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## **ECOADVERT: INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DIGITAL SUSTAINABLE MARKETING BY PROMOTING ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY PRACTICE**



**Ec@ADVERT.**

EcoAdvert: Innovative Approaches to Digital Sustainable Marketing by  
Promoting Environment-Friendly Practices  
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**Ec@ADVERT.**

**Sustainable Marketing Toolkit**



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## Contents

Introduction.....	4
How to Use This Toolkit.....	6
Trainer Guidance .....	6
Suggested Lesson Structure .....	7
Flexibility and Adaptation.....	7
1. Digital Skills and Green Awareness in VET Education .....	8
1.1. Understanding – Why Digital Skills and Green Awareness Are Interconnected.....	8
1.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	9
1.3. Core Values Revisited – Digitalisation with Purpose .....	9
1.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation .....	10
1.5. Reflection Prompt – Connecting Digital Practice and Sustainability .....	11
1.6. Indicators and Simple Metrics for Reflection .....	11
1.7. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	11
2. Practical Steps to Start with Sustainable Marketing .....	12
2.1. Understanding – From Intention to Action in Sustainable Marketing.....	12
2.2. Historical Context and Evolution of Sustainable Marketing Practices .....	12
2.3. Core Values Revisited – Principles Guiding Practical Action .....	13
2.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Marketing.....	13
2.5. First Practical Steps in Sustainable Marketing.....	14
2.6. Mini-Exercises for SMEs and VET Learners .....	14
2.7. Summary Table – Practical Actions and Sustainability Impact .....	15
2.8. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Progress .....	15
2.9. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	15
3. Communicating Sustainability Clearly.....	16
3.1. Understanding – Why Clear Sustainability Communication Is Essential.....	16
3.2. Historical Context and Evolution of Sustainability Communication .....	16
3.3. Core Values Revisited – Trust, Clarity, and Responsibility .....	17
3.4. Understanding Greenwashing – Risks and Realities .....	17
3.5. Barriers and Challenges in Clear Sustainability Communication .....	18
3.6. Practical Principles for Clear Sustainability Communication.....	18
3.8. Common Communication Mistakes and How to Avoid Them .....	19
3.9. Practical Exercises for SMEs and VET Learners .....	19
4. Simple ESG Basics for Small Businesses.....	20
4.1. Understanding: What Is ESG and Why Does It Matter for SMEs? .....	20
4.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	20
4.3. Core Values Revisited: A Deeper Dive into ESG Principles .....	21
4.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation .....	21
4.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact .....	23
4.6. Useful Tools for SMEs.....	24
4.7. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	27
5. Re-Using and Recycling in Marketing.....	29
5.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	29
5.3. Core Values Revisited: Ethical, Social and Environmental Principles .....	30

5. 4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation .....	30
5.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact .....	32
5.6 Useful Tools for SMEs .....	33
5.7. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	35
5.8. EU Resources for Further Learning and Practice.....	35
<b>6. EU Priorities Made Simple: Green Deal and SDGs.....</b>	<b>37</b>
6.1. Understanding: What Are the Green Deal and SDGs - and Why Do They Matter? .....	37
6.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	37
6.3. Core Values Revisited: Ethical, Social, and Environmental Principles .....	38
6.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation .....	38
6.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact .....	40
6.4 Useful Tools for SMEs and Educators.....	40
A. SDG Dashboard .....	41
B. EU Green Deal Communication Documents.....	41
C. SDG Compass .....	42
6.6. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	42
6.7. EU Resources for Further Learning and Practice.....	43
6.8. Self-Assessment Tool: Are You Linking Local Practice to EU Priorities? .....	43
<b>7. Telling Green Stories .....</b>	<b>44</b>
7.1. Understanding – What Is “Green Storytelling” and Why It Matters? .....	44
7.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	44
7.3. Core Values Revisited: Ethics and Impact Through Stories .....	45
7.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation .....	45
7.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact .....	46
7.6. Mini Exercise – Creating Your Green Story.....	46
7.7. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	46
7.9. Mini Test – Ask Yourself.....	48
<b>8. Understanding Consumers: Barriers and Opportunities .....</b>	<b>50</b>
8.1. Understanding – Why Consumers Don’t Always Choose Green.....	50
8.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	50
8.3. Core Values Revisited: Reframing the Consumer Relationship .....	51
8.4. Barriers and Challenges in Consumer Adoption .....	51
8.5. Indicators and Metrics for Evaluating Consumer Engagement .....	51
8.6. Quick Reflection – Reducing Consumer Barriers.....	52
8.7. Summary and Forward Outlook .....	52
<b>9: Green Advertising and Eco-Packaging.....</b>	<b>54</b>
9.1. Understanding the Green Advertising and Eco-Packaging.....	54
9.2. Historical Context and Evolution .....	54
9.3. Core Values Revisited: A Deeper Dive .....	55
9.4. Implementation Barriers: Why is it Difficult? .....	55
9.5. Indicators and Metrics: How to Quantify Impact.....	57
9.6. Conclusion .....	58
9.7. Self-Assessment Tool: Is Your Advertising and Packaging Sustainable?.....	58
<b>Conclusion and Key Insights .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>61</b>

## Introduction

In the context of accelerating climate change, digital transformation, and growing public expectations regarding corporate responsibility, marketing can no longer be perceived solely as a function for increasing sales or enhancing brand visibility. Marketing shapes consumer behaviour, influences purchasing patterns, and contributes directly to environmental and social outcomes. Every campaign, communication channel, packaging decision, and promotional strategy leaves a measurable footprint — not only economically, but also environmentally and socially.

Across Europe, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and vocational education and training (VET) institutions are operating within a rapidly evolving policy landscape. European initiatives such as the Green Deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan, ESG reporting standards, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have redefined expectations for businesses and educational actors alike. Sustainability is no longer a voluntary add-on; it is becoming an operational requirement and a competitive factor.

However, despite increasing awareness, many organisations face a practical gap. While the importance of sustainability is widely recognised, there is often a lack of structured guidance on how to translate environmental principles into everyday marketing activities and teaching practice. VET trainers may lack ready-to-use materials that link sustainability with digital marketing skills. SMEs, particularly small family businesses, rural enterprises, women-led start-ups, or organisations with limited resources, may struggle to identify realistic entry points for sustainable transformation.

The Sustainable Marketing Toolkit (SMT), developed within the EcoAdvert project, responds directly to this gap. Its purpose is not to provide abstract theory, but to offer a practical, accessible, and structured framework that enables trainers, learners, and SMEs to integrate sustainability into marketing practice step by step. The Toolkit translates complex European policy frameworks and sustainability concepts into clear explanations, actionable strategies, and measurable indicators.

The SMT is built around the understanding that meaningful change does not require radical restructuring. Instead, it can begin with small, consistent improvements: reducing unnecessary printed materials, improving transparency in communication, analyzing digital campaign efficiency, choosing more responsible packaging options, or designing consumer engagement strategies that lower behavioural barriers to sustainable choices.

A central feature of the Toolkit is its unified structure. Each chapter follows a coherent template that includes conceptual understanding, historical context, core values, implementation barriers, practical indicators, and forward-looking reflections. Where appropriate, self-assessment tools and reflective exercises support experiential learning. This structure ensures that the Toolkit functions not only as a reference document but as an operational instrument for training sessions, workshops, and SME strategy discussions.

The SMT also supports the European “dual transition” — the green and digital transformation. Digital skills are presented not merely as technical competences, but as enablers of sustainable practice. Data analytics can optimise resource use; digital communication can reduce material waste; transparency tools can strengthen trust and accountability. By linking digital readiness with environmental awareness, the Toolkit aligns with Erasmus+ horizontal priorities of sustainability, digitalisation, and inclusion.

Inclusion remains a guiding principle throughout the Toolkit. The methods and examples are designed to be accessible for organisations with limited financial or technical capacity. The intention is to ensure that sustainability does not become a privilege of well-resourced corporations, but a realistic pathway for diverse actors, including SMEs and learners with fewer opportunities.

The expected impact of the Toolkit operates at multiple levels. At the trainer level, it strengthens the capacity to integrate sustainable marketing concepts into VET curricula. At the learner and SME level, it builds practical competences for responsible decision-making and measurable environmental improvement. At the European level, it contributes to the broader objective of aligning education, business practice, and policy priorities through open and reusable educational resources.

Ultimately, the Sustainable Marketing Toolkit serves as a bridge between policy and practice. It demonstrates that sustainable marketing is not a separate discipline, but an evolution of responsible business thinking. By combining structured guidance, realistic implementation steps, and alignment with European strategies, the SMT provides a clear pathway for moving from awareness to action, and from isolated green initiatives to systematic sustainable marketing practice.

In line with the objectives of the EcoAdvert project, the Sustainable Marketing Toolkit is designed as an **open educational resource (OER)** that can be freely used, adapted, and further developed by VET trainers, educators, and organisations working in the fields of marketing, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. The Toolkit is intended not only as a project output but as a long-term training resource that can support the development of sustainable marketing competences in vocational education and professional practice.

Following the completion of the project, the Toolkit will remain publicly available through the websites of the partner organisations and will continue to be integrated into their training activities, workshops, and educational programmes. In this way, the resource contributes to the wider dissemination of sustainable marketing practices and supports the green and digital transition promoted by the Erasmus+ Programme.

### **Suggested Use of the Toolkit in Training Activities**

The Sustainable Marketing Toolkit has been designed as a flexible learning resource that can be integrated into various training formats within vocational education and adult learning.

Trainers may use individual modules as standalone learning sessions or combine several chapters into longer workshops or short training programmes focused on sustainable marketing practices. The structure of the Toolkit allows educators to adapt the content according to the needs, experience level, and professional background of participants.

The materials included in the Toolkit – explanations, examples, reflection questions, and self-assessment activities – support interactive learning and encourage participants to connect sustainability concepts with real business and marketing situations.

## How to Use This Toolkit

The Sustainable Marketing Toolkit is designed as a practical resource for **VET trainers, educators, and training providers** who wish to integrate sustainable marketing concepts into their teaching and training activities. The Toolkit combines conceptual explanations, real-life examples, and practical exercises that help learners understand how sustainability principles can be applied in marketing practice and business communication.

Trainers may use the modules flexibly depending on the learning context, the experience level of participants, and the duration of the training session. Each module can be delivered as a standalone learning unit or combined with other modules to create longer training sessions.

A typical lesson may include a short introduction to the topic, presentation of key concepts, a practical exercise or group activity, and a reflection discussion where participants connect the concepts with real-life marketing situations.

## Trainer Guidance

The Sustainable Marketing Toolkit has been developed as a practical resource for **Vocational Education and Training (VET) trainers, educators, and training providers** who wish to integrate sustainable marketing concepts into their teaching and training activities.

The Toolkit aims to support trainers in translating sustainability principles into practical marketing practices that can be applied by learners, SMEs, and marketing professionals. Rather than focusing only on theoretical explanations, the Toolkit combines conceptual insights, practical examples, reflection prompts, and small exercises that encourage active learning.

Trainers are encouraged to use the Toolkit flexibly depending on the learning context, the experience level of participants, and the duration of the training session.

Modules may be delivered as standalone learning units or combined into longer training programmes focused on sustainable marketing and digital transformation.

The Toolkit can be used in various learning environments, including:

- vocational education and training programmes
- entrepreneurship and marketing courses
- workshops for SMEs and start-ups
- lifelong learning and adult education programmes
- short awareness sessions on sustainable business practices

By using real-life examples and practical exercises, the Toolkit supports trainers in helping learners understand how sustainable marketing can be applied in everyday professional practice.

## Suggested Lesson Structure

To facilitate the practical implementation of the Toolkit in VET learning environments, trainers may follow a simple session structure when using the modules.

### 1. Introduction to the Topic (10–15 minutes)

The trainer introduces the topic and explains its relevance for sustainable marketing practices. Short examples from real business cases or recent sustainability trends may be used to stimulate interest and discussion.

### 2. Conceptual Overview (15–20 minutes)

Key concepts from the Toolkit module are presented. Trainers may highlight the most important principles, challenges, and opportunities related to sustainable marketing and digital transformation.

### 3. Practical Activity or Exercise (20–30 minutes)

Participants engage in one of the exercises provided in the module. Activities may be conducted individually or in small groups and aim to connect theory with practical business situations.

Examples of activities include:

- analysing marketing messages for sustainability claims
- identifying potential greenwashing risks in advertising
- proposing improvements for a company's sustainable marketing strategy
- discussing how digital tools can support environmentally responsible communication.

### 4. Reflection and Discussion (10–15 minutes)

Participants discuss their findings and reflect on how the concepts explored during the session can be applied in their own professional or educational contexts.

### 5. Key Takeaways and Next Steps (5 minutes)

The trainer summarises the main insights of the session and encourages participants to identify one practical action that could improve sustainability in marketing practices.

## Flexibility and Adaptation

The Toolkit is intentionally designed as a flexible educational resource. Trainers are encouraged to adapt the examples, exercises, and discussion questions according to the needs of their learners, local business environments, and sector-specific contexts.

By combining structured learning with practical reflection, Toolkit supports the development of sustainable marketing competences within vocational education and training while contributing to the broader goals of the green and digital transition.

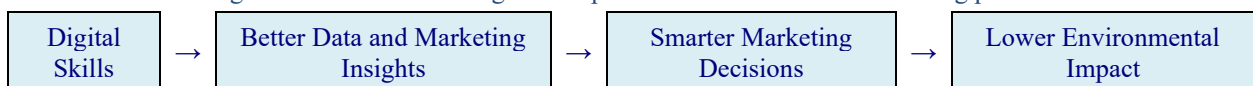
## 1. Digital Skills and Green Awareness in VET Education

Digital skills and environmental awareness are increasingly inseparable in today's labour market. Sustainability objectives are no longer implemented through isolated environmental actions, but through digitally enabled systems that shape how organisations plan, operate, measure performance, and communicate with stakeholders. From online marketing platforms and digital collaboration environments to data analytics, learning management systems, and reporting tools, digital competence has become a prerequisite for applying green practices in real business and educational contexts.

