communicate their environmental and social impact with greater precision and transparency (Guandalini, 2022).

Social media is no longer a peripheral communication tool, it has evolved into a **powerful arena for advocacy, accountability, and co-creation** (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). The growing influence of user-generated content has shifted the power dynamic, as consumers now actively participate in shaping brand narratives around sustainability (White, Rishad & Hardisty, 2019). This participatory culture challenges organisations to move beyond **top-down, one-directional campaigns** toward **collaborative, trust-based strategies** that integrate consumer voices into the sustainability journey.

Among these transformations, the integration of **artificial intelligence** into sustainable marketing marks one of the most significant recent developments. AI-driven tools enable real-time tracking of carbon footprints, predictive modelling of consumer behaviour, and personalised messaging that aligns environmental commitments with customer expectations (Paul et al., 2024). When combined with digital storytelling and transparent reporting, these technologies not only increase efficiency but also help brands demonstrate **authenticity, accountability, and measurable progress**.

The future of sustainable marketing is defined by **digital-sustainability convergence**: a landscape where technological innovation, consumer participation, and organisational transparency intersect to create more credible, inclusive, and impactful sustainability communication.

Table 20 Innovative trends in sustainable marketing

Trends	Description	Example
Digital Transformation & AI	Use of AI, big data, and digital platforms to personalize and optimize sustainable marketing initiatives.	AI-driven eco-innovation in tourism
Circular Economy & Green Supply Chains	Emphasis on closed-loop systems, eco-design, and sustainable sourcing.	Circular packaging
Authentic Green Branding & Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	Transparent, purpose-driven communication to build trust and loyalty.	Green digital branding in insurance
Consumer Engagement & Pro-Environmental Behavior	Strategies to influence and respond to eco-conscious consumers.	Green loyalty programs
Social Media & Influencer Impact	Leveraging digital influencers and platforms for sustainability messaging.	Influencer partnerships in fashion
Regulatory & Ethical Considerations	Navigating greenwashing risks, compliance, and ethical marketing.	ESG disclosures in advertising

This transformation can be understood through a set of innovative trends that are reshaping the field, summarized in Table 20 – Innovative trends in sustainable marketing. Each trend is further developed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Key takeaways:

- Digital platforms enable sustainability narratives and create opportunities for real-time engagement.
- Social media fosters user-generated content and accountability, shifting communication from top-down to participatory.
- AI and big data drive personalized sustainability messaging and campaign optimization while requiring responsible data governance.
- Technological tools should enhance, not replace, human connection and transparency.

For example, Digital Transformation & AI highlights how artificial intelligence and big data enable personalization of sustainability messages. Circular Economy & Green Supply Chains emphasizes the role of eco-design and closed-loop systems. Similarly, Authentic Green Branding & CSR connects directly to the chapter on transparency and authenticity, while Consumer Engagement & Pro-Environmental Behavior anticipates the exploration of purpose-driven consumer segments. The influence of Social Media & Influencer Impact aligns with the discussion of community-driven marketing, and Regulatory & Ethical Considerations frame the challenges around greenwashing and compliance.

Transparency and Authenticity in the Age of Information

Modern consumers possess unprecedented access to information about corporate environmental practices, creating an environment where transparency is not merely preferred but demanded

(Montecchi *et al.*, 2024). The emergence of blockchain technology has revolutionized supply chain transparency, enabling consumers to trace products from source to shelf with unprecedented accuracy (Nwariaku *et al.*, 2024). This technological advancement has fundamentally altered consumer expectations, with authenticity becoming the cornerstone of successful sustainable marketing campaigns (Jung, Tian and Oh, 2024). The concept of “radical transparency” has gained traction among forward-thinking brands, involving the complete disclosure of environmental impact data, supply chain practices, and sustainability metrics. This approach represents a significant departure from traditional marketing practices, where controlled messaging dominated brand communication. Companies embracing radical transparency report higher levels of consumer trust and brand loyalty, demonstrating the commercial viability of authentic sustainability communication. Third-party verification systems have evolved to meet the growing demand for credible sustainability claims. Independent certification bodies now provide sophisticated verification services that go beyond simple compliance checking to offer comprehensive sustainability assessments. These systems have become essential tools for marketers seeking to build credible sustainability narratives while avoiding the pitfalls of greenwashing accusations.