### 1.1. Understanding – Why Digital Skills and Green Awareness Are Interconnected

In many sectors, sustainability-related decisions depend on digital tools. Energy consumption is monitored digitally, supply chains are managed through software platforms, marketing campaigns are optimised using data analytics, and sustainability-related information is communicated primarily through digital channels such as websites, online platforms, or internal systems. Without basic digital literacy, it becomes difficult to assess environmental impact, demonstrate progress, or engage meaningfully with customers, learners, and partners on sustainability topics.

Diagram 1 Link between digital competences and sustainable marketing practices



For vocational education and training (VET), this interconnection is particularly important. VET systems are expected to respond quickly to labour market changes and equip learners with practical, job-relevant competences.

Trainers are therefore challenged to integrate sustainability and digitalisation not as separate topics, but as complementary dimensions of modern professional practice. Environmental awareness without digital skills often remains theoretical and detached from workplace realities, while digital skills without sustainability awareness risk reinforcing inefficient or environmentally harmful practices.

This chapter introduces the idea that digitalisation can actively support sustainability when used with intention and responsibility. By embedding simple digital tools and practices into sustainability-oriented teaching and learning processes—such as digital collaboration platforms, shared documents, or basic learning environments, VET education can reduce resource consumption, enhance inclusion and accessibility, and equip learners with competences aligned with European labour market priorities and Erasmus+ objectives.

## Expected outcome

VET trainers gain simple, practical reference points for integrating digital and green perspectives into teaching and training activities, enabling learners to understand sustainability as a digitally supported, everyday practice rather than an abstract concept.

## Example Digital Tool for VET Trainers

One simple digital tool that can support green awareness in VET education is a collaborative platform such as **Padlet or Miro**. Trainers can use these tools to ask learners to map everyday marketing practices and identify which of them have environmental impacts.

For example, learners can create a shared board where they list marketing activities used by SMEs (printing flyers, social media campaigns, packaging design) and suggest greener alternatives.

This activity combines digital collaboration with sustainability reflection and can be implemented easily in short classroom sessions.<sup>33</sup>

## 1.2. Historical Context and Evolution

Historically, vocational education focused primarily on efficiency, productivity, and technical performance. Environmental considerations were often addressed indirectly, for example through regulatory compliance or cost-saving measures, rather than as explicit learning objectives. At the same time, early digitalisation in education and business aimed mainly at increasing speed, scale, and competitiveness, with limited attention to environmental consequences.

From the early 2000s onwards, two parallel developments reshaped this landscape. First, climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity became central political, economic, and social concerns. Sustainability moved from a niche issue to a strategic priority influencing policy, funding, and market expectations.

Second, digital technologies have become more accessible, affordable, and embedded in everyday professional and educational practice, including online platforms, mobile technologies, and cloud-based tools.

European policy frameworks increasingly recognised that these two transitions—the green and the digital—are deeply interconnected. The European Green Deal frames sustainability as a systemic transformation requiring innovation, data, and digital solutions. Similarly, the Digital Education Action Plan emphasises the role of digital competences in enabling inclusive, resilient, and future-oriented education systems.

Within the Erasmus+ programme, this convergence is reflected in horizontal priorities that promote digital transformation and environmental sustainability across education and training sectors. VET education is therefore positioned at the intersection of these priorities, with a responsibility to translate high-level policy objectives into concrete learning experiences and workplace-relevant skills.

As a result, contemporary VET education is no longer expected merely to transfer technical knowledge, but to prepare learners for professional contexts in which digital tools function as enablers of sustainable practice rather than neutral technologies.

## 1.3. Core Values Revisited – Digitalisation with Purpose

The integration of digital skills and green awareness in VET education is guided by a set of core values that shape both teaching practice and learning outcomes.

## Responsibility

Digital tools should be used consciously to reduce environmental impact. This includes minimising printed materials, optimizing digital workflows, reducing unnecessary travel through online collaboration, and encouraging energy-efficient digital habits. Responsible digital use demonstrates that sustainability begins with everyday decisions.

## Accessibility and Inclusion

Digital learning environments can significantly expand access to education and training. Online platforms, blended learning formats, and digital resources enable participation by learners with fewer opportunities, including those in rural or remote areas, learners with disabilities, or those balancing education with work or family responsibilities. This strongly aligns with the Erasmus+ inclusion priority.

## Efficiency and Transparency

Digital tools make sustainability efforts more visible and easier to document. They support basic monitoring, reflection, and communication of actions such as resource use, learning activities, or project outcomes. Transparency strengthens trust and accountability within educational institutions and in their cooperation with SMEs and external stakeholders.

## Lifelong Learning

Digital and green competences evolve continuously in response to technological innovation, policy developments, and labour market needs. VET education therefore plays a key role in fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and a mindset of continuous learning.

Together, these values underline that digital skills are not value-neutral. They shape how sustainability goals are understood, implemented, and communicated in practice.

*Table 1 Linking Digital Skills with Green Practice*

Digital Skill	Sustainable Application
Data analytics	Measuring campaign efficiency
Social media management	Promoting responsible consumption
Cloud collaboration	Reducing printed materials
Content management	Transparent sustainability reporting

## 1.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation

Despite the clear benefits of integrating digital skills and green awareness, several barriers limit effective implementation in VET education.

A common challenge is limited digital confidence among trainers. Some educators may feel uncertain about using digital platforms or tools beyond basic functions, which can reduce their willingness to experiment with digitally supported sustainability teaching.

Another barrier is perceived complexity. Sustainability and digitalisation are often associated with policy language, technical jargon, or large-scale transformation, making them appear distant from everyday teaching practice. Without clear reference points, trainers may struggle to identify practical entry points. Resource constraints also play a significant role, particularly in small VET institutions and SME-linked training environments. Limited time, infrastructure, or institutional support can restrict opportunities for innovation and experimentation.

Finally, there is often a gap between theory and practice. Learners may understand sustainability concepts in abstract terms but fail to recognise how digital tools can support concrete environmental improvements in real workplace situations. Addressing these barriers requires low-threshold, incremental approaches that focus on practical application, peer learning, and gradual integration rather than comprehensive transformation.

### **1.5. Reflection Prompt – Connecting Digital Practice and Sustainability**

Consider your current teaching or training practice:

- Which digital tools or platforms do you already use on a regular basis?
- How do these tools affect resource use (e.g. printing, travel, time)?
- Where could small adjustments support more sustainable practices without adding complexity?

This short reflection can be used as an entry point for discussion or as preparation for the more practice-oriented chapters that follow.

### **1.6. Indicators and Simple Metrics for Reflection**

Monitoring progress does not require complex systems. Simple indicators can support reflection and gradual improvement, such as:

- Reduced use of printed teaching and marketing materials through digital alternatives
- Increased use of digital collaboration or learning platforms
- Learner participation in digitally supported sustainability-related tasks
- Trainer confidence in using basic digital tools for sustainability-oriented teaching
- Integration of sustainability topics into digital assignments or activities

These indicators support awareness and continuous improvement without creating additional administrative burden.

### **1.7. Summary and Forward Outlook**

Digital skills and green awareness together form a foundation of future-oriented VET education. Their integration supports environmental objectives, improves accessibility and inclusion, and aligns training provision with evolving labour market expectations.

As European policies continue to promote the twin green and digital transition, VET education that embraces this combined approach will be better positioned to support learners, SMEs, and local communities. By focusing on practical, digitally supported sustainability learning, trainers can help transform abstract policy goals into meaningful professional competences.

#### **Reflection Exercise: Digital and Green Awareness**

Ask yourself or your learners:

- Do you currently use digital tools to reduce paper use in marketing or teaching?
- Which everyday marketing activities create unnecessary environmental impact?
- What small digital change could reduce this impact?

Discuss your answers in pairs or small groups.

## **2. Practical Steps to Start with Sustainable Marketing**

Sustainable marketing is often perceived as a complex or resource-intensive activity, associated with large companies, specialised expertise, or substantial financial investment. In reality, sustainable marketing for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and VET contexts begins with everyday decisions that influence how products, services, and messages are designed, delivered, and communicated.

### **2.1. Understanding – From Intention to Action in Sustainable Marketing**

At its core, sustainable marketing is about aligning marketing practices with environmental and social responsibility while maintaining business relevance and credibility. It does not require perfection or radical transformation. Instead, it focuses on progressive improvement, transparency, and consistency. Small, well-chosen actions can reduce environmental impact, improve efficiency, and strengthen trust with customers and learners.

For VET trainers, sustainable marketing also has a pedagogical dimension. It offers a practical entry point for teaching sustainability through real-world examples that learners can easily relate to. By focusing on marketing activities—such as communication channels, materials, and campaigns—trainers can demonstrate how sustainability principles translate into concrete professional practice.

This chapter functions as a practical bridge between sustainability awareness and implementation. It supports SMEs and trainers in moving from intention to action by showing that sustainable marketing starts with feasible steps integrated into existing workflows rather than parallel or additional systems.

#### **Expected outcome**

SMEs and trainers are able to identify, implement, and reflect on practical first steps toward sustainable marketing that are realistic, measurable, and aligned with everyday practice.

### **2.2. Historical Context and Evolution of Sustainable Marketing Practices**

Early approaches to sustainable marketing often focused on isolated environmental actions, such as promoting recyclable packaging or highlighting eco-labels. While these initiatives raised awareness, they frequently lacked integration into broader business and educational strategies. Sustainability was treated as an add-on rather than as part of core marketing practice.

Over time, several developments reshaped this approach. Growing public awareness of environmental challenges increased expectations toward businesses of all sizes. At the same time,

digitalisation transformed marketing processes, enabling new forms of communication, data analysis, and customer engagement.

Digital tools reduced reliance on printed materials, enabled targeted communication, and supported more efficient use of resources. This created opportunities to embed sustainability into marketing not only through messages, but also through how marketing is carried out—for example through digital newsletters, websites, basic analytics tools, or online collaboration platforms. Sustainable marketing gradually evolved from a focus on claims and symbols to a focus on processes, behaviours, and continuous improvement.

In the context of education and training, this evolution highlighted the importance of experiential learning. Learners benefit most when sustainability is demonstrated through practical decisions and routines rather than abstract concepts. Sustainable marketing therefore became a useful entry point for teaching applied sustainability in VET.

### 2.3. Core Values Revisited – Principles Guiding Practical Action

Practical sustainable marketing is guided by a set of values that shape decision-making and prioritisation.

**Pragmatism:** Actions should be feasible within the resources and capacities of SMEs and training organisations. Sustainable marketing works best when it builds on existing practices rather than replacing them entirely.

**Consistency:** Regular, incremental improvements have greater long-term impact than one-off initiatives. Consistency also strengthens credibility and learning outcomes.

**Credibility and Honesty:** Marketing actions should reflect actual practices. Overstating impact or adopting sustainability language without evidence undermines trust and increases the risk of greenwashing.

**Learning by Doing:** Sustainable marketing is most effective when approached as a learning process. Practical experimentation, reflection, and adaptation are central to both business improvement and education.

These values help SMEs and trainers prioritise actions that are meaningful, manageable, and aligned with their specific context.

### 2.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Marketing

Despite growing awareness, several barriers often prevent SMEs and educators from taking practical steps. A common challenge is the perception of high cost. Sustainability is frequently associated with additional expenses, leading organisations to postpone action. In practice, many sustainable marketing measures—such as reducing printed materials or optimising communication channels—can reduce costs rather than increase them.

Another barrier is uncertainty about where to start. Without clear guidance, SMEs and trainers may feel overwhelmed by the breadth of sustainability topics and hesitate to take initial steps.

Time constraints also play a role. Marketing activities are often carried out under tight deadlines, leaving limited space for reflection or experimentation.

Finally, fear of making mistakes—particularly in communication—can result in inaction or overly cautious behaviour, even when improvements are possible.

Addressing these barriers requires a structured yet flexible approach that focuses on prioritisation, feasibility, and gradual progress.

#### Example Digital Tools

SMEs and trainers can use simple digital tools to analyse and improve their marketing practices. For example, **Google Analytics** can help track which online campaigns generate the most engagement, reducing the need for printed promotion materials. Similarly, email marketing platforms such as **Mailchimp** allow organisations to communicate with customers digitally instead of relying on paper-based marketing.

## 2.5. First Practical Steps in Sustainable Marketing

Sustainable marketing can begin with a small number of targeted actions that fit naturally into existing workflows. Examples include:

- Reducing printed materials by shifting brochures, catalogues, and handouts to digital formats
- Optimising communication channels by prioritising digital newsletters, websites, and social media
- Rethinking campaign design to focus on clarity and relevance rather than volume
- Using online meetings and collaboration tools to reduce travel-related emissions
- Encouraging reuse of marketing materials such as banners, templates, or digital assets

These steps illustrate that sustainability is not limited to product design but is embedded in everyday marketing practice.

### How to Interpret Your Results

If most of your answers show that marketing activities still rely heavily on printed materials or resource-intensive practices, this indicates an opportunity for gradual improvement. Start by selecting one activity that can be easily digitised or simplified.

If several sustainable practices are already in place, the next step is to monitor their effectiveness and communicate them clearly to customers.

## 2.6. Mini-Exercises for SMEs and VET Learners

The following mini-exercises support learning by doing and can be applied in SME workshops, VET classrooms, or internal team discussions.

### Exercise 1: Marketing Material Audit

Participants list marketing materials used over one working week and identify which materials can be eliminated, digitised, or reused.

### Exercise 2: Channel Review

Participants review current communication channels and assess their resource use, effectiveness, and overlap.

### Exercise 3: Campaign Redesign

Participants redesign an existing marketing message to reduce resource use while maintaining clarity and effectiveness. These exercises can be completed individually or in small groups and adapted to different timeframes.

### Quick Checklist – First Steps in Sustainable Marketing

- ✓ Review your current marketing activities
- ✓ Identify activities with high environmental impact
- ✓ Replace printed materials with digital alternatives where possible

- ✓ Communicate sustainability transparently
- ✓ Monitor the results of small changes

## 2.7. Summary Table – Practical Actions and Sustainability Impact

The table below helps consolidate learning outcomes from the exercises and supports interpretation of results, particularly in short or modular training sessions.

*Table 2 Table – Practical Actions and Sustainability Impact*

Action	Effort level	Sustainability benefit
Shift printed brochures to digital formats	Low	Reduced paper use and distribution impact
Prioritise digital communication channels	Low	Lower resource consumption and wider reach
Redesign campaigns with fewer materials	Medium	Reduced waste and clearer messaging
Use online meetings instead of travel	Low	Reduced emissions and time savings
Reuse digital templates and assets	Low	Improved resource efficiency and consistency

This overview can be used by trainers and SMEs to identify actions that offer high impact with limited effort and to plan next steps.

## 2.8. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Progress

Monitoring progress supports reflection and continuous improvement. Simple indicators include:

- Reduction in printed materials over time
- Increased use of digital communication channels
- Cost savings related to reduced resource use
- Participation of learners or staff in sustainability-related activities
- Qualitative feedback on clarity and effectiveness of marketing messages

These indicators allow progress to be tracked without complex reporting systems.

## 2.9. Summary and Forward Outlook

Practical sustainable marketing begins with small, realistic actions integrated into everyday practice. By focusing on feasibility, consistency, and learning, SMEs and trainers can reduce environmental impact while strengthening credibility and engagement.

As sustainability expectations continue to grow, organisations that start with simple steps today will be better positioned to adapt and expand their efforts in the future. In VET contexts, sustainable marketing provides a concrete and accessible way to teach applied sustainability and prepare learners for evolving professional environments.

## **3. Communicating Sustainability Clearly**

Clear sustainability communication is not a branding exercise or a marketing trend. It is a core requirement for credibility, trust, and long-term engagement. As environmental and social topics become more visible in public debate, customers, learners, partners, and institutions increasingly expect organisations to explain clearly what they do, why they do it, and what difference it makes. For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and vocational education and training (VET) contexts, sustainability communication plays a particularly sensitive role. SMEs often operate with limited resources, informal structures, and evolving sustainability practices. When communication is vague, exaggerated, or inconsistent, it can unintentionally undermine trust, expose organisations to accusations of greenwashing, or discourage further sustainability action.

### **3.1. Understanding – Why Clear Sustainability Communication Is Essential**

Clear communication does not require sophisticated campaigns or complex reporting systems. It requires honest translation of real actions into understandable language. In educational contexts, it also means helping learners understand that communication choices are not neutral: they shape public perception, influence trust, and carry ethical responsibility. This chapter focuses on how sustainability can be communicated clearly, proportionately, and responsibly through everyday communication channels such as websites, social media, newsletters, and training materials. The emphasis is on transparency and clarity rather than promotional language.

#### **Expected outcome**

Participants are able to identify unclear or misleading sustainability messages, communicate sustainability actions clearly and proportionately, and build long-term trust through honest and specific communication.

### **3.2. Historical Context and Evolution of Sustainability Communication**

Communication sustainability has evolved significantly over recent decades. Early environmental communication often relied on broad claims and symbolic language. Terms such as “eco-friendly,” “green,” or “environmentally responsible” were widely used without clear definitions or supporting evidence.

As sustainability gained prominence, particularly from the early 2000s onwards—this approach led to growing scepticism. High-profile cases of misleading environmental claims, combined with increased access to information through digital media, made audiences more critical and better informed. Consumers and learners began questioning not only what organisations claimed, but how those claims were justified.

In response, policymakers, consumer organisations, and international institutions developed clearer guidance on environmental claims and sustainability communication. Transparency, specificity, and evidence became central principles.

*Table 3 Example of transparent sustainability communication*

<b>Vague Claim</b>	<b>Improved Claim</b>	<b>Evidence Needed</b>
Eco-friendly product	Packaging made from 80% recycled cardboard	Certification or supplier data
Green packaging	Recyclable paper packaging	Recycling symbol and materials info
Sustainable product	Produced using renewable energy	Energy source documentation

The focus shifted from aspirational slogans to verifiable action, and from general promises to clearly explained progress.

Digitalisation intensified this shift. Sustainability communication now takes place primarily online, where claims can be easily compared, challenged, and shared. For SMEs and VET institutions, this means that even small communication choices—website text, social media posts, or training examples—can significantly affect credibility.

### 3.3. Core Values Revisited – Trust, Clarity, and Responsibility

Clear sustainability communication is guided by a set of values that define ethical and effective practice.

**Honesty:** Honesty means communicating what is actually being done, not what is planned, implied, or hoped for. It includes acknowledging limits and avoiding the presentation of future intentions as current achievements.

**Clarity:** Clarity involves using simple, precise language that can be understood by non-experts. Sustainability concepts often involve technical terms, but effective communication translates them into everyday language without distorting meaning.

**Evidence:** Evidence-based communication links claims to concrete actions, data, or observable practices. Evidence does not need to be complex; it can include clear descriptions, simple indicators, or transparent explanations of processes.

**Proportionality:** Communication should reflect the real scale of action. Small improvements should be communicated as such, without exaggeration. Proportionality protects credibility and supports continuous improvement.

**Responsibility:** Responsible communication recognises the impact messages can have on public trust, learner understanding, and organisational reputation. It avoids misleading impressions and supports informed decision-making.

Together, these values form the ethical foundation of sustainable marketing and sustainability education.

### 3.4. Understanding Greenwashing – Risks and Realities

Greenwashing is often understood as intentional deception. In practice, especially for SMEs and educational organisations, greenwashing is frequently unintentional. It often results from unclear language, lack of evidence, or pressure to appear sustainable without sufficient guidance.

Common forms of unintentional greenwashing include:

- using vague or undefined sustainability terms,
- highlighting one positive action while ignoring major impacts,
- presenting aspirations as achieved results,

- using imagery or symbols that imply sustainability without factual basis.

At the same time, fear of greenwashing can lead to silence. Some organisations avoid communicating sustainability altogether, even when they are taking meaningful action. This reduces transparency, learning opportunities, and motivation.

Effective sustainability communication therefore requires a balanced approach: avoiding exaggeration while still sharing progress openly and constructively.

### **Example Digital Tools for Transparent Communication**

Digital communication platforms can help SMEs present sustainability information more clearly and consistently. For example, website content management systems (such as WordPress) allow organisations to publish detailed sustainability information and updates.

Similarly, social media platforms enable businesses to share short stories, updates, and visual evidence of their sustainability practices, making communication more transparent and accessible to consumers.

## **3.5. Barriers and Challenges in Clear Sustainability Communication**

Several barriers commonly affect SMEs, trainers, and learners:

- fear of making mistakes, leading to overly cautious or vague language,
- lack of clear guidance on acceptable sustainability claims,
- limited time and capacity in small teams,
- inconsistent messaging across different communication channels.

Recognizing these barriers is the first step toward addressing them through structured, practical approaches.

### **How to Interpret Your Results**

If your answers show that sustainability claims are often vague or unsupported by evidence, this may indicate a risk of unintentional greenwashing. In this case, organisations should focus on improving transparency and providing clear explanations of their environmental actions.

If most communication practices are already clear and supported by evidence, the next step is to ensure regular updates and consistent messaging across different communication channels.

## **3.6. Practical Principles for Clear Sustainability Communication**

The following principles support clarity and trust in everyday communication:

- say what you do, not what you are,
- be specific about scope and context,
- explain why an action matters, not only that it exists,
- use consistent language across channels,
- acknowledge limits and next steps.

These principles help transform sustainability communication from promotional language into meaningful dialogue.

The table below supports practical application of the principles and helps users assess and improve sustainability messages across common communication channels (e.g. websites, social media posts, newsletters, training materials).

The next table can be used as a quick checklist or discussion tool in SME workshops and VET training sessions

Table 4 From Vague Claims to Clear Communication

Vague or risky claim	Clear and proportionate wording	Evidence or explanation needed
“We are eco-friendly”	“We reduce food waste by donating unsold products daily to a local food bank”	Description of the donation practice
“Our production is climate neutral”	“We upgraded machinery to reduce energy use as a first step toward lowering emissions”	Explanation of the upgrade and its effect
“Sustainable packaging”	“We use certified paper packaging for takeaway products”	Type of certification or material
“Green marketing campaign”	“This campaign is delivered digitally to reduce printed materials”	Description of digital channels used
“Environmentally responsible company”	“We are working to improve resource efficiency in our daily operations”	Scope and limits of current actions

This table can be used as a quick checklist or discussion tool in SME workshops and VET training sessions.

### 3.8. Common Communication Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Frequent mistakes include:

- overclaiming through absolute terms (“100% sustainable”),
- visual greenwashing without factual support,
- selective storytelling that ignores relevant impacts,
- silence due to fear of criticism.

Awareness of these patterns helps organisations and learners communicate more responsibly.

### 3.9. Practical Exercises for SMEs and VET Learners

**Exercise 1: Claim clarity check:** Participants review a sustainability statement and answer:

- What is being done?
- How do we know?
- What is not included?

**Exercise 2: Rewrite a vague claim:** Participants transform a generic sustainability statement into a clear, specific message.

**Exercise 3: Channel consistency review:** Participants compare sustainability messages across different channels and identify inconsistencies.

These exercises can be used flexibly and adapted to different training formats.

#### Indicators for Measuring Communication Quality

Simple indicators can support reflection and improvement:

- reduction of vague or unsupported claims,
- consistency of sustainability messages across channels,
- audience understanding and feedback,
- alignment between communication and actual practice,
- increased confidence in discussing sustainability topics.

Clear sustainability communication is a cornerstone of responsible marketing and education. It builds trust, supports learning, and reduces reputational risk. For SMEs and VET contexts, clarity is not a limitation but a strength that reflects authenticity and commitment.

## 4. Simple ESG Basics for Small Businesses

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) refers to a set of standards that help organisations understand and manage their wider impact on society and the environment. Although the term originally emerged in the investment sector, ESG principles now influence how businesses of all sizes - including micro- and small enterprises - plan, operate, and communicate (European Commission, 2023).

### 4.1. Understanding: What Is ESG and Why Does It Matter for SMEs?

For small businesses, ESG is not about complex reporting frameworks. It is about **how the business uses resources, how it treats people, and how responsibly it is governed**. Many SMEs already demonstrate ESG values through energy-saving habits, fair treatment of staff, responsible sourcing, or transparent communication - even if they have never used the term “ESG”.

For marketing professionals, ESG matters because customers increasingly want to understand not only *what* a business sells but *how* it behaves. Responsible actions build credibility, while unclear or misleading claims risk reputational damage (OECD, 2021).

*Table 5 ESG dimensions explained for SMEs*

ESG Dimension	What It Means for SMEs	Example in Marketing
Environmental	Reducing environmental impact	Using digital marketing instead of printed materials
Social	Responsible for the treatment of employees and customers	Transparent communication with consumers
Governance	Ethical and transparent management	Clear sustainability commitments

### 4.2. Historical Context and Evolution

ESG thinking did not appear overnight. Its development reflects a broader societal shift toward accountability and sustainable development.

- **1970s-1990s:** Early corporate responsibility movements focused on philanthropy and compliance.
- **2000s:** Growing awareness of climate change led to stronger sustainability initiatives.
- **2004:** The term *ESG* was formally introduced in the UN report *Who Cares Wins* (UN, 2004).
- **2010s:** Global standards like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pushed ESG mainstream.

- **2020s:** EU policy instruments (e.g., European Green Deal, CSRD) accelerated ESG adoption across European supply chains (European Commission, 2019).

Today, SMEs experience ESG not as a legal requirement but as a **market expectation**. Large clients, public authorities, and consumers increasingly demand responsible practices and credible communication (NielsenIQ, 2023).

### 4.3. Core Values Revisited: A Deeper Dive into ESG Principles

This section examines the ethical, social, and environmental principles behind ESG and why they matter for small businesses.

- **Environmental Values:** Environmental responsibility focuses on reducing negative impacts and promoting efficient resource use. Actions may include energy savings, waste reduction, sustainable materials, and circular economy practices.
- **Social Values:** Social principles involve fair treatment of workers, community engagement, human rights, diversity, and product safety. For SMEs, these values often reflect strong local commitment.
- **Governance Values:** Governance is the foundation of trust. It covers transparency, ethical conduct, data protection, decision-making structures, and responsible marketing practices. Good governance reduces risks - including accidental greenwashing.

### 4.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation

Small businesses often agree with the principles behind ESG, but struggle to translate them into day-to-day decisions. The most common barriers are not a lack of motivation: they're practical frictions that make ESG feel "bigger than the business". Below are the barriers SMEs typically face, with a focus on the issues that most often block progress.

#### 1) Materiality confusion (what matters most, and to whom)

Many SMEs get stuck at the very first step: deciding which ESG topics are "relevant enough" to focus on. Without a clear process, they either:

- try to cover everything and become overwhelmed, or
- focus only on one visible topic (often recycling) and miss bigger risks (e.g., worker safety, supply-chain ethics, energy use, governance practices).

A simple materiality approach is essential, but it must be SME-friendly: identify the top impacts, risks, and stakeholder expectations without turning it into a corporate exercise.