Key takeaways:

- Transparency and authenticity are prerequisites for credibility; blockchain and radical transparency build trust.
- Independent certification helps validate sustainability claims and counter greenwashing.
- Purpose-driven consumers prioritise sustainability over price and are willing to pay premiums for aligned offerings.
- Segmentation strategies must consider values and generational differences to effectively engage conscious consumers.

10.2. Future Trends: The Rise of Purpose-Driven Consumer Segments

Contemporary market research reveals the emergence of distinct consumer segments characterized by their commitment to environmental and social causes (Manley, Seock and Shin, 2023). These purpose-driven consumers demonstrate purchasing behaviors that prioritize sustainability considerations over traditional factors such as price and convenience (Šimek and Sadílek, 2024). Understanding these segments requires marketers to develop sophisticated segmentation strategies that go beyond demographic characteristics to include values, behaviors, and lifestyle preferences (Dragolea *et al.*, 2023).

The “conscious consumer” segment has demonstrated remarkable growth potential, with studies indicating that consumers are willing to pay premium prices for products and services that align with their environmental values. This willingness to pay sustainability premiums has created new market opportunities for brands that can effectively communicate their environmental commitments while delivering superior value propositions.

Generational differences in sustainability consciousness have become increasingly pronounced, with younger consumers demonstrating higher levels of environmental awareness and activism

(Krasulja, Ilić and Marković, 2020). Marketing strategies must account for these generational variations, tailoring messaging and channel selection to resonate with different age groups while maintaining consistency in core sustainability commitments (Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025).

10.3. Technological Innovation in Sustainable Marketing Communication

The emergence of immersive technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality has opened new frontiers for sustainable marketing communication (Gupta and Bansal, 2022). These technologies enable brands to create experiential narratives that allow consumers to visualize environmental impact in compelling and memorable ways (Vanar, 2024). Virtual reality experiences can transport consumers to renewable energy facilities, sustainable farms, or conservation areas, creating emotional connections that traditional media cannot achieve. Augmented reality applications have proven particularly effective in helping consumers make informed purchasing decisions by providing real-time information about product sustainability attributes. Smart phone applications can now scan product barcodes to reveal comprehensive sustainability information, including carbon footprint data, ethical sourcing details, and end-of-life disposal instructions. The Internet of Things (IoT) has enabled the development of smart products that provide continuous feedback on environmental performance. These connected devices can track energy consumption, waste generation, and resource utilization in real-time, providing consumers with actionable insights that support sustainable lifestyle choices. Marketers can leverage this data to develop personalized sustainability recommendations and reward programs that incentivize environmentally responsible behavior.

10.4. Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the landscape of sustainable marketing. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and digital platforms is enabling marketers to engage with consumers in real time, offering highly personalized and contextually relevant experiences. AI technologies are being harnessed to predict and influence pro-environmental behaviors, optimize marketing campaigns for efficiency, and streamline operations to minimize waste. For example, in the tourism sector, AI-driven personalization tools allow businesses to tailor eco-friendly experiences to individual travelers, while digital platforms facilitate the promotion of sustainable destinations and practices (Bujdosó *et al.*, 2025). AI-powered systems can now analyze vast amounts of environmental data to provide real-time insights into consumer behavior, enabling personalized sustainability messaging that resonates with individual values and preferences (Yu, 2025). Machine learning algorithms can predict consumer responses to sustainability initiatives, allowing marketers to optimize their campaigns for maximum impact while minimizing resource waste.