#### 2) Data gaps and measurement overload

Even when SMEs know what to work on, they often lack reliable data or time to collect it. Typical pain points include:

- inconsistent utility bills across sites or shared premises,
- missing baseline information (no "starting point"),
- uncertainty about which indicators are "good enough" and which are excessive,
- reliance on manual spreadsheets that become outdated quickly.

This leads to "analysis paralysis": the business delays action because it feels it cannot measure perfectly. Credible ESG progress often starts with rough but transparent baselines that improve over time.

### **3) Supplier questionnaires and customer due diligence pressure**

A major driver of ESG action in SMEs is external: larger buyers increasingly ask suppliers to complete sustainability questionnaires, sign codes of conduct, disclose emissions data, or explain labor and sourcing practices. SMEs can struggle because:

- questionnaires are long, technical, and not standardized,
- they may request data SMEs don't track (Scope 3, detailed HR metrics, policies),
- answering requires cross-department coordination that SMEs don't have. The risk is twofold: losing contracts due to incomplete responses, or responding hastily and making unverifiable claims.

### **4) B2B procurement “gatekeeping”**

Even when an SME is doing meaningful sustainability work, it may not “count” unless it fits procurement checklists. This creates frustration and often pushes SMEs toward superficial compliance rather than impactful improvements. Common examples:

- buyers requiring a specific certification (even when alternatives exist),
- sustainability scoring systems that prioritize documentation over results,
- procurement timelines too short for SMEs to adapt.

In practice, SMEs need guidance on how to present ESG commitments credibly and proportionately, and how to plan improvements against procurement cycles.

### **5) Governance is neglected (because it feels abstract)**

Environmental and social action often feels tangible; governance can feel “corporate” or irrelevant. Yet small-business governance challenges are real:

- unclear roles and responsibilities (who owns ESG decisions?),
- informal processes that increase risk (e.g., no documented anti-bribery practices),
- lack of basic controls on claims and reporting.

When governance is weak, even good ESG actions can become inconsistent, hard to prove, or vulnerable to reputational risk.

### **6) Greenwashing anxiety (and fear of saying the wrong thing)**

Many SMEs do not communicate their efforts because they fear being accused of greenwashing. This is often triggered by:

- vague language (“eco-friendly”, “green”, “sustainable”) without evidence,
- pressure to make marketing claims faster than data can support,
- uncertainty about what constitutes a “substantiated claim”.

The result can be silence, or worse, accidental overclaiming. SMEs need simple rules: communicate what you do, provide evidence, avoid absolute claims, and be transparent about limits.

### **7) Limited capacity to respond to evolving reporting expectations**

Even if the SME is not directly subject to major reporting obligations, it can be affected indirectly (e.g., via requests from banks, investors, or larger customers). This creates uncertainty: “Which requests are mandatory? Which are best practice?”. Without clarity, SMEs may over-invest in complex reporting or ignore critical requests until it's too late.

### **Example Digital Tool for ESG Awareness**

SMEs can use simple digital platforms to better understand their sustainability practices. Tools such as **B Impact Assessment** allow organisations to evaluate environmental and social performance through structured questionnaires.

These tools help businesses identify small improvements without requiring complex reporting systems.

### **Practical takeaway**

For SMEs, the best way to overcome these barriers is to adopt a “minimum viable ESG system”: a short materiality list, a small set of indicators, a clear owner for ESG decisions, and a controlled approach to external questionnaires and claims—improving precision over time.

## **4.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact**

Small businesses do not need sophisticated systems. Simple, practical indicators help track sustainability actions and communicate progress.

### **Environmental Indicators**

- Energy use (kWh per month)
- Waste generated and recycled
- Water consumption
- Use of sustainable materials

### **Social Indicators**

- Employee satisfaction
- Training hours provided
- Workplace safety records
- Community engagement activities

### **Governance Indicators**

- Accuracy of marketing claims
- Data protection measures
- Transparent decision-making processes

### **Self-Assessment – ESG in Your Business**

Answer the following questions:

- Does your organisation try to reduce environmental impact in marketing activities?
- Are sustainability practices communicated clearly to customers?
- Are employees aware of sustainability initiatives in the organisation?
- Does the organisation monitor any environmental or social indicators?

### **How to Interpret Your Results**

- If most of your answers indicate that sustainability practices are still limited, your organisation may benefit from introducing simple ESG-related improvements, such as reducing printed materials or improving transparency in communication.

- If several ESG practices are already in place, the next step is to monitor progress and communicate these efforts clearly to customers and stakeholders.

## 4.6. Useful Tools for SMEs

### A. UN Global Compact Self-Assessment Tool



**United Nations**  
Global Compact

#### Learning Objectives

After using this tool, SMEs will be able to:

- Understand how basic human rights, labour, environmental, and governance practices relate to ESG.
- Identify strengths and gaps in their sustainability approach.
- Translate assessment results into transparent, credible marketing messages.
- Enhance digital readiness by documenting actions in a structured online format.

#### How the Tool Works

The tool provides a questionnaire aligned with the UN Global Compact’s Ten Principles. SMEs complete the assessment online, receive feedback on their performance, and identify priority areas.

#### How SMEs Can Use It

- Register and access the assessment on the UN Global Compact platform.
- Complete the questionnaire, involving staff if needed.
- Review the scoring, noting high-performing areas and weak points.
- Select 2–3 strengths to communicate in their sustainability or marketing content.
- Set improvement actions for weaker areas and create a short progress narrative for digital channels (website, social media, newsletters).

#### Example - Fashion Retail

A small ethical clothing brand uses the tool to confirm strong performance in “Fair Labour Practices” and incorporates this into its communications:

*“All our garments are produced with verified fair labour conditions, aligned with the Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact.”*

They also use the online report to guide improvements, reinforcing both sustainability and digital literacy.

### B. ESG Navigator



**Sustainable Growth**  
NAVIGATOR

#### Learning Objectives

- Users will be able to:
- Understand ESG maturity levels and identify which aspects are most relevant to their business model.
- Connect ESG performance to long-term strategic decision-making.

- Integrate digital dashboards as part of ongoing sustainability monitoring.
- Build marketing messages around verified areas of progress.

### How the Tool Works

ESG Navigator provides a structured assessment across ESG domains, including a digital dashboard showing maturity levels from “Initial” to “Advanced”.

### How SMEs Can Use It

Create an online account and access the assessment dashboard.

- Complete the maturity assessment on environmental, social, and governance topics.
- Analyse dashboard results to identify the most material sustainability aspects.
- Use the dashboard visuals in internal discussions or external sustainability communications.
- Prioritise 1-2 areas to develop each year and document actions in a digital format.

### Example - Local Café Chain

A café identifies low maturity in “Energy Efficiency”. After replacing old appliances with energy-efficient models, they add a simple message to their website:

*“We reduced energy consumption by 18% this year - progress tracked using ESG Navigator.”*

The café benefits not only from sustainability gains but also from improved digital capability by adopting data-based decision making.

### C. SDG Action Manager (UN Global Compact & B Lab)



### Learning Objectives

Users will be able to:

- Understand the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for SMEs.
- Identify which SDGs are most meaningful for their business.
- Translate SDG priorities into marketing narratives and product storytelling.
- Develop digital skills by using an online assessment platform to track impact.

### How the Tool Works

The tool guides SMEs through the 17 SDGs, providing diagnostic questions and recommended actions aligned with global sustainability targets.

### How SMEs Can Use It

- Register for free and explore SDGs relevant to your sector.
- Complete the diagnostic, identifying SDGs where your SME already has an impact.
- Create a short SDG action plan with initiatives to implement or enhance.
- Choose 1-3 SDGs to highlight in marketing communication.
- Use SDG icons (available from the UN) to visually represent commitments.

### **Example - Printing Company**

A printing SME identifies strong alignment with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). They design new labels and web content showing:

*“We support SDG 12: All our printed materials use certified recycled paper.”*

They also highlight their climate-aware courier partnership as part of their SDG narrative.

### **D. EcoVadis Rating System**

# ecovadis

#### **Learning Objectives**

After using EcoVadis, SMEs will be able to:

- Understand how external validation strengthens credibility.
- Interpret sustainability scores and compare against sector benchmarks.
- Use certifications in marketing to build trust with clients.
- Improve digital readiness through interaction with online scorecards and evidence uploads.

#### **How the Tool Works**

EcoVadis evaluates companies on environmental, labour & human rights, ethics, and sustainable procurement. SMEs receive a scorecard (Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum).

#### **How SMEs Can Use It**

- Register on the platform and respond to the questionnaire.
- Upload evidence (policies, commitments, data).
- Receive a scorecard with detailed recommendations.
- Share badges on websites, LinkedIn, or tenders.
- Integrate the results into sustainability pages and annual updates.

### **Example - Metal Components Supplier**

A small manufacturing firm obtains a Silver EcoVadis rating. They add the badge to:

- Their homepage
- Tender applications
- Social media
- Customer newsletters

This enhances trust among B2B customers and differentiates them from competitors lacking verified sustainability credentials.

### **E. EU SME Sustainability Templates**



#### **Learning Objectives**

Users will be able to:

- Organise sustainability information using an EU-approved structure.

- Collect basic data needed for transparent communication.
- Prepare for future ESG reporting requirements.
- Develop digital skills by documenting sustainability indicators in accessible templates.

### How the Tool Works

These templates simplify sustainability reporting into short sections covering environment, workers, human rights, and governance. They are designed specifically for SMEs.

### How SMEs Can Use It

- Download the EU template (PDF or editable formats).
- Fill in basic indicators, starting with available data.
- Develop a short Sustainability Statement for your website or brochures.
- Update annually, keeping records in a digital format.
- Use the structured sections to avoid vague claims.

### Example - Hospitality Business

- A small hotel uses the EU template to create a two-page Sustainability Statement featuring:
  - Energy and water use
  - Waste reduction practices
  - Worker training data
  - Ethical procurement commitments

The hotel publishes the statement on its website and includes a QR code in reception for guests. This practice strengthens the hotel's credibility and supports transparency, without requiring a full CSR report.

## 4.7. Summary and Forward Outlook

ESG provides an accessible structure for understanding and improving sustainability practices in small businesses. Although SMEs face unique challenges, they also have unique strengths: flexibility, close relationships with communities, and strong local identities.

In the coming years, ESG expectations will continue to influence procurement, finance, customer loyalty, and training. SMEs that begin documenting and communicating their actions now will be better positioned for future opportunities (EFRAG, 2022).

- [European Green Deal - strategic roadmap for climate-neutral Europe](#)
- [Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive \(CSRD\)](#)
- [EU SME Sustainability Guide](#)
- [EU Taxonomy Overview](#)

### Self-Assessment Tool: Is Your Marketing Strategy Sustainable?

Rate each statement from 1 (not true) to 5 (very true).

#### Environmental

- We communicate our resource-saving actions clearly.
- We use reliable data when discussing environmental benefits.

## **Social**

- Our marketing reflects fair and inclusive values.
- We engage with our community and share these efforts publicly.

## **Governance**

- All sustainability claims are evidence-based.
- Our digital communication follows transparency and data-protection standards.

## **Result Interpretation**

- **Scores 24-30:**  
Your marketing strategy demonstrates strong ESG alignment. Keep documenting progress and consider using formal tools like the SDG Action Manager.
- **Scores 16-23:**  
You are on the right path. Strengthen your indicators, gather more evidence, and review communication consistency.
- **Scores 6-15:**  
ESG communication needs development. Start with simple steps: basic indicators, honest narratives, and the EU SME templates.

## 5. Re-Using and Recycling in Marketing

Re-use and recycling in marketing refer to a set of practices that reduce waste, extend product life, encourage material circularity, and promote resource efficiency. In simple terms, they are about **getting more value from materials instead of throwing them away**. For SMEs, this translates into using fewer resources, minimising packaging waste, encouraging product returns or refills, and communicating these efforts clearly and honestly.

### 5.1. Understanding: What Re-Use and Recycling Mean in Marketing

The concept goes beyond environmental impact - it strengthens brand identity, builds trust, and resonates strongly with today's sustainability-oriented consumers. Even modest actions, such as offering refillable containers or reusing shipping materials, can have tangible benefits for both business and planet (European Commission, 2020).

In marketing, re-use and recycling principles can be integrated into:

- Product design communication
- Packaging choices
- Advertising messages
- Brand storytelling
- Customer engagement strategies

### 5.2. Historical Context and Evolution

Circular economy principles have deep roots, though their strategic application in marketing is relatively recent.

#### Early beginnings

- Traditional societies often reused materials out of necessity, long before “recycling” was formalised.
- Early modern recycling appeared during wartime, when materials scarcity encouraged systematic reuse.

#### Late 20th century

- Environmental movements of the 1970s and 1980s brought recycling into policy debates (Porter & van der Linde, 1995).
- Packaging regulations began to target waste reduction.

#### 2000s onwards

- The EU Waste Framework Directive and Packaging & Packaging Waste Directive formalised recycling obligations.

- The concept of the **Circular Economy** emerged, emphasising looping materials back into production and consumption (European Commission, 2015).

### 2019-present

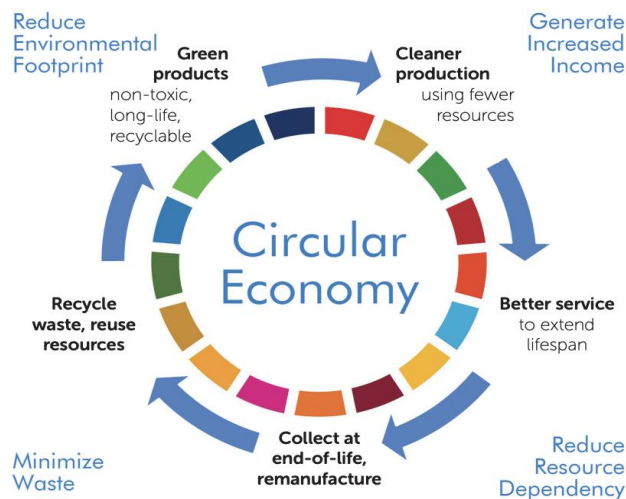
- The EU Circular Economy Action Plan under the European Green Deal accelerated requirements for sustainable packaging and waste reduction.
- Consumers began to expect businesses to minimise waste and communicate sustainability honestly (Eurobarometer, 2021).

Today, SMEs are essential actors: they are agile, local, and able to innovate quickly

## 5.3. Core Values Revisited: Ethical, Social and Environmental Principles

1. **Environmental Values:** Re-use and recycling reduce resource extraction, greenhouse gas emissions, and waste. They support ecosystems by lowering pollution and promoting regenerative resource flows.
2. **Social Values:** Circular practices empower consumers to participate in sustainability efforts (e.g., returning bottles or using refill stations). They also foster local jobs in repair, refurbishing, and waste management.
3. **Governance Values:** Good governance ensures transparent claims about recycling rates, packaging impacts, or take-back schemes. Ethical communication avoids greenwashing by providing evidence and clear instructions.

*Figure 1 – Circular economy value wheel. How circular strategies generate environmental, economic, and social value simultaneously.*



*Source: UNIDO – Circular Economy.*

## 5. 4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation

Re-use and recycling are powerful sustainability levers, but in marketing they fail when the operational reality is ignored. Many initiatives look great in campaigns and packaging redesign decks, yet underperform because the customer journey, logistics, and product constraints were not considered. The barriers below reflect the most common reasons circular marketing plans stall.

## **1) Reverse logistics complexity (returns, collection, and sorting)**

Re-use requires systems for collecting items back from customers or partners, often the hardest part. Common obstacles include:

- no collection infrastructure or too few drop-off points,
- high cost per item returned (especially for low-cost products),
- “dirty stream” problems: products returned mixed with non-eligible items,
- unclear responsibility for transport, sorting, and storage.

Marketing can promise a take-back scheme, but if the reverse logistics are weak, the experience becomes frustrating and damages trust.

## **2) Hygiene, safety, and regulatory constraints (especially in food/contact products)**

In many sectors, re-use touches safety and compliance boundaries:

- food-contact packaging and refill schemes require strict hygiene protocols,
- cosmetics and personal care may face contamination and tamper concerns,
- product returns intended for re-use can be restricted by safety rules.

If these realities are not integrated early, marketing campaigns can overpromise, triggering legal risk or backlash when the scheme is limited in practice.

### **3) Packaging performance trade-offs**

Designing for recyclability or re-use can conflict with other priorities: shelf life and barrier performance (moisture/oxygen protection),

- durability during shipping,
- leakage prevention,
- premium look and feel.

If performance drops, customer satisfaction and product loss can increase, undermining both sustainability and business outcomes. Strong circular design balances “end-of-life” goals with functionality.

## **4) Customer behavior design: convenience beats intention**

Customers may support sustainability in principle but abandon circular behaviors if they require extra effort. Typical friction points:

- unclear instructions (“where do I return this?” “what is recyclable here?”),
- return/refill points too far away,
- deposit systems that feel complicated,
- fear of inconvenience at checkout.

Circular marketing must be designed as a behavior change journey: reduce steps, provide simple cues, and reward participation (financially or emotionally).

## **5) Credibility and greenwashing risk in marketing claims**

Circularity claims can be misunderstood or challenged if they are imprecise. Risks include:

- saying “100% recyclable” when only facilities in some regions can recycle it,
- presenting recycled content claims without clear percentages or standards,
- implying “zero waste” without evidence.

Marketing teams need a claims checklist: define the claim, identify evidence, specify conditions (“where facilities exist”), and avoid absolute language.

## 6) Supply-chain limits and inconsistent material availability

Even if the marketing strategy is clear, execution can fail due to:

- limited availability of recycled materials or price volatility,
- supplier capability gaps (e.g., printing inks, adhesives affecting recycling),
- long lead times for packaging changes.

Marketing calendars are often faster than packaging redesign cycles, creating a mismatch between campaign launch and real-world readiness.

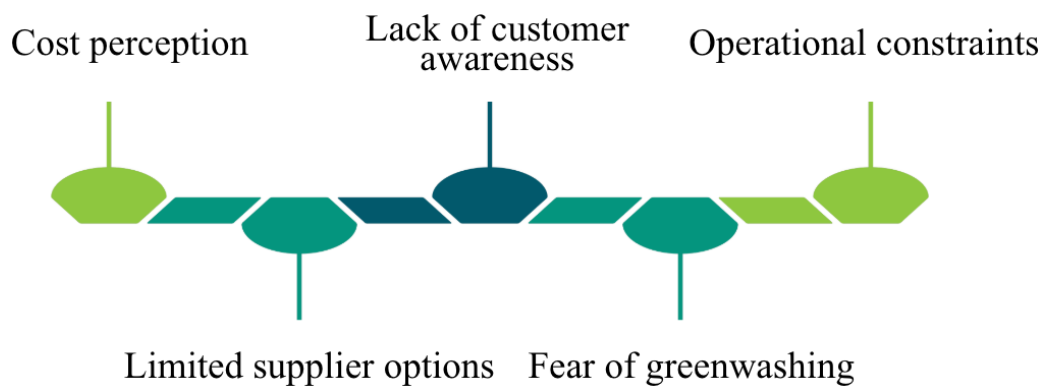
## 7) Internal misalignment: marketing vs operations

Circular initiatives require tight coordination across marketing, procurement, operations, quality, and legal. Failure modes include:

- marketing launching a take-back campaign before operations can process returns,
- procurement selecting materials for cost while marketing assumes sustainability features,
- legal reviewing claims too late.

A circular marketing plan works best when it is treated like a cross-functional product change, not a communications-only initiative.

*Figure 2 – Key barriers to circular marketing implementation. Operational, behavioural, and credibility barriers affecting circular initiatives.*



*Source: Author's own elaboration.*

### Practical takeaway

To overcome these barriers, circular marketing must be “operations-led and customer-designed”: build reverse logistics first, validate safety constraints, test packaging performance, design low-friction customer participation, and only then scale communications.

## 5.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact

### Environmental Metrics

- Percentage of packaging that is reusable or recyclable
- Amount of packaging material reduced
- Share of recycled content used in packaging
- Waste diverted from landfill

## Social Metrics

- Customer participation in reuse programs
- Feedback on circular initiatives
- Engagement in repair, refill, or take-back schemes

## Governance Metrics

- Accuracy of recycling information provided
- Compliance with applicable EU and national packaging rules
- Transparency of environmental claims

## 5.6 Useful Tools for SMEs

This section presents two high-value tools relevant to applying circular economy principles in marketing, packaging, and product communication: **COMPASS** and the **CIRCO Method**. Both tools support small businesses in reducing waste, rethinking packaging, and integrating circularity into marketing strategies.

### A. COMPASS by TRAYAK



### Learning Objectives

After engaging with COMPASS, learners will be able to:

- Assess the environmental impacts of packaging options.
- Compare materials across multiple sustainability indicators.
- Understand life-cycle assessment (LCA) basics and apply them in marketing narratives.

Strengthen digital readiness by interpreting data visualisations and uploading packaging information into an online assessment tool.

### How the Tool Works

The Tool evaluates packaging across environmental categories such as greenhouse gas emissions, water use, solid waste, and material sourcing. It provides colour-coded dashboards and impact charts.

### How SMEs Can Use It

- Create an account and enter packaging details (materials, weight, production location).
- Compare multiple packaging options using the tool's life-cycle indicators.
- Identify the most sustainable option, considering both environmental impact and cost.
- Document findings by exporting visual reports (e.g., spider diagrams, bar graphs).
- Use insights to redesign packaging or select more sustainable materials.
- Integrate results into marketing content (e.g., "50% lower CO<sub>2</sub> footprint compared to previous packaging - verified using COMPASS").

### Example - Artisan Biscuit Producer

A small organic bakery compares:

- Plastic pouch
- Recycled cardboard box
- Compostable film

The COMPASS charts reveal that recycled cardboard significantly reduces CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and waste.

The bakery updates its packaging and communicates:

*“Our new packaging reduces environmental impact by 37% (COMPASS assessment).”*

Digital readiness is strengthened as the team learns to manage digital evaluations and interpret LCA outputs.

## B. CIRCO Method



### Learning Objectives

After completing the CIRCO Method process, users will be able to:

- Apply circular economy principles to product, packaging, and marketing decisions.
- Identify opportunities to reduce, reuse, redesign, or recycle materials.
- Create customer-facing campaigns centred on circularity.
- Build digital readiness by using digital canvases, circular design tools, and documentation workflows.

### How the Tool Works

The CIRCO Method is a structured **circular design process** consisting of:

- **Initiate:** Analyse current products, services, packaging, and marketing flows.
- **Ideate:** Generate circular solutions (refill, repair, reuse, modular packaging).
- **Implement:** Convert ideas into prototypes, packaging redesigns, and marketing messages.

CIRCO is widely used in EU innovation hubs, circular labs, and SME transformation programmes.

### How SMEs Can Use It

- **Map material flows** through the CIRCO “Value Hill” (what becomes waste, what can circulate).
- **Identify circular opportunities** (refill models, reusable packaging, repair services).
- **Select one opportunity** that fits the business model and customer preferences.
- **Design circular features** such as return schemes or modular packaging.
- **Develop a marketing story**, e.g.:  
“How your bottle returns create zero waste.”  
“Designed for disassembly: less waste, more value.”
- **Document decisions** and create prototypes using CIRCO templates.
- **Communicate the impact** digitally (website, social media, in-store displays).

### Example - Handmade Cosmetics Brand

A small soap and cosmetics brand takes part in a CIRCO workshop. Through the circular design exercises, they identify that:

- Their glass jars can be washed and reused.
- Customers are open to a refill discount scheme.
- Packaging design can shift from coated labels to water-soluble labels.

The SME develops a circular marketing campaign:

*“Bring back your jar - refill and save. Designed with circularity in mind.”*

Within six months:

- 48% of customers participate in the return scheme.
- Packaging waste drops by one-third.
- Social media engagement increases due to sustainability storytelling.

Digital readiness grows because the business tracks returns, packaging flows, and customer participation using digital tools.

## 5.6. Practical Examples: Circular Economy in Advertising & Packaging

### Advertising

- QR-code campaigns replacing printed catalogues.
- Digital-first advertising reducing paper use.
- Using real stories (e.g., repair instead of replace) in social media content.
- Offering incentives for circular behaviour (“Bring your old device, get a discount”).
- Collaborations with local recycling initiatives to enhance brand visibility.

### Packaging

- Refillable containers for cosmetics, detergents, spices, oils.
- Recycled cardboard for bakery or café take-away packaging.
- Deposit-return systems for glass jars and bottles.
- Reusable shipping boxes for online SMEs.
- Modular packaging designed for disassembly.

## 5.7. Summary and Forward Outlook

Re-using and recycling principles help SMEs reduce waste, strengthen their market positioning, and engage customers in sustainability efforts. EU policy will continue to push circular packaging standards, making early adoption beneficial for competitiveness (European Commission, 2020). Small steps, like switching packaging materials, encouraging refills, promoting repairs, or redesigning advertising processes, can make a **big impact** on both environmental footprint and brand trust.

## 5.8. EU Resources for Further Learning and Practice

- EU Circular Economy Action Plan  
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0098>
- EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Legal Strategy  
[https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/packaging-waste\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/packaging-waste_en)
- EU Plastics Strategy  
[https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/plastics\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/plastics_en)
- European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform  
<https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform>

### Self-Assessment Tool: Is Your Marketing Strategy Circular?

Rate from **1 (not true)** to **5 (very true)**:

#### Environmental

- Our packaging includes recycled or reusable materials.

- Our advertising minimises paper or resource use.

### **Social**

- Customers can participate in reuse or return schemes.
- We communicate circular practices clearly and honestly.

### **Governance**

- We avoid vague claims and provide evidence for recycling rates.
- We track at least one circularity indicator.

### **Result Interpretation**

- **24–30 points:**  
Strong circularity performance. Consider adopting advanced tools like COMPASS or formal LCA methods.
- **16–23 points:**  
Good foundation. Improve data tracking and expand reuse or recycling initiatives.
- **6–15 points:**  
Circular marketing practices are limited. Begin with small, feasible actions such as switching packaging or reducing print materials.

## 6. EU Priorities Made Simple: Green Deal and SDGs

The **European Green Deal** and the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** are the two most important policy frameworks directing Europe's sustainability transition. They define how Europe plans to reach climate neutrality, reduce waste, protect biodiversity, promote social fairness, and support sustainable economic growth (European Commission, 2019; United Nations, 2015).

### 6.1. Understanding: What Are the Green Deal and SDGs - and Why Do They Matter?

For trainers, students, SMEs, and VET learners, these policies may seem abstract. However, they directly shape **funding programmes, training priorities, market trends, and local sustainability efforts**. Understanding them enables educators and SMEs to:

- align local projects with EU goals
- communicate their sustainability actions more clearly
- respond to market and policy expectations
- prepare for future job skills and innovation pathways

The goal of this chapter is simple: to make big EU priorities understandable, concrete, and actionable at the local level.

### 6.2. Historical Context and Evolution

#### Origins of the SDGs

The SDGs were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 as part of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** (UN, 2015). They include **17 interconnected goals** such as Climate Action, Responsible Consumption, Quality Education, and Gender Equality.