However, the adoption of advanced digital tools brings with it the imperative to maintain transparency and preserve the human element in marketing communications (Marios and Anastasios, 2025). As consumers grow more aware of data privacy issues and the potential for

manipulation, brands must strive to build trust by being open about how data is used and by ensuring that automation does not come at the expense of genuine human connection. In this evolving context, the most successful sustainable marketing strategies are those that leverage technology to enhance, not replace, authentic engagement.

10.5. The Circular Economy and Marketing Innovation

The transition from linear to circular business models has created new opportunities for innovative marketing approaches that emphasize resource efficiency and waste reduction (Vidal-Ayuso, Akhmedova and Jaca, 2023). Circular economy principles challenge traditional marketing concepts by prioritizing product longevity, repairability, and recyclability over consumption volume (Shevchenko *et al.*, 2023).

This shift requires marketers to develop new value propositions that celebrate durability and responsible consumption rather than frequent replacement cycles. Product-as-a-service models have emerged as a compelling alternative to traditional ownership-based consumption, enabling companies to maintain ongoing relationships with customers while optimizing resource utilization. Marketing these service-based offerings requires sophisticated storytelling that helps consumers understand the benefits of access over ownership while addressing concerns about convenience and value. The concept of “regenerative marketing” has gained prominence as companies seek to move beyond sustainability toward positive environmental impact.

This approach involves marketing strategies that actively contribute to environmental restoration and social healing, positioning brands as agents of positive change rather than merely neutral actors in the marketplace.

10.6. Collaborative Consumption and Community-Driven Marketing

The rise of sharing-economy platforms has fundamentally altered consumer relationships with products and services, creating new opportunities for sustainable marketing that emphasize community and collaboration. These platforms enable resource sharing that reduces individual environmental impact while fostering social connections that enhance brand loyalty and advocacy (Belk, 2010; Eckelman and Kalmykova, 2023).

Community-driven marketing initiatives have proven particularly effective in building authentic relationships with sustainability-conscious consumers. Brands that create platforms for consumer collaboration around environmental issues demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability while generating valuable user-generated content that enhances marketing effectiveness (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Anwar, 2023).

The emergence of brand communities focused on sustainability has the potential to create opportunities for peer-to-peer education and advocacy that extends marketing reach while building credibility (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). These communities serve as testing grounds for new sustainability initiatives while providing valuable feedback that informs product development and marketing strategy refinement (Dellaert, 2019).

Case Study: Lush Cosmetics' Ethical Ecosystem

Lush is an illustrative example of a brand that has deeply embedded sustainability into its marketing DNA. From ingredient sourcing to packaging, Lush communicates its values transparently and consistently. The company refrains from paid digital advertising, relying instead



on brand advocacy and grassroots storytelling, underscoring the potential of authenticity as a strategic asset. By aligning its marketing, operations, and governance, Lush demonstrates how sustainable marketing can simultaneously serve environmental goals and enhance commercial performance. The brand integrates multiple dimensions of sustainability: (Aditya, 2025):

1. Product-Level Sustainability and Innovation

Lush leads in packaging innovation with its “Naked” product line, which eliminates plastic entirely. About 35% of its product range is sold without any packaging, reducing waste and aligning with circular economy principles. This reflects the trend of sustainable product development and packaging design.

2. Radical Transparency and Ethical Sourcing

Lush openly shares sourcing information and supports fair-trade ingredients. Each product carries labels indicating whether it is vegan, cruelty-free, or handmade. This transparency addresses the increasing demand for authentic and traceable sustainability claims and helps avoid greenwashing.

3. Purpose-Driven Communication

The brand refrains from mainstream paid digital advertising and instead focuses on storytelling and community engagement. Lush uses its stores and social media to advocate for environmental, animal rights, and human rights causes. This supports the trend of ESG alignment in brand narratives and strengthens brand communities around shared values.