#### European Green Deal Timeline

The European Green Deal was launched in **2019** as the EU's strategy to become the first climate-neutral continent by **2050**. It includes key actions:

- **EU Climate Law** (establishes 2050 neutrality target)
- **Fit for 55 Package** (reducing emissions by 55% by 2030)
- **Circular Economy Action Plan**
- **Biodiversity Strategy**

- **Farm to Fork Strategy**

### **2.3 How These Frameworks Converge**

The SDGs provide a *global* vision; the Green Deal provides a *European* action plan. Local communities and SMEs implement these visions through:

- sustainable product design
- reduced waste strategies
- social responsibility
- renewable energy use
- circular economy initiatives

## **6.3. Core Values Revisited: Ethical, Social, and Environmental Principles**

### **Environmental Principles**

Both the Green Deal and SDGs promote reducing environmental impact through:

- lower emissions
- less waste
- renewable energy
- protection of biodiversity
- circular resource flows

### **Social Principles**

Sustainability is not only “green”, but also social. Core values include:

- inclusive education
- fair work
- equal opportunities
- healthy, resilient communities
- youth empowerment

### **Governance Principles**

Good governance underpins EU sustainability work through:

- transparency
- participation
- evidence-based decision-making
- responsible communication
- public accountability

These values align strongly with sustainable marketing: local communication must be honest, evidence-based, and socially responsible.

## **6.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation**

EU priorities like the Green Deal and the SDGs provide powerful direction, but many educators, youth workers, SMEs, and local actors struggle to apply them in practical projects. The main barriers are not ideological; they’re problems of translation: from high-level frameworks into concrete actions, learning outcomes, and credible communications. The barriers below focus on what most often blocks effective alignment.

## **Policy literacy: the language is dense and the ecosystem is broad**

EU frameworks use technical terms, acronyms, and layered strategies. Newcomers often struggle with:

- distinguishing political vision from legal obligations,
- understanding which documents are “strategy” vs “law” vs “guidance”,
- keeping track of evolving initiatives and updates.

Without policy literacy, projects risk using EU terms incorrectly or choosing priorities that don't fit their actual scope.

## **Finding the “right” EU programme or reference point**

Many projects cite EU priorities but fail to connect to the right mechanisms:

- confusing funding programmes with policy frameworks,
- referencing the wrong EU instrument for the topic (or an outdated one),
- aligning to a general priority without identifying the relevant targets and indicators.

The result is a weak rationale section and a project design that doesn't “talk the same language” as evaluators or stakeholders.

## **Translating frameworks into concrete training or project outcomes**

The SDGs and the Green Deal are broad. The real challenge is turning them into:

- clear learning objectives (knowledge, skills, attitudes),
- measurable outputs (curricula, toolkits, pilots),
- practical tasks participants can complete.

Projects often stay at the level of awareness-raising, missing behavioral or institutional change. This makes outcomes hard to assess, sustain, or scale.

## **Overgeneralization: everything gets mapped to everything**

A common “compliance” pattern is mapping a project to too many SDGs or Green Deal goals. This creates confusion and reduces credibility:

- the project seems unfocused,
- impact claims become inflated,
- monitoring becomes impossible.

Better alignment is narrower and deeper: select a small number of goals and show clear contribution pathways.

## **Misuse of EU branding and “EU-washing” risk**

There is a reputational and sometimes legal risk when organisations:

- use EU logos incorrectly,
- imply endorsement (“EU-approved”, “EU certified”) without basis,
- present generic sustainability work as “Green Deal-compliant” without evidence.

This can undermine trust and can cause compliance issues in funded projects. Communications should be accurate, precise, and properly attributed.

## **Measuring impact with the wrong indicators**

Projects often default to easy metrics (number of participants, likes, downloads) rather than indicators that show real contribution:

- changes in behavior, practices, or decisions,
- adoption by institutions,
- improvements tracked against recognized indicator sets.

When monitoring is weak, the project narrative becomes “activities delivered” rather than “change achieved”.

### **Stakeholder mismatch and local relevance gaps**

EU priorities are designed to be broad, but application must be contextual. Projects fail when: the chosen priorities don’t match local needs or participant realities,

- beneficiaries cannot see how frameworks affect daily choices,
- Stakeholders (schools, SMEs, municipalities) aren’t involved early.

Successful projects translate EU priorities into locally meaningful examples and co-created actions.

### **Practical takeaway**

Overcoming these barriers requires a “translation method”: build basic policy literacy, choose a small number of relevant goals, convert them into measurable outcomes, use correct referencing and branding, and evaluate impact with meaningful indicators—not just activity counts.

## **6.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact**

The Green Deal and the SDGs both promote **evidence-based monitoring**. Simple indicators that SMEs and training organisations can track include:

### **Environmental Indicators**

- CO<sub>2</sub> reduction (kg per month/year)
- Energy savings (%)
- Waste reduction or recycling rate (%)
- Use of eco-labelled products

### **Social Indicators**

- Number of learners involved in sustainability education<sup>9</sup>
- Staff participation in green training
- Volunteer or community engagement hours

### **Governance Indicators**

- Transparent communication practices
- Use of recognised sustainability tools
- Alignment of actions with SDGs

## **6.4 Useful Tools for SMEs and Educators**

This section explains four EU-originated or EU-relevant tools that support educators, SMEs, and learners in linking local sustainability practices to the European policy context.

## A. SDG Dashboard



### Learning Objectives

Learners will be able to: Understand the 17 SDGs; Identify which goals are most relevant to their sector or local context; Use dashboards to interpret sustainability data visually; and Apply insights to teaching, marketing, or organisational planning.

### How It Works

The Dashboard presents worldwide indicators, such as energy use, gender equality, waste management, and responsible consumption.

### How SMEs and Trainers Can Use It

- **Select an SDG** relevant to your activity (e.g., SDG12 on responsible consumption).
- **Explore indicators** (e.g., recycling rates, resource productivity).
- **Compare EU and national performance** to understand gaps.
- **Use the visuals** in lessons, presentations, or sustainability communication.
- **Translate indicators** into local actions.

### Example - Social Enterprise

A social enterprise teaching eco-design uses the dashboard to justify its focus on circular materials: *“Portugal is below the EU average in resource productivity - here’s how our design workshops help.”*

## B. EU Green Deal Communication Documents



### Learning Objectives

Learners will: Understand how to communicate EU sustainability values clearly; Recognise approved messages, visuals, and narratives aligned with the Green Deal; Build digital readiness through downloadable templates and materials; and Promote local projects using EU-aligned language.

### How It Works

The toolkit provides communication templates, infographics, messaging guidelines, and storytelling elements specifically designed to support communication about the Green Deal.

### How SMEs and Educators Can Use It

- Download templates (leaflets, icons, communication guides).
- Adapt messages to your local context or SME communication.
- Use EU visuals to strengthen credibility.
- Communicate your actions using approved key messages.
- Show alignment with Green Deal priorities (e.g., renewable energy, circularity).

### Example - Local Repair Café

A repair café uses the toolkit templates to design digital posters for community events: *“Supporting the European Green Deal: Repair, Reuse, Reconnect.”*

## C. SDG Compass



### Learning Objectives

Learners will: Understand how to align business strategy with SDGs; Identify priority SDGs for their organisation; Use indicators to measure progress; and Strengthen digital readiness using online worksheets and tools.

### How It Works

The SDG Compass guides users through a 5-step process:

- Understand the SDGs
- Define priorities
- Set goals
- Integrate
- Report and communicate

### How SMEs Can Use It

- **Conduct a mapping exercise:** which SDGs match your activities?
- **Choose 2-3 SDGs** most relevant to customers or learners.
- **Set measurable goals** (energy savings, waste reduction, inclusion).
- **Integrate into business strategy** and digital communication.
- **Report progress** through stories, indicators, or dashboards.

### Example - Sustainable Bakery

**A bakery maps its actions to SDG12 and SDG13, promoting:**

“Reducing waste through donation initiatives - aligned with SDG12.”

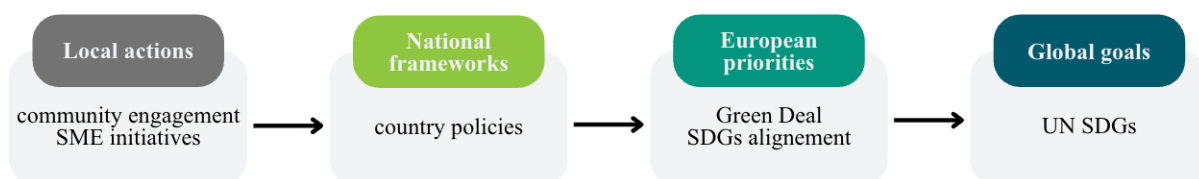
## 6.6. Summary and Forward Outlook

Understanding EU sustainability priorities empowers SMEs, trainers, and learners to: connect local initiatives with European goals; strengthen sustainability communication; access EU funding more effectively; and make informed choices about training and resource use

- contribute to Europe’s collective climate and social goals

The future will bring more EU policies supporting circularity, social inclusion, digital transformation, and climate-neutrality. Early adoption benefits local businesses and educators alike.

*Figure 3 – From local practice to EU-wide impact.  
How local sustainability actions contribute to broader European goals.*



*Source: Author’s own elaboration.*

## 6.7. EU Resources for Further Learning and Practice

- EU Green Deal overview  
[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en)
- SDG resources (UN)  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- Circular Economy Action Plan  
[https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/circular-economy\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/circular-economy_en)
- Fit for 55 package  
[https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/delivering-european-green-deal\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/delivering-european-green-deal_en)

## 6.8. Self-Assessment Tool: Are You Linking Local Practice to EU Priorities?

Rate 1 (not true) to 5 (very true):

### Environmental

- Our activities support SDG or Green Deal environmental goals.
- We measure at least one environmental indicator.

### Social

- We integrate social sustainability in our projects or teaching.
- We use examples from EU programmes.

### Governance

- We communicate sustainability transparently.
- We use at least one EU-aligned tool.

### Result Interpretation

- **24-30 points:**  
Strong EU alignment - excellent integration of Green Deal and SDG concepts.
- **16-23 points:**  
Good foundation - continue exploring tools and indicators.
- **6-15 points:**  
Limited EU integration - begin with simple steps using the SDG Dashboard or the Erasmus+ portal.

## **7. Telling Green Stories**

### **7.1. Understanding – What Is “Green Storytelling” and Why It Matters?**

Green storytelling is the practice of using narrative techniques to communicate sustainability values, practices, and impacts in a way that is relatable, emotional, and engaging for diverse audiences. It goes beyond traditional promotional messages by presenting real actions, authentic people, and meaningful environmental efforts in a compelling format.

Unlike technical reports or formal sustainability statements, storytelling creates a personal connection by showing how sustainability is embedded in everyday life. While data and statistics inform, stories inspire. They help audiences understand not only what a business does, but why it matters.

For SMEs, this approach provides a cost-effective way to build trust and differentiate from competitors. For VET learners, it offers a practical way to understand sustainability as a lived experience rather than an abstract concept.

Green storytelling transforms sustainability from a distant idea into something visible, relatable, and actionable.

### **7.2. Historical Context and Evolution**

Storytelling has been used for centuries to share knowledge, shape values, and build communities. In marketing, it has long served as a tool for creating emotional connections and brand identity.

In the late 20th century, as environmental awareness increased, storytelling began to incorporate sustainability themes. Early green marketing focused mainly on product features, such as recyclable materials or energy efficiency. However, these messages often lacked emotional engagement and failed to change behaviour.

With the rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and global initiatives such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, communication shifted toward purpose-driven narratives. Businesses began telling stories not only about products, but about values, impact, and responsibility.

Today, in the digital era, storytelling has become more interactive and transparent. Consumers expect authenticity, and sustainability communication must reflect real actions rather than

idealised claims. Green storytelling is now a strategic tool for building trust and long-term engagement.

### 7.3. Core Values Revisited: Ethics and Impact Through Stories

Effective green storytelling is built on key values that ensure credibility and impact.

- **Transparency – Demonstrating accountability.** Transparency means being open and honest about sustainability practices, including both achievements and ongoing challenges. In practice, businesses can share real data, explain their processes, and communicate progress over time. This builds trust and avoids the risk of greenwashing.
- **Community – Highlighting shared experiences** Sustainability is a collective effort. Stories that involve local communities, partnerships, or customer participation create stronger emotional connections. For example, a business may highlight how it collaborates with local suppliers or engages customers in sustainability initiatives.
- **Responsibility – Acting as part of the solution**
- Organisations play an active role in addressing environmental and social challenges. Stories that demonstrate responsibility show how businesses take concrete steps to reduce impact and contribute to positive change.
- **Empowerment – Encouraging action.** A strong story motivates others to act. By sharing practical examples, tips, or customer experiences, organisations can inspire audiences to adopt more sustainable behaviours in their own lives.

These values help transform communication into meaningful engagement, where sustainability is not only explained but experienced.

### 7.4. Barriers and Challenges in Implementation

Despite its potential, green storytelling can be difficult to implement, especially for SMEs and educators with limited resources.

One common challenge is the lack of content creation skills. Developing engaging stories often requires abilities such as writing, visual communication, or digital content production. Many organisations may not feel confident in these areas.

Another barrier is the perception that sustainability is not engaging enough. Some businesses believe that environmental topics are too technical or complex to interest audiences. However, even simple actions can become powerful stories when connected to real people and real experiences.

Fear of greenwashing is also a significant concern. Organisations may hesitate to communicate sustainability efforts if they lack certifications or worry about being perceived as misleading. This can result in silence instead of honest communication.

Finally, storytelling can be time-consuming. Gathering information, documenting actions, and creating content require time and effort, which may be difficult for small teams.

Addressing these challenges requires a simple and realistic approach. Starting with small stories, using existing resources, and focusing on authenticity rather than perfection can make storytelling more accessible and effective.

## **7.5. Indicators and Metrics for Measuring Impact**

To evaluate the effectiveness of green storytelling, SMEs and trainers can use a combination of qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Engagement metrics, such as views, shares, and comments on digital content, help assess whether stories attract attention and resonate with audiences.