4. User-Generated Content and Community Building

Lush encourages customers to share their experiences via social platforms and incorporates feedback into product development. This fosters a strong community and reflects the trend of consumer co-creation and platform-driven brand collaboration.

5. Activist Marketing

Lush engages in activist campaigns, such as its support for banning microplastics and opposing animal testing, which goes beyond traditional CSR and positions the brand as a social change agent.

10.7. Conclusions and Key Takeaways

The future of sustainable marketing is being defined by a **convergence of digital innovation, shifting consumer values, and systemic sustainability transitions**. These forces interact dynamically, creating both opportunities and responsibilities for marketing professionals.

First, digital transformation has unlocked powerful tools for **personalized and interactive sustainability communication**, but it has also raised the bar for **radical transparency and accountability**. Consumers expect not just stories, but **verifiable data and evidence** of impact.

Second, the rise of **purpose-driven consumer segments** is reshaping demand. These audiences reward authenticity and punish superficial claims, pushing brands to align their narratives with **genuine operational practices**. Technological innovations such as AI, immersive media, and data-driven platforms offer new ways to build trust by making sustainability both **engaging and measurable**.

Third, the accelerating **circular economy transition** requires marketers to rethink value propositions. Success lies in shifting from messages of consumption to stories of **resource efficiency, regeneration, and shared value**. Similarly, **collaborative consumption models** open opportunities for **community-driven marketing**, where engagement and co-creation replace traditional one-way promotion.

In this evolving landscape, **sustainability is no longer a constraint**. It is a **source of innovation, differentiation, and long-term resilience**. Brands that embrace transparency, leverage technology responsibly, and deeply understand purpose-driven consumers will not only thrive in the marketplace but will also contribute meaningfully to environmental and social progress. Ultimately, the integration of these trends into comprehensive strategies is both a **challenge and an opportunity**. Marketing professionals who adapt will design campaigns that are more effective, authentic, and impactful, resonating with conscious consumers while driving measurable contributions toward a greener, fairer future.

Final Conclusion

The *EcoAdvert Sustainable Marketing Manual* has demonstrated that sustainable marketing is not a passing trend but a **strategic imperative** for businesses, educators, and entrepreneurs navigating today's rapidly changing world. By integrating sustainability into the very core of marketing practice, organisations can align profit with purpose, competitiveness with fairness, and innovation with responsibility.

Throughout the manual, we explored how the **marketing mix (5Ps)**, **product design**, **pricing strategies**, **communication practices**, and **measurement tools** can be rethought through the lens of sustainability. Each chapter provided practical frameworks, SMART indicators, and EU-aligned tools, ensuring that theory translates into actionable strategies. The case studies, from pioneering brands such as Patagonia and Fairphone to the lessons of failed greenwashing attempts illustrate both the opportunities and risks of sustainability communication.

The overarching message is clear:

- **Authenticity and transparency** are non-negotiable. Consumers and stakeholders demand verifiable impact, not vague promises.
- **Innovation and circularity** are key drivers. New business models, from product-as-a-service to collaborative consumption, create resilience and competitive advantage.
- **Collaboration and participation** strengthen credibility. Sustainable marketing requires cross-departmental alignment, stakeholder engagement, and community involvement.
- **Measurement and accountability** ensure progress. KPIs, reporting frameworks, and self-assessment tools allow organisations to track, communicate, and continuously improve their sustainability impact.

For VET trainers, learners, SMEs, and marketing professionals, this manual provides not only guidance but also a **call to action**. Sustainable marketing is about creating value that lasts: value that empowers people, restores ecosystems, and strengthens communities while ensuring financial viability.

The EcoAdvert project began with a clear mission: to equip organisations with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to **make sustainability the foundation of their marketing strategies**. This manual embodies that mission. The path forward is challenging, but also full of opportunity. Those who embrace sustainable marketing will not only meet consumer expectations and regulatory demands but will also contribute to building a greener, fairer, and more inclusive future.

Sustainable marketing is more than communication: it is a movement.

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