Behavioural changes provide deeper insight. Increased demand for eco-friendly products, participation in sustainability initiatives, or changes in learner attitudes indicate that storytelling is influencing real actions.

Feedback and testimonials are also valuable. Customer reviews, learner reflections, or community responses reveal how stories are perceived and whether they are considered credible and meaningful.

Internal impact should also be considered. Employees or learners may become more engaged and motivated when sustainability values are clearly communicated through storytelling.

A balanced approach combining data and personal insights offers a comprehensive understanding of storytelling impact and supports continuous improvement.

## **7.6. Mini Exercise – Creating Your Green Story**

Choose one sustainability action from your business, organisation, or local community.

- What is the story behind this action?
- Who is involved?
- What problem does it address?
- How does it create value for people or the environment?

Try to describe this story in 3–4 sentences using simple and clear language.

This exercise helps transform sustainability actions into engaging and authentic narratives that can be used in communication and training.

## **7.7. Summary and Forward Outlook**

Green storytelling offers a unique and powerful way to bridge the gap between sustainability practices and public understanding. By translating environmental actions into relatable narratives, SMEs and VET trainers can engage audiences on a deeper level, fostering trust, awareness, and shared responsibility. In this chapter, we explored what green storytelling is, how it has evolved over time, and why it matters in the context of modern communication. We also examined how core values like transparency, responsibility, community, and empowerment anchor effective storytelling. These values ensure that stories do not simply describe change but invite others to join it.

Yet, while the benefits of green storytelling are clear, its implementation is not always straightforward. SMEs, trainers, and learners may face practical and strategic challenges, such as limited skills in content creation, fear of greenwashing accusations, or the perception that sustainability stories lack excitement. These obstacles, however, are not insurmountable. They can be mitigated through collaborative learning, gradual experimentation, and a commitment to authenticity over perfection.

Looking ahead, the role of green storytelling is likely to grow in importance. As European policies such as the Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals continue to shape public expectations and corporate standards, the pressure to communicate sustainability clearly and honestly will increase. At the same time, new digital tools, storytelling platforms, and community networks are emerging, offering affordable and creative opportunities for SMEs and educators to share their voices and inspire change.

The future of green storytelling lies not only in sharing information but in sparking meaningful connections—between businesses and consumers, teachers and learners, and people and the planet. Even the smallest stories, when told with sincerity and purpose, can help reshape values, influence actions, and contribute to a more sustainable society. Whether used in marketing, education, or community engagement, green storytelling is an essential tool for building the kind of future we want to live in.

### **Self-Assessment Tool**

Is Your Marketing Strategy Sustainable?

#### **(Reflective Exercise for Learners)**

This self-assessment helps learners reflect on how well their marketing or communication activities align with the principles of green storytelling, sustainability values, and ethical communication.

#### **Reflection Instructions**

Read each statement and rate yourself honestly:

- **1 = Not at all**
- **2 = To a small extent**
- **3 = To some extent**
- **4 = To a large extent**
- **5 = Fully / consistently**

#### **A. Authenticity & Transparency**

- Our marketing stories are based on real actions, not just intentions.
- We openly communicate both successes and challenges related to sustainability.
- We avoid exaggerated or vague environmental claims.

#### **B. Values & Ethics**

- Our stories clearly reflect values such as responsibility, fairness, and care for the environment.
- Sustainability is presented as a long-term commitment, not a trend.
- Ethical considerations guide how and what we communicate.

#### **C. Human & Community Focus**

- Our stories highlight people (employees, customers, partners), not only products.
- We show how our actions benefit the local community or wider society.
- We encourage collaboration and shared responsibility through our messaging.

#### **D. Empowerment & Impact**

- Our communication motivates audiences to act more sustainably themselves.
- We provide practical ideas, examples, or inspiration—not just information.
- We observe positive reactions (engagement, feedback, behavior change) from our stories.

**Total Score:** \_\_\_\_ / 60

### **7.9. Mini Test – Ask Yourself**

Use this short quiz to reinforce understanding of green storytelling principles.

#### **1. Which element is essential for green storytelling?**

- a) Perfect sustainability performance
- b) Emotional language without evidence
- c) Authentic stories based on real practices
- d) High marketing budget

#### **2. Why is transparency important in sustainability communication?**

- a) It avoids legal responsibility
- b) It builds trust and credibility
- c) It makes stories more technical
- d) It replaces sustainability action

#### **3. Green storytelling is most effective when it focuses on:**

- a) Certifications only
- b) Products and prices
- c) People, values, and real impact
- d) Visual design alone

#### **4. What is a key risk of poor sustainability communication?**

- a) Reduced creativity
- b) Greenwashing accusations
- c) Lower production costs
- d) Less audience feedback

**Correct answers:** 1-c | 2-b | 3-c | 4-b

#### **Result Interpretation & Guidance**

12–25 points | *Early Stage*

Your marketing strategy shows limited integration of sustainability storytelling.

What to do next:

- Start documenting small sustainability actions.
- Focus on honesty rather than perfection.
- Practice telling one simple, real story (e.g. a change in packaging, sourcing, or daily habits).

26–45 points | *Developing*

You are on the right path, but your strategy may lack consistency or depth.

What to do next:

- Strengthen the link between values and everyday practices.
- Include community voices or learner/customer perspectives.

**Reflect regularly: Why are we telling this story—and for whom?**

46–60 points | *Advanced / Sustainable*

Your marketing approach reflects strong green storytelling principles.

What to do next:

- Measure impact (engagement, behavior change, feedback).
- Empower others to share their own sustainability stories.
- Use storytelling strategically to support long-term sustainability goals.

## **8. Understanding Consumers: Barriers and Opportunities**

Even as awareness of environmental issues increases, many consumers struggle to translate their intentions into action. This disconnects—often referred to as the “value–action gap”—describes the difference between what people believe and how they behave in practice.

### **8.1. Understanding – Why Consumers Don’t Always Choose Green**

While many individuals support sustainability in principle, everyday decisions are influenced by practical factors such as price, convenience, time constraints, and habits. Sustainable choices are often perceived as less accessible, more expensive, or more complex than conventional alternatives.

Trust also plays a key role. In an environment where greenwashing is common, consumers may hesitate to rely on sustainability claims if they are unclear or unsupported by evidence. This uncertainty reduces confidence and discourages behaviour change.

For SMEs and VET educators, understanding these dynamics is essential. Sustainable products and services are more likely to be adopted when they are easy to access, clearly explained, and aligned with consumers’ everyday realities.

### **8.2. Historical Context and Evolution**

Consumer awareness of environmental issues began to grow in the 1960s and 1970s, when public concern shifted toward pollution, resource use, and public health. Early initiatives focused mainly on education and regulation, with limited impact on consumer behaviour.

In the 1980s and 1990s, green consumerism emerged as businesses introduced eco-friendly products such as organic food and energy-efficient appliances. Although interest increased, adoption remained limited due to price sensitivity and lack of trust.

In the early 2000s, sustainability became more closely linked to global challenges such as climate change. Behavioural research highlighted the importance of psychological and social factors, including identity, emotions, and social norms, in shaping consumer decisions.

Today, digital media and global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the EU Green Deal influence how sustainability is communicated and perceived. Consumers are more informed, but also more critical, expecting transparency and real impact rather than symbolic claims.

### 8.3. Core Values Revisited: Reframing the Consumer Relationship

Effective sustainable marketing requires building relationships based on trust, relevance, and shared responsibility.

- **Empathy – Understanding real-life constraints.** Consumers often face financial limitations, time pressure, and established habits. Recognising these realities allows businesses to design solutions that support rather than judge consumer choices.
- **Clarity – Communicating simply and transparently.** Sustainability concepts can be complex. Clear language and practical examples help consumers understand the benefits of sustainable options and make informed decisions.
- **Inclusion – Making sustainability accessible.** Sustainable solutions should be available to different groups, including those with limited resources. Offering affordable options and inclusive communication strengthens engagement and adoption.
- **Shared responsibility – Encouraging collaboration.** Sustainability is a collective effort. When businesses and consumers work together, trust increases and long-term behavioural change becomes more achievable.

These values help transform sustainability from an abstract concept into a practical and inclusive experience.

### 8.4. Barriers and Challenges in Consumer Adoption

Several key barriers influence consumer behaviour and limit the adoption of sustainable choices.

- **Perceived cost.** Eco-friendly products are often seen as more expensive, even when long-term value may be equal or higher. This perception discourages consumers with limited budgets.
- **Habits and convenience.** People tend to rely on familiar routines. Changing behaviour requires effort, and sustainable options may not always be easily accessible or convenient.
- **Lack of trust.** Unclear or misleading sustainability claims reduce consumer confidence. Without verifiable information, consumers may hesitate to choose green alternatives.
- **Social influence.** Behaviour is shaped by social environments. If sustainability is not widely practiced within a community, individuals may feel less motivated to adopt it.
- **Emotional distance.** Environmental issues are often perceived as distant or abstract. When the impact of individual actions is not visible, consumers may not feel that their choices make a difference.

Understanding these barriers allows SMEs and educators to design solutions that reduce friction and make sustainable behaviour easier and more attractive.

### 8.5. Indicators and Metrics for Evaluating Consumer Engagement

To assess how effectively they support consumer adoption of sustainable products or services, SMEs and trainers can use a balanced set of indicators.

Customer feedback provides insights into perceptions, motivations, and concerns related to sustainability. This feedback can be collected through surveys, reviews, or direct interaction.

Sales performance allows comparison between eco-friendly and conventional products, helping to identify trends and measure market acceptance.

Repeat purchase or subscription behaviour reflects customer satisfaction and long-term commitment to sustainable choices.

Engagement with educational or communication activities, such as workshops or campaigns, indicates the level of consumer interest and awareness.

Behavioural surveys conducted before and after exposure to sustainability initiatives help measure changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour.

These indicators can also be used to monitor progress in reducing barriers and strengthening trust over time.

## 8.6. Quick Reflection – Reducing Consumer Barriers

Think about one green product or service from your organisation or local market.

- What is the main barrier for consumers (price, trust, convenience, habit)?
- What small change could reduce this barrier?
- How could this change be communicated clearly to customers?

This reflection supports SMEs and learners in translating consumer insights into practical improvements.

## 8.7. Summary and Forward Outlook

Understanding consumer behavior is central to building a green economy. It shows us that sustainability is not simply a matter of offering the “right” products, but about designing meaningful and inclusive solutions that reflect real-life constraints and emotional needs.

The future of sustainable consumption lies in supporting—not pressuring—people to make green choices. This may involve adjusting business models, providing clearer information, or inviting consumers to co-create solutions with local businesses and communities.

SMEs and trainers play a vital role in this transition. By empathetically addressing consumer barriers and designing services that align with everyday life, they can transform sustainability from a distant ideal into a practical, rewarding experience for everyone.

### Mini Test – Ask Yourself

The following short quiz helps learners consolidate key concepts from Chapter 8 and test their understanding of sustainable consumer engagement. It can be used individually or as a group discussion activity.

#### 1. What is the “intention–behavior gap”?

- a. Consumers lack information about sustainability
- b. Consumers value sustainability but do not always act accordingly
- c. Sustainable products are unavailable

- d. Sustainability only applies to large companies

**Correct answer: b**

**2. Which factor most often discourages consumers from choosing green products?**

- a. Lack of interest
- b. Excessive choice
- c. Perceived cost, inconvenience, or lack of trust
- d. Too much regulation

**Correct answer: c**

**3. Why is emotional connection important in sustainable marketing?**

- a. It increases guilt
- b. It replaces factual information
- c. It makes sustainability personally meaningful and relatable
- d. It lowers product quality

**Correct answer: c**

**4. Which practice best helps prevent greenwashing?**

- a. Using trendy sustainability terms
- b. Offering discounts
- c. Transparent, evidence-based communication
- d. Emotional storytelling only

**Correct answer: c**

**5. What role do SMEs and educators play in sustainable consumption?**

- a. Selling green products only
- b. Informing consumers and supporting behavior change
- c. Regulating markets
- d. Shifting responsibility entirely to individuals

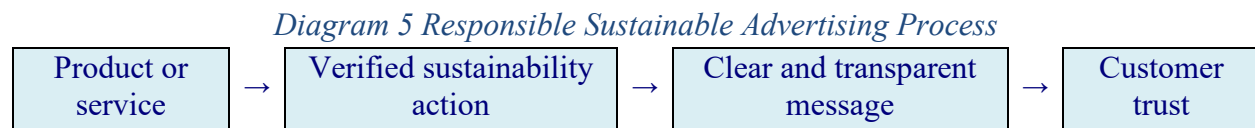
**Correct answer: b**

## 9: Green Advertising and Eco-Packaging

Green advertising and eco-packaging focus on reducing the environmental impact of marketing communications and product presentation while maintaining clarity, credibility, and value for consumers.

### 9.1. Understanding the Green Advertising and Eco-Packaging

Green advertising promotes products and services by highlighting genuine environmental benefits, responsible production processes, and sustainable values. Eco-packaging refers to the design and use of packaging materials that minimise waste, reduce resource consumption, and support reuse, recycling, or composting.



For SMEs and VET learners, this topic is particularly relevant because advertising and packaging are often the most visible parts of a brand. Even small changes—such as switching to recycled materials, reducing packaging size, or choosing digital-first advertising—can significantly reduce environmental footprints and improve brand trust.

### 9.2. Historical Context and Evolution

Traditionally, advertising prioritised visibility, frequency, and persuasion, often relying on printed materials, plastic packaging, and short-lived promotional items. Environmental considerations were largely absent until the late 20th century, when growing awareness of pollution, waste, and climate change began to influence consumer expectations.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the first forms of “green marketing” emerged, often focusing on single attributes such as recyclable packaging or reduced energy use. Over time, consumers became more informed and critical, leading to stronger scrutiny of environmental claims. This shift pushed businesses and regulators to demand transparency and measurable impact.

Today, green advertising and eco-packaging are closely linked to the circular economy, ESG criteria, and EU sustainability policies. The focus has moved from isolated claims to holistic approaches that consider the entire lifecycle of products and communications.

#### Learning Outcomes and Competence Development

After completing this chapter, learners and SMEs will be able to:

- **Knowledge:** Explain the principles of green advertising and eco-packaging; and Identify key compliance and credibility risks linked to environmental claims.
- **Skills:** Evaluate whether an advertising claim risks greenwashing; Identify at least one packaging improvement that reduces environmental impact; Select appropriate indicators to measure advertising and packaging performance; and Assess whether packaging choices align with local waste infrastructure.
- **Competence:** Make informed decisions balancing cost, sustainability, and credibility; Integrate lifecycle thinking into marketing and packaging strategy; Apply sustainability improvements progressively rather than aiming for perfection.

### 9.3. Core Values Revisited: A Deeper Dive

Green advertising and eco-packaging are grounded in three interconnected values:

- **Environmental responsibility** – reducing waste, emissions, and resource use across advertising channels and packaging solutions.
- **Ethical communication** – ensuring that sustainability claims are accurate, verifiable, and easy for consumers to understand.
- **Social value creation** – encouraging responsible consumption and supporting wider community and environmental goals.

For SMEs, embracing these values strengthens credibility and long-term competitiveness. For learners, it reinforces the idea that marketing is not only a commercial activity but also a social and environmental one.

#### Checklist – Responsible Green Advertising

Before publishing sustainability claims, SMEs should verify:

- Is the environmental claim supported by evidence?
- Is the language clear and specific?
- Can the claim be explained to customers if asked?
- Does the claim avoid vague terms like “eco-friendly” or “green”?
- Is the information consistent across website, packaging, and social media?

### 9.4. Implementation Barriers: Why is it Difficult?

Even with the best intentions, businesses face four primary challenges when adopting green advertising and eco-packaging:

- **Financial Barriers:** There is a widespread belief that sustainable inputs are costlier. For SMEs, the upfront investment in redesigning packaging can seem risky.
- **Operational Knowledge:** A lack of technical expertise prevents many from switching to eco-friendly alternatives. Learners and SMEs often need better signposting to trusted suppliers.
- **Credibility Risks:** Navigating the line between promotion and "greenwashing" is difficult. Exaggerated environmental claims can destroy consumer trust and result in penalties.
- **Systemic Limitations:** Packaging choices are often limited by local waste infrastructure. If a region cannot process compostable plastics, using them becomes ineffective.

Addressing these challenges is not about perfection, but progress. It requires realistic goal-setting and a step-by-step approach supported by clear industry guidance. Today the amount of

information and tools existing online is enormous. To overcome these barriers, SMEs and VET learners can utilize specific digital tools that simplify sustainability, verify claims, and optimize design.

To tackle the specific financial barrier that "sustainable inputs are costlier" and the risk of "upfront investment," the most effective tools for an SME are On-Demand Packaging Platforms and Palletization/Optimization Software.

Cape Pack by Esko is an example of an accessible tool to be used. Many SMEs believe sustainable material is expensive (e.g., recycled cardboard costs more per sheet than virgin plastic). Cape Pack is a software that optimizes how products fit into boxes and how boxes fit onto pallets.

- Shipping Savings > Material Costs: By mathematically calculating the smallest possible box for your product ("right-sizing"), it reduces the amount of material used and, crucially, the Dimensional Weight (the "air" you pay to ship).
- The Financial Argument: Even if the eco-material costs 10% more, this software often reduces shipping volume by 20-30%. Since shipping is usually more expensive than the box itself, the *total* cost goes down, debunking the myth that going green is net-expensive.

The operational knowledge is another challenge faced when trying to adopt more sustainable marketing strategies. The "Search Engine" for Trusted Suppliers: SourceGreenPackaging is a platform that helps finding verified suppliers without needing to be an expert in certification.

SMEs often struggle to verify if a supplier's "biodegradable" claim is true. SourceGreenPackaging is a global B2B marketplace (similar to Alibaba, but strictly for sustainable goods) that does the technical vetting for you.

- Vetted "Signposting": Every supplier on the platform is pre-vetted. You can filter by specific needs like "Plastic-Free," "Home Compostable," or "FSC Certified."
- Direct Access: It connects you directly with manufacturers who accept smaller orders (SME-friendly), removing the need for a middleman consultant to explain the technical specs.

Credibility Risks or simply said the fear of accidental greenwashing and the resulting legal or reputation damage is something else that should be taken into account when implementing the transition to be sustainable. An example for existing online tool that could help you with this is the "Spell-checker" for Greenwashing: The Greenwashing Compass. A quick, free check of your marketing text before you publish. How it tackles the risk: Just as you use a spell-checker to avoid typos, this AI-powered tool (often based on the "10 Principles of Greenwashing") analyzes your draft text.

- What it does: You paste your ad copy or product description into the tool. It highlights vague words like "eco-friendly," "green," or "natural" that trigger legal red flags.
- The Benefit: It forces you to be specific. Instead of letting you say "Eco-friendly bottle," it prompts you to say "Bottle made from 50% recycled post-consumer plastic." This specificity is your best legal defense.

And lastly to navigate the barrier of **Systemic Limitations** (where packaging that *looks* eco-friendly ends up in landfill because local facilities can't process it), you need tools that map **theoretical design** against **real-world infrastructure**.

The "Global Infrastructure Map": Recyda is such a tool. Infrastructure varies wildly by border. A pouch recyclable in Germany might be non-recyclable in France. Recyda is a software platform that acts as a "recyclability checkmate."

- Country-Specific Analysis: You input your packaging specs (material, additives, cap type), and the tool scores its recyclability against the *actual* laws and waste infrastructure of specific countries.
- Why it helps: It prevents you from launching a "Compostable" campaign in a market that incinerates compostables, saving you from wasting money on features the local system cannot use.

The suggested tools are just a small part of the resources available online that could help with facing all the barriers pinpointed above.

## 9.5. Indicators and Metrics: How to Quantify Impact

To move beyond vague goals, it is crucial to use specific indicators to measure the environmental performance of advertising and packaging.

- Material Efficiency (Light-weighting): Tracking the reduction in packaging weight (in grams) per product. *Why? Lighter packaging means lower shipping emissions and less waste.*
- Recycled Content Ratio: Calculating the share of recycled materials used compared to virgin materials. *Goal: Increase the % of Post-Consumer Recycled (PCR) plastic or paper.*
- Print-to-Digital Shift: Measuring the reduction in physical marketing materials (flyers, catalogs). *Impact: Reduces paper waste and chemical ink usage.*
- Sustainability Perception Score: Using surveys to ask customers, "How sustainable do you consider our packaging?" *Value: Connects environmental action to brand loyalty.*
- Standardization & Compliance: Checking products against checklists for eco-labels (like the EU Ecolabel). *Result: Ensures credibility and avoids greenwashing.*
- These indicators provide a straightforward "dashboard" for improvement, allowing even small organizations to track their journey toward sustainability.

Quick Practical Tool: Advertising & Packaging Review (5 Minutes)

- Before launching a campaign or packaging redesign, ask:
- Is the environmental claim specific and verifiable?
- Does packaging weight exceed functional necessity?
- Is the material compatible with local waste systems?
- Can we measure improvement with at least one indicator?

If two or more answers are “no,” revise before launch.

### Mini Exercise – Reviewing Your Advertising Message

Select one marketing message used by your organisation (website, social media post, or advertisement).

**Check:** Does the message include a clear sustainability claim? Is there evidence supporting the claim? Could customers easily understand the environmental benefit?

Rewrite the message to make it clearer and more transparent if necessary.

### How to Interpret Your Results

- a. If your marketing message includes clear actions, evidence, and understandable benefits, it demonstrates responsible sustainable advertising.

- b. If the message relies on vague claims or lacks evidence, consider revising the wording and providing specific information about your sustainability actions.

## 9.6. Conclusion

Green advertising and eco-packaging demonstrate how marketing can actively contribute to sustainability goals. By rethinking materials, messages, and channels, SMEs can reduce environmental impact while strengthening brand trust and customer loyalty.

Looking ahead, increased regulation, digital innovation, and consumer awareness will make sustainable advertising and packaging not an option but a standard practice. Early adoption enables businesses and learners to stay competitive and aligned with European priorities.

EU-level initiatives and resources support the transition toward greener advertising and packaging practices, including:

- EU Green Deal strategies on waste reduction and circular economy.
- Sustainable Products Initiative and packaging-related directives.
- EU Ecolabel guidance for products and services.
- Erasmus+ and EPALE resources on sustainability education.

Sustainable marketing is not a single action but an ongoing process of learning, transparency, and improvement. By applying the principles and tools presented throughout this Toolkit, SMEs and VET trainers can gradually develop marketing practices that support both business success and environmental responsibility.

## 9.7. Self-Assessment Tool: Is Your Advertising and Packaging Sustainable?

**Purpose:** This self-assessment helps learners and SMEs reflect on how well their current advertising and packaging practices align with green advertising and eco-packaging principles.

**Instructions:** For each statement, choose one answer:

**Yes / Partly / No**

- Our advertising prioritises digital channels over printed materials wherever possible.
- Our packaging is designed to minimise material use (right-sized, lightweight).
- We use recycled, recyclable, reusable, or compostable materials in our packaging.
- We verify sustainability claims before communicating them to customers.
- Our environmental messages avoid vague terms such as “eco-friendly” or “green” without evidence.
- We consider local recycling or waste infrastructure when choosing packaging materials.
- We regularly review suppliers to ensure sustainability certifications are valid and transparent.
- We measure at least one environmental indicator related to packaging or advertising.
- Customer feedback is used to assess perceptions of our sustainability efforts.
- We see sustainability as a long-term strategy rather than a one-time marketing action.

### Mini Test – Ask Yourself

#### 1. What is the main objective of green advertising?

- a. To increase sales using emotional claims  
To highlight genuine environmental benefits with transparency

- To follow marketing trends
- To replace traditional advertising completely

**Correct answer:** b)

**2. Which of the following best describes eco-packaging?**

- a. Packaging with green colours and nature imagery
- b. Packaging made only from new materials
- c. Packaging designed to reduce waste and support reuse or recycling
- d. Packaging that looks premium

**Correct answer:** c)

**3. Why can “right-sizing” packaging reduce total costs for SMEs?**

- a. It increases product visibility
- b. It reduces shipping volume and emissions
- c. It eliminates the need for labels
- d. It avoids digital marketing costs

**Correct answer:** b)

**What is the main risk of vague sustainability claims?**

- a. Higher production costs
- b. Reduced packaging quality
- c. Accidental greenwashing and loss of trust
- d. Slower delivery times

**Correct answer:** c)

**5. Which indicator helps measure progress toward eco-packaging?**

- a. Social media likes
- b. Packaging weight reduction per product
- c. Advertising frequency
- d. Number of competitors

**Correct answer:** b)

**Result Interpretation**

**Mostly “Yes” answers**

You are strongly aligned with sustainable marketing principles. Your strategy demonstrates environmental responsibility, ethical communication, and social value creation. Focus on continuous improvement and formalising measurement practices.

**Mostly “Partly” answers**

You are on the right path, but improvements are needed. Prioritise one area—such as packaging optimisation, claim verification, or measurement indicators—and implement small, realistic changes step by step.

**Mostly “No” answers**

Sustainability is not yet integrated into your marketing strategy. Start with low-cost actions such as reducing printed materials, right-sizing packaging, or clarifying environmental claims. Small changes can quickly lead to visible impact.

## Conclusion and Key Insights

The Sustainable Marketing Toolkit provides a structured and practical resource designed to support vocational education and training (VET) professionals, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and learners in understanding and applying the principles of sustainable marketing.

Across nine thematic chapters, the Toolkit gradually introduces the key dimensions of sustainability in marketing practice. It begins with foundational concepts related to digital awareness and responsible communication, and progressively expands to include ESG principles, circular economy practices, consumer behaviour, and responsible advertising strategies. This structure enables readers to move from basic awareness to more advanced applications of sustainable marketing.

One of the central strengths of the Toolkit lies in its practical orientation. Instead of focusing solely on theoretical explanations, the chapters combine conceptual insights with exercises, self-assessment tools, practical examples, and digital resources. This approach supports both trainers and SMEs in translating sustainability principles into concrete marketing decisions.

The Toolkit also highlights that sustainable marketing is not limited to environmental messaging. It involves a broader set of organisational practices that include transparency, responsible communication, ethical governance, and engagement with communities and stakeholders. By connecting sustainability concepts with everyday marketing activities, the Toolkit encourages organisations to adopt gradual and realistic improvements rather than complex or resource-intensive strategies.

Another important aspect of the Toolkit is its focus on credibility and trust. In a market where consumers are increasingly attentive to sustainability claims, businesses must communicate their actions clearly and responsibly. The Toolkit therefore emphasises the importance of evidence-based communication and warns against vague or misleading claims that may result in reputational risks or accusations of greenwashing.

Finally, the Toolkit recognises that SMEs face specific challenges when adopting sustainability practices, including limited resources, lack of technical expertise, and evolving regulatory expectations. By presenting simple frameworks, practical indicators, and accessible tools, the Toolkit supports SMEs in taking manageable steps toward more responsible and transparent marketing practices.

Overall, the Sustainable Marketing Toolkit aims to empower organisations and training providers to integrate sustainability into marketing strategies in a realistic, transparent, and effective way. By combining knowledge, practical tools, and reflective exercises, the Toolkit contributes to the development of more responsible marketing practices and supports the broader transition toward sustainable economic activity.

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